Renegades
by MarieTurtle

Summary

Black Canary, Speedy and Spartan have a good thing going in Star City. They've found their footing as a team and have become a force to be reckoned with, bringing down criminals and holding the line in the crumbling metropolis. But it's becoming more apparent that all they're doing is holding the line and there are more new players in town than ever, including a former Robin with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove.

The secrecy, black-and-white justice and lies from the past aren't going to make them the team that saves Star City. This situation calls for something a little more red.

Notes

A/N -- You made it past the tags and summary, awesome! Thanks! I started this in a fit of rage after letting my anger simmer all of season 3 and then finally boil over when they *put a Jew in a gas chamber for shock value.* I simply can't stand by any longer and let Arrow stomp all over my favorite ladies in comics and TV, so I decided to start my very own fix-it fic. This story may parallel and even use elements from the show, and may deviate entirely based on how I actually develop toward the exciting conclusion.
Thank you to dreamsofnever for beta reading for me and giving me the motivation to post and keep this rolling!

Obviously the Flarrowverse is restricted from using Gotham/Bat characters, but I'm not! Incorporating Jason into this has been one of the most fun things I've ever written, but also very tricky as his backstory and overall characterization vary wildly depending on the writer, series, era, etc. Since this story takes place in the Flarrowverse, independent of any of the comics, I've decided to make his backstory and characterization a blending into a solid character that is definitely Jason Todd, but a Jason Todd that could be on this show (if it was on HBO) and with a longer backstory to give him more age and add an extra "oh shit" layer to the Lazarus Pit side effects.

Warning shot: I love my Flarrow ladies, all of them. That includes Laurel (the main, if you didn't notice from the tags) *and* Felicity. I don't like the way she has been written on the show since season 3 and I fully intend to address that in this fic in a very positive and empowering way. From my perspective and where I am with this piece currently, I don't see how I can do that without essentially tearing apart Olicity. That is not my endgame, I don't know what my endgame is yet for those two characters, and this piece has quickly snowballed into something a lot bigger than I initially imagined. I feel like at this point, as I write and develop the story further, there's room for that to change in any direction. But reader be warned: this fic is not kind to Olicity.
In a brightly neon-lit corner of the bar, a jukebox came to life on its random setting. Or maybe someone had paid for this before the brawling had started.

The only man left standing leaned over the bar to grab a clean shot glass and bottle of whisky. He smiled to himself as the rhythmic strumming of *Wanderer* began to smooth over the sounds of groaning and broken glass and the the desperate muttering and crawling of the only other man fully conscious trying to get himself to the door. The man at the bar liked this song.

*Good luck with that, buddy*, the man thought, taking off his helmet so he could properly enjoy his shot. It burned down his throat and warmed his chest. Good things should burn. He flexed his right fist. A few solid uppercuts did nice work, but repeatedly punching grown men right in the jaw was hell on the old knuckles.

Setting the empty glass back on the bar, the man turned the helmet over in his hands. He could just question this guy in the domino mask, but something about the faceless red helmet scared the absolute hell out of most people. With a sigh, Jason pulled the helmet back on. *Time to get back to work*.

“Where ya goin, buddy? Ya got a hot date?” Jason jeered as he strode over to the man slowly dragging himself to the door. In one smooth motion, he picked the man up by the back of his collar and dumped him in the nearest chair, taking the seat opposite of his target. “I just want to talk to you,” he said with mock sincerity, leaning forward and resting his chin on his hand.

The other man was shaking, already bleeding from the temple. His leg was definitely broken. “I don’t know shit, man, I’m just a dealer…”

“Yeah, about that,” faster than the weaker man could follow, Jason was out of his seat and had slammed the man’s head into the table, holding his head down and an arm stretched out. “I’ve been following you for a little while now, and I don’t particularly care for your target audience. Why are you selling to kids you know can’t pay you?”

“They don’t pay me, man,” the man sobbed under Jason’s hand. “I get my cut and supply from different drop spots. I’ve never even seen my boss, they just give printed directions.” He was squirming uselessly, tears streaming down his face.
Jason leaned close to the struggling man, dropping his voice to a low growl. “You know, even just a few months ago, this would have been the part where I would decide that you’re all tapped out, and a dead scumbag is one less scumbag, right? I’d put a bullet in your head and the world would be a better place for it.” He sighed and leaned back. “But times, they are a-changing, right? You’re not a monster, are you?”

“No, no, please…” the man was now weeping.

“You’re not going to be dealing to kids anymore, right?”

The man furiously shook his head, as much as he could under the larger man’s hand.

“Good.” Jason pulled out the rather large knife one of the more impressive bar patrons had tried to use on him. “You stay put; the cops should be here any minute.”

Without further ado, Jason Todd slammed the knife into the man’s hand, pinning him screaming to the table, before disappearing into the Star City night.

Laurel skimmed over the file as she made her way to the hospital room where the suspect was being treated. Broken right tibia, multiple facial fractures, a few fractured ribs, and a stab wound in his hand. He also came with a neatly packaged manila envelope stuffed with pictures clearly showing the man picking up drugs and distributing them to minors on school grounds, all with date and time stamps. The man was unfortunately the best witness to what could only be a new masked psycho in Star City.

Just what this town needs, Laurel sighed and looked up to see that she had found the right door. Her father and another officer were standing outside. Catching sight of his daughter, Quentin quickly moved to pull her gently out of earshot from the other officer.

“Laurel, good you’re here. What the hell, you guys have a new teammate who doesn’t play nicely with others or something?”

“Seriously, Dad?” Laurel felt her shoulders sag. “Of course not, you know I would have told you that.”
“I’m sorry,” Quentin shook his head. “That was...do you guys know anything we don’t?”

Now it was Laurel’s turn to shake her head. “No, I think I’m the first one on this. I already spoke to the other bar patrons, but apparently the only thing he said to any of them was telling them to get out if they didn’t want to wake up in the hospital. Mr. Palomas here is the only one who actually interacted with this guy.”

Quentin snorted, “Well, maybe next time some nutcase in a mask asks them nicely to leave, they’ll listen.”

“One can hope,” Laurel rolled her eyes. “Is he awake?” she gestured to the guarded room. Quentin nodded and they moved to the drug dealer’s bedside.

“Mr. Palomas, I’m Laurel Lance, Assistant District Attorney. I have some questions for you.”

With a tired sigh, Palomas slowly turned his battered face toward the detective and his daughter. Laurel winced a little at the state of the man’s face, then wiped the expression from her own. “I already told everything to your daddy here. I’m tired.”

“Unfortunately you’re going to have to repeat this story a few more times during the investigation,” Laurel pulled a seat next to his bed, set out a tape recorder and prepared a notebook and pen for her own notes. “Tell me how it started.”

“What’s the point?” Palomas said, mostly to the ceiling. “Best case scenario, I’m going to jail.”

“The DA is prepared to offer you a deal in exchange for information about your attacker, Mr. Palomas.”

He turned his head sharply to her, eyes wider, almost wild. “I don’t want a deal. I end up back on the streets on my own, I don’t even know who’s coming for me. The guys I was working for...they’re organized. They don’t let people go. I go back to them, and this Iron Man-looking nut is going to come for me. He’s like the Terminator. I saw him...” he trailed off, his body beginning to shake. “That bar had no less than ten bikers in there, drinking, playing pool. One-percenters, the real deal. He walks in, in that fucking red mask thing, tells them to hit the bricks. Of course they don’t. And he just...like they were nothing...”
Laurel thought back on the men she had briefly interviewed downstairs. They had all been treated for various minor wounds, concussions, anything that left them momentarily debilitated but not maimed. They had also all fit this man’s description: big, dangerous, most with some degree of violent criminal history. For someone to so easily put all of them down...

This was not good.

“I’m a dead man no matter what. He said he used to kill scumbags like me. He should have just…” Palomas blubbered.

“Mr. Palomas, we can arrange protective custody, in or out of county jail,” Laurel replied evenly. “Is there anything else you can remember about him?”

Palomas blinked and wet his lips, “He...he took his helmet off at the bar, after...I only saw him from behind. He had dark hair, white guy, tall, he was wearing a red mask under the helmet. He had a motorcycle jacket and was wearing this suit-thing with like, body armor or something. And I think he had a red bat on his chest. You can’t just throw me back out there,” he gazed at Laurel like a dog after scraps.

“I’ll ensure that you’re in solitary until the arraignment,” Laurel began. “Depending on how much this information helps us and the results of our investigation into this Red Helmet person, the DA will consider a reduced sentence as well as protection upon release.”

Laurel stood, collecting her things. “Are you sure it was a red bat on his chest. A red bat, like…?”

“Like him, that guy in Gotham.”

“Got it,” Laurel nodded. “I’ll be in touch, Mr. Palomas.”

Back in the hallway, Quentin joined his daughter as she made her way to the elevators.

“Did he say what I think he did?” Quentin asked in a hushed whisper as they boarded the empty elevator.
“Yeah. I’m going to have to call Oliver on this one.” Laurel grimaced bitterly.

“He still busy playing house with Felicity?”

“Yes, but if anyone knows how to get in touch with the bats up in Gotham, it’s him. Well, actually Felicity, probably.”

They stepped off the elevator and prepared to head in separate directions. “I’ll keep you posted, Dad. Oh and Dad, you should probably let your officers know that if they see this guy, they shouldn’t engage.”

“I’m picking up on that,” Quentin squeezed his daughter’s hand. “You stay safe, sweetie.”

Laurel returned the squeeze before parting ways, “I will, Dad.”

Sitting alone in her car, Laurel scowled at the thought of calling Oliver. She was happy that he was happy. After everything he had been through, the man deserved a bit of happiness in his life.

But he had also made a promise to stay in the city. Thea had been nearly dead, and Laurel knew that Oliver knew there was something more going on with Thea. She was his sister and despite the thin facade she’s been wearing, Laurel knew how badly Thea missed her brother. If anyone could understand what she’s going through, it’d be him. So how could he just leave?

Yet again, Laurel was left in Star City to pick up the pieces. Keep her chin up. Be the big sister Thea needed. Keep “Team Arrow” going minus the Arrow. Not that the Diggle/Laurel/Thea trio hadn’t been successful, but Oliver’s absence left her with that same nagging anger she had endured when his boat sank.

Some days she wanted to drive to Ivy Town just to drag him back to Star City by his ear and scream at him that for once in his life he had to follow through with a promise. If for no one else, he owed it to Thea to be here.

As quickly as that feeling boiled up, she shoved it back down in disgust and shame. Laurel was in no position to judge Oliver’s decisions. Oliver had a right to be happy, and if that was in Ivy Town
with Felicity living the suburban dream, then good for him. She, Thea and Diggle had gotten along just fine without him before and they would continue to get along fine.

She’d call them to their home base to fill them in on this helmet character and get input on calling Oliver. They would come to an agreement and work together as a team, because that’s how it was now.

Laurel smiled to herself as she started the engine. Their team was good and they would tackle this together.

Jason sighed and idly tapped his knife against his thigh.

One week.

One week of round-the-clock surveillance. That was one week on this shitty rooftop in this shitty city eating canned beans, sleeping for just a few hours at a time to make sure the video equipment didn’t malfunction, and crapping in a bucket on the other side of the roof.

Hero work is gross when you don’t have a budget.

Months of work tracking drug dealers and pimps had lead him to the small warehouse across the street. Most of the dirtbags he interrogated walked away. A few ended up in the bay. Progress is progress, okay?

He had carefully mapped all the different drop locations the dealers had used, the different zones each pimp covered, he had even caught the trail of a few pick up vehicles making the rounds. All roads circled right back to this defunct warehouse in the Glades. Jason had to admit, the neighborhood had a homey feel. Like the Narrows.

But in exactly seven days, he had hardly seen so much as a rat move in or near that damn building. Son of a bitch.

Jason felt his mind begin to wander. How many bad guys could he have beat up and dumped on the SCPD in this time? There were so many other delightful groups he could be running down in this city; the Bratva still had a ring, even the Triad was looking at rebuilding now that half the
city’s population had skipped town. Including the green Batman wannabe.

Another team of masks was still here, scratching at the surface of the problem. The Red Hood had bigger fish to fry, and didn’t need a team of wet-behind-the-ears masks tripping him up. Or god forbid, lecturing him.

Tim and Dick had been blessedly understanding as to why he needed to do this on his own, which was weird, because if there was a pair of more nosey, bossy know-it-alls, he hadn’t met them. It felt strange to wear the bat crest again, but at the same time it was a constant reminder to check his punches, to ask if he really should pull the trigger.

Jason turned his thoughts back to the local masks. The big guy had seen some things, an ex-special forces type most likely. The two women were something else entirely. The smaller one in red - Speedy, he’d heard - was League trained. Small but lethal. And vicious. More than once the other two had to stop her from beating a perp to death. A vigilante after his own heart. The blonde one in black was different. A little bit of league training, but mostly a brawler. *And a screamer,* apparently, Jason smirked at his own innuendo. That little throat device was nifty, but she was always holding back.

With a sigh, Jason leaned back against the wall of an old storage shed on the roof. He could watch - and think about watching - beautiful women beating the crap out of criminals all day long. What did they call Blondie? Black Canary? Jason thought it was appropriate. *Blonde hair and black leather,* he licked his lips at the thought.

They were good, but not great. Busting crime in action just treats the symptoms. Not to mention pulling their punches. *You don’t win a war by playing by the rules,* he scowled down at the building. Admittedly, his old methods had, uh, backfired, but Jason still believed in the importance of cutting the head off the snake, and making sure the scumbags don’t go back to scumbagging.

And suddenly, there was movement. A light.

“It’s about goddamn time,” Jason cursed, instantly alert, watching the figure move in the building. Only a small office light was on. It was now or never.

Deftly maneuvering down the fire escape, Jason made his way to the side window he’d propped open for just such an occasion.

There was only one perp, nervously shuffling papers on a desk in the warehouse’s office. He wore a large, bulky overcoat. Stacks of old newspapers lined the walls around the ground floor of the
building. The scent of gasoline drifted into Jason’s helmet. That wasn’t unusual for an industrial area, but the hair on the back of his neck rose nonetheless. This wasn’t right.

Time to stop being subtle.

Moving out from the shadows, Jason kicked open the dilapidated office door, grabbed the man around the throat, dragging him over the desk that separated them.

“Hi there,” he said cheerfully, “I’ll bet you know why I’m here.”

Not waiting for a response, Jason chucked the man through the glass window of the office, back into the main warehouse floor.

To his credit, the man staggered to his feet. “She knew you were coming. She’s not scared of you.”

“She?” he arched a brow under his helmet. “Who’s she?” he punctuated the question with a mean right hook, sending the older, chubbier man back to his knees.

“She wants to thank you,” the man coughed, spitting out blood. “If it hadn’t been for you, the whole crime syndicate on the eastern seaboard wouldn’t have been disrupted enough for her to start operations again.”

Jason launched a vicious kick into the man’s stomach. “What operation? Who is she?”

“Red Hood, you just keep doing exactly what she wants,” the man laughed, rolling onto his back. His overcoat fell open to reveal thin strips of C4 taped to his chest, wired to a detonator...in his hand.

“Son of a -”

The world exploded into fire and hell before he could finish that thought.

“You heard anything back from Oliver yet?” Diggle asked as Laurel walked into their new-ish base of operations in the Palmer Tech building. It sure was nice of Felicity to have all those biometric
“CEO only” entrances installed.

“No, but I get the impression Felicity didn’t tell him I called and is working this one on her own,” Laurel replied, sliding a file in front of her partner. “I do, however, have the stats on those missing kids. Each one of the dealers the red helmet guy has dropped on the SCPD has been tied to dealing near a specific school or neighborhood in the Glades that also saw a spike in missing kid reports. And, after the dealers were off the streets, those same neighborhoods stopped reporting missing kids. John, whoever this guy is, I think he might be on our side.”

John frowned, looking over the reports and stats pilfered out of the SCPD. “His methods would suggest otherwise,” he replied cynically, tossing the file on the desk next to the computer where he was tracking local police radios. “There was a guy in Gotham with the same M.O.; get the biggest game in town by the throat and take the local crime ring for himself. He even had the same red mask thing. Might be the same guy, we don’t know. Even if he is on our side, we can’t have some other mask running around crippling people in the name of justice. You know that, Laurel.”

“Obviously, we have to find him,” she looked at the map on the wall behind them, tracking his known appearances. The explosion in the Glades was a question mark. Preliminary investigation was pointing to a suicide bomber whose only victim was himself and an empty warehouse. In the two weeks since the bombing, there hadn’t been any more beaten drug dealers dropped at the SCPD. “We know what he’s looking for. Maybe we should try beating him to the punch.”

At this suggestion, Diggle stood to join her at the map. “You want to start bagging these dealers and hope to meet him in the field?”

“No,” Laurel shook her head, “the dealers are a dead end. And I don’t think this is about drugs anyway. I think that’s just how they’re picking victims.”

“Human trafficking? Makes sense. The people left in this city aren’t exactly easily missed by well-off relatives who can afford a big search.”

“And the police force is stretched to its breaking point just to maintain basic order. No one is looking for kids who fit the runaway profile.”

Diggle looked at one of the missing reports and let his eyes linger on the picture of the young girl. Fourteen. Beautiful natural hair, big smile revealing slightly crooked teeth. That could be his Sara in just a few years.
“Alright. The dealers are just the bottom rung. What’s next?”

“Processing. People to grab these kids, get them into their system.”

John nodded, “They’ll need vehicles, communication systems, a way to track these kids. I’m betting the drugs they’re distributing have some kind of tracking system in the packaging. They’ll need locations all over the city to dump these kids and store them until they can move them again for the next phase.”

Laurel turned back to the computer and began clacking away at the keyboard. “Massage houses, nail salons, laundromats, strip clubs…”

“Good, good, you get a list going of all of those places in relation to all the schools and neighborhoods that have had missing kids and we’ll work out the most likely places. They’ll use places that don’t get a lot of traffic. Look for businesses that don’t advertise, no website, should have closed years ago, but are still open. I’ll call Thea.”

Laurel set to work on the list, but stopped to turn back to her partner. “Hey John,” he looked up from where he had been hunched over a laptop, preparing to call Thea, “we’re going to get these guys.”

John offered her a small smile. “I know we are, Laurel. We’re a good team.”

Laurel felt her own smile in return, and returned to the work at hand.

They had a long night ahead of them.

“Alright, I’ve got about twelve, maybe thirteen human heat signatures coming from the back of this place. I think we have a winner,” John’s voice sounded over their radios.

“Jeez, about time,” Speedy griped. “I was starting to think you two just wanted a tour of the worst small businesses in Star City.”
“Stay frosty, Speedy, this place is definitely guarded and we don’t have eyes on all of them,” John came back in a serious tone.

“Is everyone in position?” Laurel spoke, bringing them back to center.

“Ready to rock and roll, BC,” Speedy chirped back and Laurel couldn’t help but smile.

“Spartan, are you ready?”

“Let’s blow the doors off, Black Canary.”

At that, Speedy flipped from her perch across the street, launching an arrow at the laundromat’s front door. Once the arrow found its target, the offending door and wall blew apart.

“Gotta love those exploding arrows,” Thea grinned and took off in a sprint toward the newly-widened entrance to the store. Right behind her were the squealing tires of Diggle flipping the van around and backing into the laundromat.

Diggle came out of the back of the van, ensuring that it was still running and wide open, ready to take as many kids as they could get out.

He was immediately met with a hail of gunfire. Thea’s exploding arrow had done good work on the door, but not so much on the guards/laundromat employees still inside.

“Speedy, you okay?” he called into his radio from his cover behind the van.

“Yeah, I’m good,” her breathless voice came back from the cover she had found. “We got three, maybe four, semi-autos all behind the counter. BC, what’s your status?”

“I’m a little behind the timeline, but catching up,” she responded.

On the other side of the building, Laurel was cringing at her handiwork. The security bars over the back windows had been more than the toolset Diggle had given her could handle. Luckily, a tow
truck driver had left his vehicle unlocked in the alley. With the keys inside. It was like some people in this city wanted to be robbed.

She pulled out one tonfa and busted the basement window. When she slid in, the sight that greeted her was more stomach-churning than she had imagined.

The smell of urine and feces and vomit was overwhelming. Cages like dog kennels lined the walls, stacked two or three high. Some of the kids were crying, some were screaming, but many were just silent. God only knew how long they had been there.

For a moment she was lost. The world was spinning into a sickening blur. Where could she even start? Were some of them **dead**? Laurel shook her head and steadied herself. “Spartan, is the van ready, we have to get them out of here **now**.”

She could hear the gunfire from the floor above. “Almost Canary, we’ll get the door open when it’s clear,” Diggle’s voice came back over the sound of assault rifles.

“Got it, I’ll get them ready to run,” Laurel holstered the tonfa and pulled out a pair of heavy-duty bolt cutters to get to work on the nearest cage.

The wide, glassy brown eyes of a boy no older than 10 or 11 stared back at her in total silence. Suddenly, his eyes shifted over her shoulders and his face blanched. Before Laurel could turn, a giant hand gripped her neck and tossed her like a ragdoll across the room, where she crashed into a row of cages.

Now the room was really spinning. Her eyes came into focus on the biggest man she’d ever seen. Bald, skin covered in tattoos, or markings, and what appeared to be literally dozens of gunshot wound scars.

“Guys, whenever you’re done up there, I could use a hand,” Laurel spoke quietly into her radio as she staggered to her feet, pulling both tonfas out.

“You’re gonna need something a little bigger than that for me, sweetheart,” the beast smirked at her.

Laurel arched a brow back at him, “I bet all the girls say that to you.”
With a roar, the big man lunged at her, but she ducked and rolled under his reach, taking vicious swings of her tonfas at his kneecaps.

As terrified as she was of this behemoth, she had to keep herself close to him or risk his hits landing on the caged kids all around them. The canary cry would do more harm than good in the small space. Nope, it was her, fist to fist against a man who probably had more than 200 pounds on her.

She kept her tonfas flying in an exhausting dance that seemed to be no more than an annoyance to her opponent. One solid hit to his neck, followed by another to his balls.

“You little bitch!” he screamed at her, launching a closed-fist punch to her gut, followed by a left hook to her temple.

Just like that, the Black Canary was down. On the ground, she began sputtering up blood and struggling to regain her footing, but her limbs wouldn't cooperate the room was just too uneven and off-kilter. A giant’s hand pulled her up by her hair, turning her to face him, her feet not even touching the ground he was so tall.

“This is it?” he sneered at her. “This is the best Star City has to offer? One bird whose little neck I’m going to snap?”

“Oh, don’t worry, she’s clearly holding back,” a gravelly voice sounded from over his shoulder. In the din of the fight, neither had noticed the third party slip in the broken window. Laurel’s eyes focused on a tall man in a red helmet. It’s you …

“Didn’t I, I dunno, shoot the hell out of you the last time we met?” Jason snarked, casually leaning against the cages.

“Red Hood, you son of a bitch…” the giant, apparently having lost interest, released his hold on Laurel. She fell to her knees, but forced herself back to stand. She had to get to the basement door, regroup with Diggle and Thea. She realized they never replied to her and she couldn’t hear them anymore, and a tap on her ear told her that she had been hit so hard, her ear radio had popped out.

“Hey now, watch the language. We’re in the presence of children. Speaking of, Palette, seriously, goon work for child trafficking? How the mighty have fallen.”
The bigger man - Palette - snorted. “I work directly for the boss, you little red shit stain. She sent me when the guards hit the silent alarm.” Palette looked back at Laurel and laughed, “You people, you really think you can save this city. We are the only well-oiled machine in this town and you idiots are a bunch of freaks in masks. You gonna save this city, Red Hood? Like you saved Gotham?”

Laurel watched Red Hood flinch under his relaxed guise. Tension hung in the air, someone had to make a move.

The basement door above the stairs burst open, unleashing a flying Speedy and less flighty but more intimidating Spartan close behind. The pair assumed a ready fighting stance on either side of Laurel, weapons drawn at the two men on the other side of the room.

“Black Canary?” Spartan spoke, the question didn’t need to be asked.

“How the big one. You and Speedy just get the kids out.”

John paused at her battered appearance but nodded and immediately set to work on breaking the cages open.

Before Palette could move to stop the trio, Red Hood was on his back, firing pistol rounds directly into his core. It was enough to get the man to his knees, still roaring and strong enough to toss Jason from his shoulders.

To Jason’s surprise - and delight - the Black Canary was already back at it. On his knees, Palette was now the perfect height for her to land head and neck strikes with her tonfas. She was tossing them full force and full speed. After the beating she had taken, Jason had to marvel at the endurance and sheer force of will he was witnessing. Sadly though, tonfas just wouldn’t do much to a creature like Palette.

A spare piece of heavy copper pipe caught his eye. *Oh yes, that will do nicely.* He casually flipped the pipe in his hand, loathe to interrupt the beating he was witnessing. Oh well, he’d have to find another occasion to watch her pummel a bad guy.

With a brutal swing of the pipe, Palette fell forward on his hands.
Interrupted, Laurel froze mid swing, and looked up at the Red Hood, blinking like a deer.

“Don’t worry, sister, it takes a lot more than that to kill this monster.”

She looked back down at her opponent, who was now spitting blood and muttering about the Red Hood being a jumped-up little shit.

“Black Canary, we got ‘em, let’s roll,” Speedy gently touched her surrogate sister’s arm, darting a look at the red-masked man and beaten behemoth on the ground.

Jason watched the blonde shake herself out of the daze and focus on the smaller woman in red. “Exploding arrow, I’ll meet you out back,” Laurel held out her hand.

Speedy raised a brow, then harrumphed in approval, handing over the appropriate arrow before lithely leaping back up the stairs to the van.

“You might want to get clear,” she said in a low monotone.

“And miss this show?” the gravelly voice behind the helmet responded to her. “Never.” He moved toward the broken window, but watched in awe as Black Canary did something he really, really did not expect.

She twisted the blasting cap on the arrow, leaned down to Palette’s level, jammed it in his stomach and whispered, “Big enough for ya?” With a wink, she was dashing for the window. Ready for her, Jason gave her a boost before launching himself behind her. Seconds later, he found himself tackling her to the ground and covering her head as the explosion shot out the window.

As the debris settled, he cautiously rolled off of her and into a sitting position. “Well, that was invigorating.”

“You!” Laurel pushed herself to her feet.
“...Me,” the infuriatingly blank red face stared back at her.

“You’re Red Hood? The one from Gotham? You’re a crime boss, why did you help us tonight?”

Jason held his hands up plaintively, “Look, okay, I get it, the Gotham stuff was a lot of bad judgment, bad planning and comical misunderstandings. Technically, I did actually lower the crime rate by a lot but that’s neither here nor there. I’m not doing that anymore, I’m just trying to clean up the mess I made.”

Laurel was now pacing back and forth in front of him. It made his head hurt. Too many damn explosions this month.

“You need to come back to the cave with us. We need to talk this out. If you’re going to be here, hunting down some crime syndicate that we are also hunting down -”

Now Jason was on his feet, “No, this is my deal. You guys just keep rescuing cats from trees or whatever it is you do around here, I’m going to mop this up.”

“Excuse me,” Laurel’s voice rose defiantly. “Do you honestly think that after what we saw and did tonight we are just going to pretend nothing happened? Do you think that we are going to sit back and let some rogue I-don’t-even-know-what-you-are with a body count run around doing whatever he wants while you ‘fix’ things? Like you fixed them in Gotham?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he ground out.

“I know that tonight it took all four of us. If it had been just you, there’s no way you could have gotten all those kids out of there. And if you hadn’t shown up when you did…” Laurel looked down at the ground with a clenched jaw.

“Hey,” Jason reached a hand out gently to her chin, “Palette is a juggernaut. That guy can kill a man with a single punch. And you went a couple rounds with him. Not only that, but you got back up and finished the job. Palette is gonna be pissed when he comes to, but you put his ass down for the count tonight. Not very many people can say that.”

It was weird, getting a pep talk from an expressionless red helmet. A red helmet with a nasty reputation.
A red helmet who definitely saved her ass tonight. She moved her face away from his gloved hand and stood a little straighter, her chin just barely betraying her defiance.

“I will meet with you people on two conditions,” Red Hood held up his fingers to count. “1, this is my job. I make final decisions. If you don’t like my decisions, that’s fine, I will continue to work alone. 2,” he paused, sighed and let his hands drop to his sides, “you get your ass to a hospital tonight, because there is no way you don’t have a concussion and you’re no good to me dead or brain damaged.”

“Fine,” Laurel clipped back, crossing her arms over her chest. “How will we get in contact?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason was backing away. “I’ll be in touch. Your ride is circling back for you.”

Laurel turned to hear the rumble of the van heading toward the alley. When she turned back, he was gone.

“How’s your head?” Thea asked, settling into the deep couch cushions next to her de facto roommate.

With a deep sigh, Laurel leaned back into the couch, letting the warmth of her tea seep into her bone-cold hands. “Still hurts, but as long as I’m not nauseated or talking backward at any point in the next twentyfour hours, the doctor said I shouldn’t need a follow up.”

“Cheers to that,” Thea grinned and held up her mug. “Most of those kids were reunited with their families this morning. I’m going to mark this one in the win column.”

Laurel was still frowning. “We don’t know how many are still out there,” she winced as she spoke. “We don’t know how many they’ve already taken who are just gone. And, God, you saw that guy, I’m not even sure he can be killed and he made it sound like they’re more entrenched in the city than the Undertaking was.”

“Which guy?” Thea paused, “because one was scary in a ‘I’m-the-Juggernaut-bitch’ way, and the other was scary in the ‘I-have-the-weirdest-boner-right-now’ way.”
“Thea!” Laurel nearly choked on her tea, playfully slapping her friend on the leg.

The smaller woman grinned even wider, “Ah-ha! I got a smile out of you!”

Laurel’s shoulders shook with a chuckle. “Uh, no, I was mainly referring to scary bald man full of bullet holes who responds to the name ‘Palette’.”

“Strange choice of goon name,” Thea’s brow furrowed. “He did not strike me as the artistic type.”

“Well, he took multiple gunshots from Red Hood and that didn’t even knock him completely down. I stuck him with that exploding arrow and the Red Hood said it would only slow him down.”

“Hmm,” Thea nodded into her mug, “You two had a lot of time to talk in between the bomb and us circling back for you?”

Laurel pursed her lips and shot a side eye look at Thea. “He talked a lot. And we need to know about this guy, especially since we are apparently trying to accomplish the same thing.”

“Except,” Thea set her mug on the coffee table, “Red Hood sort of comes with a history in Gotham of solving crime by being the worst criminal on the streets. Not that we don’t have our own close ties to total criminal psychopaths who periodically make themselves useful, but it’s good to know what kind of animal we’re dealing with.”

“Which is why Felicity is looking into this for us, we’re going to talk this out as a team and figure out whether we bring him in or lock him up with Slade.”

“Excellent,” Thea patted Laurel on the thigh. “None of that has to happen today.” Before Laurel could protest, Thea was standing over her with a stern set to her crossed arms and mock-scolding expression. “I am calling you in sick, you are staying in bed with an ice pack for your head, and, being as gloriously unemployed as I am, I will make it my personal mission today to make sure you stay in bed. And I will use that ridiculous net arrow if you make me.”

Laurel opened her mouth, ready to argue, but was countered by a challenging brow daring her to
try to talk her way into working today. She nodded her silent consent and let Thea help her off the couch.

Walking arm-in-arm back toward Laurel’s bedroom, Thea remarked, “Besides, this is a great excuse to veg out today. Did I tell you that one of those guards was like a pro-MMA fighter or something?”

“What happened to goons just being goons?” Laurel pondered.

“Those were the good old days, right, sister?”

“I love you, Thea,” Laurel said as she sat down on her bed.

“I love you, too,” Thea smiled. “Now go to sleep! I’ll bring you an ice pack. I want you well rested so you can be my hot date to the Danforth’s shindig tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah, dresses and schmoozing, I forgot what that was.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure there will be plenty of jerks there who will be asking for at least a good arm bar.”

“Well, if they didn’t dress like that...” Laurel quipped, laying back on her bed.

“Ha!” Thea barked from the hallway. “Oh man, we are so awesome.”

“You know, you guys really should have called me first, John,” Lyla shot an accusatory glance at her husband. “I know I’m not officially part of the team but I am sort of married to this guy -” she slapped his chest, “-and have all that great intel and those contacts at ARGUS. What with me working there and all.”

Diggle let out a long-suffering sigh and Thea made a comically obvious attempt to look busy on a shut down computer. Diggle tossed a pleading look to Laurel who only shook her head, “Oh no, I’m not touching this with a pole.”
“Lyla…” Diggle began, “We have talked about this. I don’t want to drag you into this any more than necessary and we both agree that it’s a conflict-”

“Yeah a conflict of interest with my day job, got it,” Lyla cut him off, rapidly pulling up information on the computer and sending the relevant files to the larger display screens. “So, I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is, ARGUS has a verified contact in Gotham who will be conferencing in with us in about 5 minutes. This person has worked directly with the Red Hood and can provide firsthand intel. ARGUS also has about 700 square feet of office space dedicated to records on the Red Hood, so we basically know everything about this person.”

“…And the bad news?” Thea ventured.

With a deep breath, “The bad news is that regardless of his goals here in Star City or whatever come-to-Jesus he had back in Gotham or even if the masks in Gotham have given him their blessing, ARGUS hasn’t. Red Hood is on our top ten most wanted list and as soon as they catch wind of this, Red Hood and anyone associated with him are going to be in ARGUS’ crosshairs. That means all of us if we decide to work with this guy and not just hand him over.”

“I’m out,” Felicity’s voice piped up from the monitor.

Laurel smiled brightly and moved closer. “Hey Felicity! It’s good to see you!”

“Aha, it’s great to see you guys, too. We never actually do the face-to-face thing these days.”

“Where’s Oliver?” Diggle chimed in with a little more bite than he intended.

“He…uh, you know, I, uh…I sent him on an errand so he’s out. Yeah, he’s out,” Felicity said mostly to something on the other side of her monitor.

“Oh no,” Diggle shook his head. “He has no idea you’ve been helping us with this, does he?”

Felicity’s face went through a series of winces and eyebrow raises as she searched for the right words. “Well, it’s not so much that he doesn’t know about this in particular, he is just a lot happier when he isn’t involved,” she concluded with a deep breath.
“Right,” Diggle shook his head.

“Okay, as much as I care about whatever this is,” Lyla gestured between her husband and the monitor, “Oracle should be patching in any minute now.”

“Oracle?” Thea asked.

“She puts my skills to shame,” Felicity said with a note of disbelief. “She reached out to me when I started digging for info on this Red Hood guy, told me to verify with Lyla, and here we are.”

The small group exchanged surprised looks amongst themselves, but were silenced from commenting when all of the monitors displayed static, before returning to a few of the data files and photos Lyla had pulled up, and others that were unfamiliar. Some more sinister than they expected, some more heartbreaking.

“Hello everyone, I’m Oracle,” a smooth voice came from all the monitors, not just the one setup with video chat.

“Okay, that’s pretty cool,” Thea remarked.

“It’s good to hear your voice, Oracle,” Lyla said with a fond smile.

“You too, Lyla,” the voice responded familiarly. “The Red Hood is in Star City because certain members of the criminal elite have taken root in your home due to his own actions. Although his intentions are noble, make no mistake, he is extremely dangerous.”

“Who is he?” Laurel asked.

“His name is Jason Todd. He was taken in and trained by Batman from a young age to be the next Robin. However, Jason has always struggled with anger and violence. He was unpredictable at best. He was captured, tortured and murdered by the Joker.”
The room was silent as they each considered the story Oracle was unfolding.

“The Joker takes a unique pleasure in torturing and murdering the people Batman cares the most about. Unbeknownst to any of us, the League of Assassins had kept Jason’s real body and used a Lazarus Pit to resurrect him. Jason was already an extremely angry young man. As I’m sure you all know, the effects of the Pit can...well, it is different for each person, but with Jason it compounded with all the anger he already had, the way he was killed, and the training and coaching he got from the League.”

Laurel’s brows furrowed, “What...what is she talking about? What do you mean ‘resurrect?’”

A moment of silence hung in the air, Diggle kept his eyes on the ground, Felicity kept hers on her keyboard. Only Thea was really looking at her sister.

“A Lazarus Pit can do more than just heal the body,” Oracle began carefully. “It has been used to resurrect the dead. But that comes at significant risk. Even just using the Pit for healing is risky. You take a piece of every soul that’s entered the Pit, no one comes out the same.”

“Wait, now it’s my turn,” Thea turned toward a monitor that now displayed what was apparently the only known photo of a Lazarus Pit. “What kind of risks? They said I’d be a little different, but they didn’t…”

Now it seemed someone had stumped the Oracle. “I’ve never heard of the League allowing anyone to use one of their Pits without doing all of the ceremony and making sure all parties know what’s at stake. Whoever took you to the Pit should know.”

“What happened to Jason?” Thea asked, her chest rising and falling rapidly now.

“First,” Oracle began slowly, “he spent many years training as Batman had. He followed tutelage from the League, specifically Talia al Ghul. Ra’s wanted to restore Jason, Talia wanted to punish Batman. When Jason returned to Gotham, he returned as the Red Hood. He very quickly took over the major crime syndicates and installed himself as the reigning crime leader. His methods were effective. Crime rates did drop, drugs were no longer being dealt to children, child trafficking was halted, gang activity was minimal because they all answered to him. His methods were also brutal and involved killing anyone who stood in his way. He had decided that Batman wasn’t a fit protector for Gotham, and the city needed a hero who was willing to cross the line. Eventually he caught Joker, and set up Batman to kill him. When Batman refused, Jason took it personally. He disappeared. When he reappeared, he was known as the Arkham Knight.”
“The Arkham Knight and the Red Hood are the same guy?” Diggle finally spoke.

“Unfortunately, yes. Jason took his mission to be a better Batman further than ever, and used Scarecrow and chemical weapons to do it. It was a hard-won fight, and it cost too many lives, including Batman’s. But when the dust settled, the rage and bloodlust that had driven him for so long... well it wasn’t gone, but it was like the clouds left his eyes and we saw the Jason we all knew as a fifteen year old tagging along with Batman.”

“So what makes him a good guy now?” Diggle responded, still incredulous.

“Only my word,” Oracle responded. “I’ve known Jason since he was a homeless kid who had the moxie to steal the tires off the Batmobile. He has taken responsibility for the fact that his actions directly caused the instability which has allowed these new crime rings to take hold in most of the major cities across the US now. He wants to fix it, and he wants to do it right. He’s still...”

“A little rough?” Laurel helped, remembering the hospitalized drug dealer.

“Yes. We don’t live in a black and white world. Jay has always seen himself as the defender of the weakest people in our world, the people who have it the worst. And he can be, but he will need some guidance. The concept of the ‘line’ is usually lost on him. When he wants to stop a bad guy, he doesn’t trust the system. He wants to be personally responsible for stopping them permanently.”

“Where does this leave us?” Diggle asked.

“It’s your city, your team, the decision is yours. If you decide to hand him over to ARGUS, you have our support. Jay has committed some truly awful crimes. But I trust him with my life, and I know he wants to do the right thing.”

“Oracle, can you send me some of these files?” Lyla asked, absently flipping through pages on the nearest touchscreen.

“Of course, anything you want.”

“We should probably talk this out,” Laurel said.
“Right. Good to finally talk to you guys. You’re doing good work out there. Oh and Black Canary, if you all decide to work with him, let me know. I have a little something for that sonic scream device of yours. Jason will know how to install it and I think it will really take that weapon to the next level.”

Laurel’s eyes widened in shock. “Uh...yeah, of course, that would be great. Thanks, Oracle.”

“Good luck,” Oracle responded. “The people you’re pursuing have ties to HIVE. It looks bigger than human trafficking, but I don’t have a bead on it yet.”

Just like that, the screens flickered back to the images Lyla had originally pulled up.

“Huh,” Felicity croaked, “so that’s what that’s like.”

“Felicity,” Oliver’s voice came over the video chat, soft but stern.

Felicity’s eyes lit up like a frightened deer. “Gotta go!” With a scramble, her video feed cut out.

“I think we all have a lot to think about,” Laurel began.

“I don’t,” Diggle stood. “This is gonna put all of us in a lurch, including my wife. This guy is a loose cannon and none of us need that. We bring him to talk, knock him out and hand him over.”

“Excuse you, I’m standing right here,” Lyla slid a step away. “I think we need to at least meet with this guy and hear him out. Thus far, aside from being rough with witnesses, he’s actually been doing good work here. Also, none of you have really seen him in action. I have. We have a whole cabinet of Red Hood and Arkham Knight CCTV footage, cell phone footage, news footage. If he is on our side, we’ve just won the lottery. ARGUS isn’t going to be able to touch him or us.”

The other three looked to Thea, who had taken a seat in front of one of the monitors, facing away from the group. Her shoulders were quivering.
“Thea…?” Laurel took a cautious step forward.

“He didn’t tell me.”

Laurel reached a hand to Thea’s shoulder. “Sweetie, he probably didn’t understand how serious it is. I’m sure he would have told you and all of us if there was a real problem…”

Before she could finish, Thea exploded from the chair, completely knocking the desk over and letting out a guttural scream of rage. She stood over the mess, hands balled into fists at her sides, shaking with anger. A quick glance out the corner of her eye and she realized that three of her favorite people in the world were approaching her with the caution they would show a rabid mountain lion. Her shoulders sank and she felt the tears welling up. In a flash, the caution was gone from Laurel as she rushed forward to embrace Thea in a hug, cradling her head and whispering that it would be alright.

“What is wrong with me?” Thea sobbed into Laurel’s arms. “Why would he just leave without telling me?”

“It’s okay,” Laurel soothed, gently stroking Thea’s hair. “We’re going to figure this out. We’re going to get through it together.”

Laurel shot a steely look over Thea’s head to Diggle and Lyla, and they both understood.

They needed to find Jason Todd.

“Can you please tell me again why we’re here?” Thea groused, having returned to their table from the open bar with a fresh drink.

“Seriously?” Laurel’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “You’ve been so excited about this for weeks now. A fancy party, we got dressed up, I actually managed to cover up the bruise on my face, we haven’t seen the Danforth’s years…”

“Yeah, that was before I found out my brother knew I’m a ticking time bomb and skipped town
with his latest blonde,” Thea spat, staring coldly into her drink. “God, I’m sorry, Laurel. I didn’t mean that.”

“I know you didn’t, sweetie,” Laurel took Thea’s hand. “It’s not going to be like this forever. I’m not going to leave you. We can have fun tonight. And if tonight is a bust, there is at least a 60 percent chance it will end in violence.”

Thea chuckled, finally breaking into a real smile. “I’ll drink to that,” she raised her glass. “And if everything falls through tonight, wanna take a quick road trip to Ivy Town this week to hold me back from killing my brother?”

“He back?” Laurel smiled and raised a brow. “Honey, I owe him a few good hits, too. I’m going to refill my drink,” she tapped on her now empty ginger ale. “When I get back, we’re going to make the rounds, and find you someone attractive to flirt with tonight.”

Thea smiled and sighed, “For a pair of babes who fight crime, our flirting lives are really lame.”

Laurel laughed, “We’re gonna fix that, too,” and made her way to the bar.

Before she could get there, a strong hand caught her arm. “Laurel Lance, as I live and breathe,” a tall blonde man rose out of his chair, hand still gripping her by the elbow.

“Adam,” Laurel plastered a smile on her face, “it’s been a few years.” Ugh. This guy. A few dances and dates in high school. One anger and alcohol fueled indiscretion a few months after the Queen’s Gambit sank. She had assumed he left town after the Undertaking, but here he was. Dragging his thumb in familiar circles on her arm and smiling at her like he’d caught a wild animal in a trap.

“Too many. You look stunning. Still trying to save the world?” he asked, taking a pull from his glass.

“If you mean practicing law, yes, I work for the DA’s office.”

“Hm, interesting,” his eyes moved around the room. He set his glass down, took Laurel’s out of her hand and abandoned it on a nearby table, before taking her by the hand and leading her toward the dancefloor. “C’mon, let’s talk and dance.”
“Oookay,” Laurel said with exaggerated emphasis, finding herself being pulled into his arms, closer than she would have liked. Her training was screaming at her to toss him over her hip, jab him in the throat, throw him down in an armbar, anything to put this guy in his place.

“Yeah, I headed to London after that craziness with Moira Queen and all those nutjobs in masks started coming out of the closet,” his hand drifted lower down Laurel’s back as he prattled on about a question she hadn’t asked. “I’ve been in London doing a little stock trading and traveling. But I was chatting with Madison and thought now might be a good time to buy up some local property. The Danforths could really clean this place up, and if you buy now the property will be worth millions again in just a few years.”

Laurel had opened her mouth to reply more than once, but it had gone totally unnoticed as Adam continued on his thoughts. “....Right.”

Mistaking her slightly disgusted face for confusion, Adam perked up. “Oh, I could help you. I could show some of the available property, loan you some money to buy it, go over all the paperwork. You’re a smart cookie, you’ll catch on.”

“I think I’m good on this one, thanks though,” Laurel blinked. Is this what Oliver had been like, too?

“C’mon, don’t say no. I’m renting this great loft one block down. We can walk over, I can show you some of these properties, we can have a few drinks, it’ll be like old times,” he finished with a suggestive eyebrow wiggle.

“No,” Laurel shook her head firmly. “Sorry, Adam, but no.”

“Why not?” he scoffed and pulled her closer as she was trying to politely step further away. “We have a good time together. What’s the problem?”

Trying to gently push back again, Laurel continued to shake her head, “The problem is I said no, Adam. I don’t want to. It was one night, it was a mistake. Please, excuse me,” she tried to turn away, but he pulled her back again, his grip now painful on her hand and his right hand dipping even lower than before.

Laurel felt her eyes flash and her pulse quicken. This son of a bitch-
“Mind if I cut in?” a vaguely familiar voice interrupted her before she could start the act of violence that was boiling in her veins.

When her eyes focused on the interloper, she couldn’t hide the shock. This was the same face she’d seen in the photos Oracle and Lyla had shared just last night. The same voice that had been so gravelly and teasing in that basement. His eyes were bluer than she thought they’d be.

Jason stood there in an extremely well-fitted suit, hands in his pockets, his eyes twinkling and a smile tugging at his mouth like a mischievous boy.

“We’re having a private conversation,” Adam responded, lowering his voice and looking down his nose at Jason. They were close in size, but Jason didn’t need to puff out his chest or jut out his chin at the other man.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jason cleared his throat conspicuously, running a weathered hand along his jaw before slapping it around Adam’s shoulders and leaning in conspiratorially. “Here’s the thing though, she is about three seconds away from breaking off your hand and feeding it to you. As much as I would take a deep, personal pleasure in watching her stomp on your throat and toss you out of here like a frisbee, this seems like a nice party and she looks great. I really want to dance with her, and if I let her kick your ass, I’m not gonna get to dance with her. Do you see the pickle I’m in here?”

Adam angrily shrugged Jason’s hand off his shoulder. “This is none of your damn business,” he enunciated each word by jamming his forefinger into Jason’s chest.

Seeing a good moment, Laurel quickly grabbed his pointing hand and twisted his wrist into a painful wrist lock. Adam opened his mouth to cry out but Laurel gently put her free hand on his mouth. “Don’t scream, don’t make a scene. Adam, please leave.”

As soon as she released him, he backed away, looking between the pair in horror before walking and stumbling out of the banquet hall. When Laurel turned back to Jason, he was grinning from ear to ear.

He held out a hand to her, “May I?”

His smile was infectious, and she found herself cautiously giving him her hand and letting him pull
her into a more formal dance position.

“So, you just decided to crash a campaign party?” Laurel looked up her partner. Even in heels she had to tilt her face up to meet his eyes.

“Is it really a campaign if you’re the only one running?” Jason countered. She could just barely make out the remnants of a curved scar on his cheek.

“Did Oracle tell you who we were?”

Jason scoffed, “No. She told me she gave you intel on me, that’s it. You I figured out all on my own. World’s greatest detective,” he added with a cocky head shake.

Laurel squinted skeptically, “Isn’t that Batman?”

“Tomayto, tomahto,” Jason shook his head. His hands felt big and warm and calloused, and seemed to swallow hers and encompass more space on her back than a single hand should, but he wasn’t pushing his luck like Adam had.

“Is this your idea of making contact?”

“Is this not good contact?” his eyes maintained their mischievous twinkle.

“Oracle gave you her vote of confidence,” Laurel said, trying to keep the conversation on business. Even though in their proximity she was beginning to notice that he smelled of simple soap, worn leather and something else, maybe shaving cream.

“Really? Wow,” he frowned. “I’ll have to send her a thank you note. That’s high praise from her.”

“We need your help, Jason.”

For a moment he looked confused. He looked down at her, watching her big green eyes staring back at him. He blinked and collected himself. “I sense a ‘but’ coming on.”
Laurel nodded, “But not everyone on the team is ready to trust you. We need to know you’re going to work with us, as a team. We need to see it.”

“This group, HIVE, they’re not going to go down easy. You don’t win a war by being nice,” the twinkle was gone from his eyes.

“But you also don’t do it by becoming worse than the enemy,” Laurel offered a small smile. “There’s a middle ground here, Jason.”

His eyes flickered over her face, trying to put the pieces together. “There’s a big money move happening this week. We can track it and find one of their drop houses, follow the money, maybe even redistribute their wealth. I can text you a time and place to meet.”

“And you won’t move on them without us?” Jason responded with a solemn nod. “And….” Laurel prompted.

Jason searched for the answer she was looking for before remembering. “And I will ensure that the interrogation participants I drop off at the SCPD are left in basically good health.”

“That’s a good start,” Laurel lit up with a smile.

“See,” Jason responded in kind, “we’re already working together.” With determined resolve, he stepped back, brought Laurel’s hand to his lips for a slow, gentle kiss. “Thank you for the dance, Laurel.”

With a small smile, he turned, walked off the dance floor and disappeared into the crowd. Laurel remained rooted to the spot, her mouth dry, skin flushed, feeling strangely exposed and suddenly overwhelmed by the number of people around her.

“Oh, boy.”
Jason let his fists fly at the makeshift punching bag he had assembled on a spare wall corner in the barren apartment. A little duct tape, a few old pillows and discarded tires torn up and taped to the wall kept him from punching through the drywall, at least.

He had lost track of how long he’d been at this. Thirty minutes? An hour? After leaving the party - and Laurel - he had found himself stalking the streets of Star City, skin crawling, fingers itching for a weapon and someone to hurt. There had to be someone out up to no good who deserved a little Red Hood justice.

But no, he kept dragging his mind back to Laurel, and Barbara. Had she really vouched for him? It was one thing for blondie to be too trusting, but Babs knew better. Why would she do that?

Before he knew it, he was back at his apartment, changed into a t-shirt and shorts, fists wrapped and pounding away at his wall. Sweat dripped down his face. He could feel his shirt sticking to his skin. His shoulders ached, as they had since his resurrection. Just one more jab. One more combination. Duck, duck, guard up. His blood rang in his ears; his breaths perfectly timed to his hits. Each one was the last one before he’d throw in the towel for the night.

“I think you’ve beaten the pillow-wall, Todd,” a familiar voice sounded from his laptop. He didn’t have to turn around to know that Oracle would be on his open laptop. I really should keep that shut, he thought idly.

“How long you been staring at my ass, Babs?”

“Long enough,” she replied. “I’m not sure this is really going to be effective anger management, you know, long term.”

Jason turned to see his bespeckled, red haired cohort watching him carefully from his laptop. When he first came to the manor, he thought Barbara was the prettiest girl in the world. He hung on to that crush until facing the bitter truth that she would never see him as anything more than a wayward kid. Or see him past Dick.

“You gonna refer me to a 12-step program around here?”

“No,” she shook her head, “I’m just wondering how long you’re going to be able to keep this up.”
Jason felt his jaw clench. “Keep what up?”

“This group, they operate as a team. The Arrow doesn’t run the show anymore. You can’t just tell them what to do and if you go off half-cocked and angry, they’re going to put you down.”

Jason huffed and folded his arms across his chest. “And here I thought you had nice things to say about me.”

“I did. I also gave them all the data I have on your time as a crime boss and the Arkham Knight. They deserve to know the full picture, Jay.”

“Why did you tell them you trust me?” he ground out.

A small smile softened Barbara’s features. “I do trust you, Jay. We wouldn’t have let you leave Gotham if we didn’t. But you have been on this warpath for so long, I’m not sure you really know how to fight crime without crossing the line. I do know that, like most families, all we do is suffocate you. I know that you have to do this on your own. I don’t think you trust yourself or anyone around you, and you cross the line because it’s easier.”

He stared back at the computer in silence, puzzling over what she said. She looked so genuine, but in their line of work, that didn’t mean anything at all. “Maybe I cross the line because unlike Bruce, I don’t want to take the chance that monsters like Joker are going to keep killing people.”

“Wearing the mask doesn’t make any of us God, Jason,” Barbara said carefully. “We don’t get to decide who deserves to die.”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree on that one,” he jutted out his chin.

Barbara nodded and pursed her lips. Jason was done talking. “I’m sending you a few very small, very delicate pieces of hardware and transferring the specs and instructions to your harddrive now. It’s a little gift for Black Canary.”

“Hm,” he moved closer to his computer to look at the files Barbara was uploading, “taking a special interest?”
She looked over her glasses at him with a knowing smile, “Aren’t you?”

A corner of his lips ticked up. “Barbara Gordon, you know me too well.”

“Play nice with the other kids, Jay,” she teased.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” he responded with feigned annoyance. The video link blinked out and Jason was again alone in the dark apartment. He shut the laptop to prevent anymore surprise Oracle visits.

His blood had finally stilled. His hands were no longer hungry for a weapon. The sweat had cooled on his skin, and the tenderness in his knuckles was beginning to throb.

A hot shower and a drink would be very helpful tonight.

“Alright, this is the one,” Diggle’s voice came over their radios.

“Got it,” Red Hood came back. “Black Canary, are you in position?”

“We’re dropping in now,” Laurel replied, accelerating the motorcycle, much to Speedy’s delight.

“Speedy, you got the package?” Red Hood asked from his position.

“Ready to rock and roll,” Speedy responded with a grin from her place on the back of Laurel’s motorcycle.

“Alright, I’m seeing about six heat signatures in the back of the truck, are you ready for this?”

Thea rolled her eyes, “Are you kidding? This is the highlight of my week!”
“Speedy, we really need to work on your definition of a good time,” Black Canary shook her head with a wry smile. It was kind of fun.

One street over in a stolen Crown Victoria, Jason switched his radio to speak directly to Diggle. “Hey Spartan, are you sure it shouldn’t be me on the back of that bike? Diving headfirst and blind into a fight is sort of my thing.”

“Speedy is more than capable of handling a few HIVE goons,” came Diggle’s terse reply. “Besides, she could use the excuse to blow off steam and I still haven’t decided whether or not you’re worth including in this. You’re on the B-squad until we all agree.”

“Okay, all you had to say was ‘Yes, this plan is good,’” Jason muted his mic with an angry shake of his head. “‘Oh, thanks for handing us this great intel, Red Hood,’ ‘Why, what a great plan you built for us, Red Hood, this will help us track the HIVE leadership in Star City better than trying to beat it out of underlings. Gosh you’re helpful,’ ‘Red Hood, despite your reputation and the fact that you could very easily be doing this on your own and we’re just slowing you down, you are patiently working with us and letting us bench you while we use your hard-earned intel and plans and pat each other on the back while still treating you like a criminal.’”

He continued muttering to himself and gripped the steering wheel tighter, carefully accelerating faster than he knew the truck was traveling. He had to time the cut off just right. His heads-up display showed a clear grid of streets ahead, carefully laid out in even intervals. He couldn’t suppress the smile when he heard Speedy whoop delightedly over the radio. She must have just made her jump from the bike to the truck. Her face had lit up like a Christmas tree when this part of the plan hit the table.

“Black Canary, now!” Spartan barked. That was Red Hood’s signal. With squealing tires, he swung a hard left to cut the truck off at the next intersection. A well-placed but small sticky explosive would take out one tire, and a sedan would make a fairly solid blockade.

He punched the gas pedal harder when he heard the crack of the small bomb. Jason could see the lights of the vehicles at the intersection. Just a few more seconds...he gripped the wheel tighter, pressed ever harder on the gas and prepared for impact.

Just as he’d timed it, the truck made contact with the back end of the sedan, sending him careening in a mess of broken glass and metal across the intersection. The impact was enough to bring the truck to a halt just where they’d wanted it, allowing Diggle to slide smoothly in with the van, already unleashing gunfire at the men in the cab of the truck.
The seat belt, body armor and helmet were indeed Jason’s friends this evening. With a disgruntled groan, he unbuckled, checked to ensure his pistols and magazines were still in place, knives still secure, threw an extra belt of shotgun rounds over his shoulder, grabbed the Saiga 12-gauge from the passenger seat and drug himself from the mangled sedan.

Holding that ridiculous weapon made up for his annoyance at his secondary role and probably minor whiplash. Honestly, who made a semi-auto shotgun with a 20-round drum? Amazing. He’d been tickled pink to take this off an unsuspecting mook a few months back. He didn’t even mind using the police-issue beanbag rounds the team insisted on. This is so fun, he grinned under his helmet as he strutted toward the melee of gunfire.

Black Canary and Spartan were rushing toward the five men spilling out of the truck. Speedy had managed to toss a few down the parkway. Sadly, non-lethal weapons against actual guns just weren’t doing the trick and the men were proving to be more adept fighters than your average hired goon. Speedy held her position in the back of the truck, fighting two opponents with her swords in the close quarters, conveniently slicing open the neatly-packed stacks of money, making a glorious mess in the process. One of the fighters got her by the collar of her jacket, tossing her out of the back of the truck in a flurry of weapons and flying bills.

Red Hood was casually lobbing bean bag rounds at the fighters, who were frustratingly not going down, when he saw Speedy spring to her feet with a snarl and a familiar red-hot rage in her eyes. She launched herself at the man who had thrown her from the truck, punching wildly and completely unaware of the fight around her.

He shot a look to Black Canary; her face said that she saw it, too, but was locked in a fight of her own against two very well-prepared opponents. Spartan took his own man down and moved to assist his partner. Jason slung his weapon on his back and moved toward Speedy, knocking opponents down on his way. What was this, a truck or a clown car? How many of these guys are there? He couldn’t seem to keep them down, and then he saw another one on the other side of Speedy, leveling an M-4 at the girl.

“Speedy!” Black Canary screamed as she broke away from her opponents. The cry from a familiar voice was enough to halt Thea before she thrust a sword into her victim’s chest. Her head jerked up, the red haze gone, her eyes locked with Laurel’s, but she remained rooted in place. She was still frozen, mouth hanging open, sword precariously over the man’s chest, when she felt herself being unceremoniously tackled by a much larger Red Hood.

With a grace that seemed impossible to Laurel for a man of his size, Jason lithely somersaulted through the tackle and back to his feet, guns drawn and already exchanging fire with the gunman that had been seconds away from shooting Thea in the back. Laurel dove to Speedy’s side, pulling her away even as the man on the ground actually managed to get up and get back to the cab of the truck in spite of the beating.
Jason let out a bark of pain as a bullet caught him in the right shoulder. The shooter was gone before he could right himself. “That son of a -” he growled, holstersing his weapons with his left hand.

The rumbling of the truck caught their attention. “They’re moving,” Jason announced to no one in particular.

“I got one,” Diggle replied. At his feet was one of the gunmen, hands zip-tied behind his back.

“Oh goody,” Jason responded, wincing at the wound in his bicep. Probably just a graze, but it still hurt like a bitch.

Speedy was back on her feet, the thunderstruck look now gone. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what…”

“Did you do it?” Jason cut her off.

“Yes,” she nodded firmly. “The bills are all over the place in there.”

“Good,” he turned his attention back to Diggle’s prisoner.

Diggle squatted low over the captive, who kept his eyes forward, locked on the horizon. “Who are you answering to?”

The group formed a semicircle around the man and Diggle. Laurel leaned closer, brows furrowed in concern when she noticed a strange twitching in the man’s jaw and eyes.

“Spartan, something’s not right…” she began. He saw it too, cursed and tried to force the man’s jaw open, but it was too late. Mucus and sputum bubbled out of his mouth before his posture deflated and the life left his eyes.

“Huh,” Red Hood huffed. “Cyanide capsules. That’s a little intense for hired thugs.”
Diggle stood, arms crossed. “I don’t think we’re dealing with hired thugs. HIVE has more going on than drugs and human trafficking.”

“You don’t say,” Jason quipped with an oddly expressive tilt of his helmet.

“He’s right,” Laurel interrupted before the two could continue their passive aggressive bickering. “I don’t think we could have stopped these guys tonight if we had wanted to.”

Sirens rang out in the distance. Better late than never in this town.

“’bout damn time,” Diggle looked in the direction of the noise. “Load up, we’ll regroup at the cave. With me,” he motioned with a nod to Jason, who silently accepted the offer. Probably better than walking. Or stealing another car.

“Uh, Speedy,” Laurel said quietly, “why don’t you ride with the boys. Make sure they don’t kill each other.”

Thea snorted and leaned into Laurel’s ear, “I make no promises that I won’t encourage them. Maybe get them into some mud or a pool of Jell-O if I can find one,” she added with a devious eyebrow wiggle.

“Oh good Lord,” Laurel muttered, returning to her bike before she could get hear more about that mental image.

“It’s okay, I’ll stay,” Laurel said quietly. Diggle had his street clothes back on, but Laurel had only removed her mask, collar and jacket. She lingered more in her uniform every time she wore it. They had gone over the basics of the mission, after action notes, a few questions about where exactly Jason had acquired that car. Thea had already left, but Diggle seemed hesitant to leave Laurel alone in the cave with Jason. “You know, he did take a bullet for Thea tonight.”

John shot a look back to where Jason was now fishing through a first aid kit. Out of uniform and unarmed, the man was possibly just as threatening as he was in the faceless helmet, body armor, motorcycle jacket and strapped with weapons. That’s what kept Diggle on guard; for many in their line of work - and their enemies - the uniform was as much a prop as a tool. Oliver’s hood and bow allowed him to be something other than a common man, but out of uniform he appeared like any other athletic man his age. To the casual observer - hell, it had even taken Digg a while to fully catch on - Oliver was harmless. Jason Todd, though, had the same unsettling quality shared by
some of the most seasoned ghosts of the special forces community. People moved out of his way on the street; men let their eyes shift to the ground when he walked by. Todd didn’t need the costume to be scary. It was in the way he moved, the way his eyes scanned the room, the subtle head movements that let Diggle know he knew exactly what they were talking about on the other side of the room and was choosing to ignore it. It was the quiet confidence of a predator.

“I know he did,” John conceded. “I also know he took a minor shot in the meat of his arm. We’ve both seen what people like that can do to prove their loyalty when they want to.”

Laurel put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. The wounds left by Oliver’s betrayal to the league still stung, no matter what his real intentions had been. “Thank you, John. I will be careful.”

John gave her hand a light squeeze and offered a soft smile. “I know you will. Let me know when you get home.”

Alone, Laurel turned her attention back to where Jason now sat on a table, the bloodied sleeve of his dark undershirt pulled up over his shoulder, struggling to thread a needle with a right arm that appeared to be getting more stiff by the minute.

“Mind giving me a hand?” his low voice rumbled without looking up, startling her. She hadn’t realized she’d been staring. She moved to his side and thread the needle easily, but hesitated at his arm. He looked from her hands to her unsure face, confused. “What’s wrong?”

“Well...I just...I’ve never...” she motioned helplessly to his wound.

He blinked, still confused. “What? You don’t know how to do stitches?”

Laurel set her jaw. “In clothes. Not in people.”

“How do you guys patch each other up?”

Now it was Laurel’s turn to blink in confusion. “We go to the hospital?”

A smile tugged at the corners of Jason’s mouth. “Okay, well, legally dead guy here. I can’t go to
the hospital. It’s okay, I’ll walk you through it."

He held up his left hand to pause her, and pulled out a flask from one of his cargo pockets and took a generous pull.

Laurel tilted her head like a disapproving parent. “Did you seriously bring that with you tonight?”

He set the flask next to his hip. Even seated on the table, Laurel still had to look up to see his eyes. They were twinkling boyishly back at her. “I bring this with me everywhere, BC. Besides, I don’t know what’s worse. Me stitching myself left handed, or getting newb stitches on a gunshot wound.”

She dropped her hands in exasperation. “Well, I can call Diggle back, I’m sure he knows how-”

“No,” he cut her off, now smiling, “no, it’s fine. You need to learn and I’ve had worse. I’ve already sterilized the area and the needle, but normally that’s where you’d start. I didn’t see any gloves in there, but it’s okay. If you get me sick, I’ll let you feed me soup and give me a sponge bath.”

Laurel took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, counting to three.

“Okay, okay, I’m serious now,” he said with a laugh followed by an overly dour expression. “You’re just going to start on one end and stitch up, pulling the two sides together, just like fixing a tear in your pants. You have to stay close to the edges but not so close that the thread just tears through the skin.”

Laurel rested a shaky hand next to the wound but hesitated again with the needle. “How deep do I go?”

“See this,” he pointed to the exposed layers of flesh, “it’s not very pretty, but that’s about the layer you want to hit, and gently pull the sides together.”

His voice was low and smooth, and oddly soothing. “Okay,” Laurel nodded and began her stitches. If it was painful, he didn’t show it. She tried to keep the stitches small and straight. “Do you spend a lot of time behind a sewing machine, Mr. Todd?”
"I am a man of many skills, Ms. Lance. Why didn’t Green Batman ever teach you this when you were training together?"

She tried to hold back the snort that would surely ruin her neat stitching. "The Arrow deign to train his loose cannon addict ex-girlfriend? Never."

"Oooh," Jason cooed, "spicy. This is a story I want to hear."

Laurel let her eyes meet his for just a moment before returning to her work with a smile. Even bloody, it wasn’t exactly unpleasant to spend this much time feeling his arm. "That’s a long one."

"Okay. How about this," Jason’s tone lost the playful quality, "what exactly is wrong with Thea?"

Her hand paused for a breath, before returning to its work, less confident than before. She struggled to find the right answer. Where to even start?

"I took a bullet for her tonight because she lost her mind just long enough to decide to beat a guy to death with her bare hands and then stab him," Jason’s voice was cool and careful. "You’ve been my number one cheerleader on this team and I think there’s more to it than you being painfully naive. Diggle knows better, but you have something trumping the fact that he is convinced I’m a psychopath. After tonight, I’m guessing it’s Thea. Why?"

Laurel finished the last stitch, carefully tying off the thread and trimming the ends.

She set the tools down and slowly looked up to his face. "Oracle said you were resurrected in a Lazarus Pit. What do you know about them?"

She watched the realization dawn on him. "Thea got a little dip in a pit? Somebody killed her?"

"No," Laurel shook her head, "but it was close. When the Arrow brought her back, he didn’t tell us how the League had helped her or that anything might still be wrong with her."

Jason’s eyes went wider. "Wow, this guy doesn’t tell you shit, does he?"
A laugh bubbled in Laurel’s throat, but it caught there and she felt her lip trembling. “That might be the understatement of the century,” she managed to choke out without crying, but the tears were glassing over in her eyes. “Man, that’s embarrassing,” Laurel quickly shook her head and turned away from him, suddenly trapped by their proximity.

“No, it’s not, I...I mean, you care about her, and...” Jay trailed off, reaching out to stop Laurel from moving away from him, but quickly second-guessing the gesture and running his hand through his mussed hair. “If this was a League-sanctioned dip, then he should have known Thea would need help. No one comes out of that thing right. The Arrow left you with a time bomb.”

Laurel lifted herself up to sit on the table next to him. “So, what’s wrong with her? How does it make you come out wrong?”

“Well,” Jay began, looking down at his hands, then back to the big green eyes staring up at him with such hurt and confusion, “it’s magic, and I mean that in the literal sense. I can’t really explain it because I don’t really get it, but I know it takes a piece of the soul of everyone who uses it, and everyone who uses it gets a different cocktail of soul when they come out. No two people have the exact same reaction, but from what I understand, the more dead you are, the worse it is.”

His voice was raspy and at this angle, Laurel could see the scar on his cheek more clearly. The branded letter “J” looked like it had faded with time, but there it was. “You were dead? It can resurrect people who are dead?”

“Heh,” he chuckled, “Sister, I was way dead. For a couple days, and then I spent the next fifteen years on a killing spree that peaked with me raising an army and working with a terrorist to poison the entire city of Gotham just to get revenge. Bright side, Thea going black-out angry and kabobing some dudes from time to time doesn’t sound half bad anymore, does it?”

“Oh, well, when you put it that way,” Laurel nodded solemnly. The pair exchanged a silent stare before breaking into giggles. The laughter faded before Laurel asked, “You were dead for a few days, and it took 15 years to work out the Lazarus Pit rage issues?”

Jason shrugged, “It’s not really a rage issue as much as resolving the issue that lead to needing a Lazarus bath in the first place. In some way, everyone who comes out needs to confront the person who put them there. I was lucky enough to have a nice lady assassin to set me on a training path and keep me laser-focused on getting my master revenge on Batman and Joker. But I don’t know if that made it better or worse, and I don’t know what really made that impulse die down for me. Like I said, it’s magic. It works different for everyone.”
Laurel grimaced, “Thea was wounded by the old Ra’s, who is dead.”

Jason unscrewed the cap on the flask he had been pulling on earlier and offered the first sip to Laurel, who gave only a terse head shake before he took a drink for himself. “Then she needs another way to work it out. And I am the absolute worst person on the planet to help with that.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Laurel leaned back on her elbows, “you’re a great example of what not to do.” Jason turned to her with his mouth open and she could hardly bite back her grin. “I think we have some aloe in the first aid kit,” she motioned to the open kit with her chin and a wink.

“So she’s got jokes,” Jay muttered and took another swig from the flask before screwing the cap back on. “She’s got a drop leg holster for weapons on each thigh, and jokes. Awesome.”

Laurel sat up and kicked off the table, offering a hand to Jason. “Thanks, by the way, for what you did tonight. That was a close call.”

Jason accepted her hand and pulled himself off the table to his full height invading her space, but keeping a firm grip on her hand so she couldn’t back away. “She would have been fine. Besides, I was just trying to butter you up and impress you with my manly hero skills.”

“Hm,” Laurel tugged at her hand, but he kept hold of her, inching closer into her space, “I can see why you make Diggle jumpy. That’s pretty sharp hearing from the other side of this room.”

“It’s just bits and pieces, body language, I know how guys like him think and he knows how guys like me think, so it’s not that hard. Am I making you jumpy?” he smiled down at her.

“Generally I don’t have conversations with men less than six inches from my face and holding me in a death grip,” she squared off defiantly against him.

“Good, then get out of it.”

Laurel shot an incredulous look at his freshly stitched right arm, “Get out of it? You got shot, I’m not starting a sparring session with you right now. It’s been a long night, let’s just go,” she tried to pull away again only to be met with iron resistance.
“This?” he shrugged, “I’m not worried. I want to see what you got, Black Canary.”

She pulled at her wrist again, increasingly frustrated. The man wouldn’t budge. “You’ve seen me fight. I’m tired, Jay, I want to go home.”

“You do alright against those bozos in town, I want to see you fight someone who knows how to fight. Break this, we get out of here.”

She repositioned her feet, trying to simply twist her wrist free, still reluctant to let him have this one. “This is foreplay for you, isn’t it?” she practically growled. He only gave her a cheeky smile in response.

That was all she needed. Before she knew it, she was launching a knee to his groin and then following through with an uppercut to his solar plexus that should have knocked the wind out of him, if he wasn’t built like a brick wall.

He groaned in response to the solid hits, but remained standing and kept a solid grip on her, now moving to block her strikes. “C’mon Laurel, you’re not going to out-muscle me. Just like Palette, what do you do next?” he dodged some angry strikes and took others in turn. She hit a lot harder than a woman her size had any right to, but physics were still in his favor. “You can punch me all night long, I’m not going anywhere. Think, how can you make this more fair?”

Laurel stamped the frustration down. As easily as he had egged her into a fight, his voice was now giving her a calm focus point she often struggled to find. He was right, he had at least 75 lbs on her, if not more, and probably 6 inches, not to mention arm reach. She was still launching blows and kicks while her mind cycled through what he was trying to get her to do, then she landed on it.

She stepped into him, twisting and dropping her weight, then launching upwards, sending him over her hip in the process. She threw herself over him, using her legs to lock around his arm and neck, pinning him to the ground. Nyssa had never been a big fan of ground fighting, but her brief time with Ted had been spent on the basics of it.

“Good,” Jay laughed and coughed from his position. Before she knew quite what was happening, he flipped and maneuvered out of the arm bar. He was on top of her with an iron forearm pressed into her throat, breathing heavily. “We’ll work on ground fighting. That’ll help you even the playing field with bigger fighters.”
“Thanks,” she was huffing for breath. Neither moved from their position. His eyes were flickering to her lips and for the first time in, well, years, Laurel realized how long it had been since -

She didn’t get to finish that thought.

Neither one of them had the situational awareness at that moment to realize they weren’t alone until the large blonde blur tackled Jason.

Laurel could only gape as Oliver and Jason wrestled for position, each trying to get to their feet while keeping the other one down. Both men were barking questions at each other about their identities between strikes and muscle-wrenching locks and bars. Neither one seemed that interested in listening to the other.

A familiar presence slid next to her, gently patting her for injuries and then cupping her cheeks, “Laurel, oh my god, are you okay?” Felicity’s eyes were alight with concern, then she remembered she had come bearing gifts. “Here! I saw these on the table,” she said, placing the canary cry collar and one of Laurel’s tonfas on her hands.

“I’m fine, what are you doing here? Why is Oliver attacking him?” her voice pitched as she jumped to her feet, slipping the collar on as fast as she could. This would be like trying to separate two pit bulls.

“We came in and that guy was choking you,” Felicity began, not far behind her friend.

“He wasn’t,” Laurel shook her head, taking her eyes off the pair to look back at Felicity. “You might want to get down and cover your ears.”

Felicity gave a quick nod and ducked behind one of the desks while Laurel rushed toward the fight. She stopped short when it became apparent they weren’t even aware of her presence anymore. “Oliver! Jason!” Nothing. Oliver landed an uppercut that sent Jason reeling into a locker, but he came back swinging with one of the practice quarter staffs. “You know what, you both deserve this,” she said with a resolved nod. She took a deep breath before unleashing a short, but extra loud, canary cry. Both men hit their hands and knees, every unsuspecting glass case and computer screen in the way shattered. Good, they could clean that up together.

“Are you both done?” she crossed her arms, standing over them while they both moaned and rubbed their ears and respective wounds.
Oliver was the first up, indignant, naturally. “Laurel, what the hell?”

“Me? You’re asking me what the hell? You show up out of nowhere, start beating the hell out of my partner and you have the nerve to ask me that?” She shoved a finger in his chest, “Who do you think you are? You have no right-”

“...I feel like I was holding my own…” Jason mumbled as he pulled himself up, wincing and rubbing at one of his ears tenderly.

“Oh, excuse me for seeing you in danger and wanting to help!” Oliver gestured wildly in Jason’s direction. “Should I have assumed that you wanted the known criminal on top of you?”

Her eyes flared and before she was even aware of what she was doing, Oliver’s nose had exploded with blood and her fist was trembling from the impact. Felicity yelped, having long since come out of hiding, but still too afraid to speak up. She stood for a moment, frozen with her hands over her mouth, eyes darting between the now silent pair, before her hands dropped in disgust, “Oliver.”

Laurel turned away and kept her head high as she unclipped the drop leg holsters, dropped her collar carelessly on the nearest desk, slid into a brightly colored overcoat and left through the unmarked alley door without a word.

The click of the door echoed in the silent cave. Jason watched Oliver and Felicity like an episode of Desperate Housewives was unraveling before him. *And I thought we had problems*, he huffed.

Oliver was staring at the ground, holding his broken nose. Felicity stared at him for a moment before shaking her head, turning on her heel and following Laurel’s path. Oliver’s head jerked up at this, but before he could speak, Felicity ordered, without turning to look at him, “Don’t follow us.”

After the door closed yet again, Oliver heard the spark of a lighter and turned to see the one and only Jason Todd taking a drag from a cigarette and smirking at him. “You got issues, dude,” he exhaled smoke and tapped ashes into the glass and debris from their fight.

Oliver sighed and rolled his eyes to the heavens. What a great return to Star City.
“Unbelievable.”
Welcome back! Thanks for the comments and likes, it's motivating to know there are people who want to read this!

I've got Episode 3 almost completely outlined and ready to start writing. I know I'm slow, but please have faith that I'm in it for the long haul on this. I know every major plot point I want to hit, all the fun meat in the middle and a pretty fantastic ending.

I set up a side blog just for this: redcanary-renegades.tumblr.com. If you have questions, comments, concerns, want updates or to see my general blogging about this particular fandom/general writing stuff, please hit me up there.

Stay strong Laurel fans. No matter what, she has a home here where she's not getting killed off.

The older woman considered the accoutrements of her office - the sleek, modern desk, sharp lines, all punctuated by a single, wall-sized print of Picasso’s Guernica. It might be a little much, but she liked the way it made everyone else vaguely uncomfortable in her space.

She tapped her fountain pen against her notepad and sucked her teeth. Listening to this man talk was intolerable. She was so tired of excuses.

“Let me stop you, Palette,” she raised a silencing hand. “What you’re trying to say is that you let a 120-pound girl beat you bloody, then blow you up, and in the process lost this month’s inventory?”

Palette gritted his teeth and swallowed hard. The small, ice gray woman in front of him was without a doubt the scariest person he’d ever worked for. “Red Hood showed up,” he grumbled.

“Ah yes, about that. You also let Red Hood go. He is the one person with an established track record who could actually derail all of our hard work, and you let him shoot you, and then let him walk away with his new girlfriend. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t hand you over to Damien’s boys and have them feed you to a woodchipper? You heal fast, but I feel like a woodchipper would work wonders on a man like you.”

The giant raised his chin, “I’ll take him off the board, boss.”
“All of them,” a smooth voice came from the bar area of the office. To Palette’s eyes, the white blonde man in a custom suit seemed to materialize with a glass in his hand. “You’re going to take all of the vigilantes off the board. We’re doing important work here, and Mother tells me you come highly recommended.”

Damien Darhk ticked an eyebrow ever so slightly when he addressed Palette’s slate gray boss as “Mother,” but he wasn’t one to question an unusual nom de guerre.

“All of them, got it boss,” Palette nodded confidently.

“Oh and Mr. Palette, I’ll be assigning some of my Ghosts to work with you on this detail. No sense in working together if we aren’t working together at all levels, am I right?” Damien raised his glass and took a sip. “Plus, I’m setting up for a really spectacular moment with these vigilantes and it’s only going to work if my men are there.”

“Damien, not to tell you your business, but is it really wise to be using this as an opportunity for an elaborate prank?” Mother leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers and sighing.

Darhk chuckled, “C’mon, if you can’t enjoy the little things, then what’s the point?” He threw himself into one of the distinctly less comfortable chairs across from his new “partner” - that was a loose term, given the arrangement. “We’re breaking new ground! Testing the limits of science and human innovation in ways no other world power has ever- well, I mean, Hitler, but he had no vision. He was acting out of hate. We’re going to save the world. We should have a little fun,” he raised his glass again. Mother remained nonplussed by his enthusiasm.

She repressed the urge to roll her eyes with a concentrated effort. This partnership would net her billions and secure her seat in the new world order. Or something. All she had to do was continue to do what she did best: move people. Though even she found Damien’s repeated use of the term “culling” a tad distasteful. They weren’t farm animals. She took pride in the quality of both product and clientele she could cultivate. Her team knew what to look for in a candidate and what to avoid, and each one met strict standards before being marked by the dealers.

Any buffoon could cull a herd of farm animals. Mother specialized in singling out the finest talent available and getting them to the best clients in the world. The clients she was moving product to now were other hand-selected members of Damien’s so-called “new order,” and it was critical to foster good relations with them. They represented world leaders in politics, business, military leaders, the influencers who had the established credibility to lead people and would cow to Damien’s plans. That clown in North Korea would be among the first to go.
“I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” she pursed her lips.

As the conversation faded, Palette’s bulbous presence caught their attention once more.

“Oh, right, you’re still here,” Damien said with mock surprise. “Please, go, do whatever it is you need to do to kill these people.”

Palette nodded briskly and made his way out of Mother’s office. Working with the Ghosts stuck in his hide, but he reckoned he had earned that after the last confrontation.

They needed something big. Something so overwhelming and unexpected, the vigilantes would have no way to prepare for.

They needed a flash flood. A big bang. An army overnight.

Felicity tucked her bare feet under herself as she curled onto the couch next to Laurel.

“I know it’s like, four a.m., but there is never an inopportune moment for mint chip ice cream,” she held a second bowl out to her red-eyed friend. When she finally caught up to Laurel on the street, neither woman had said a word. They embraced in a long hug, then walked silently back to Laurel’s place. “It’s especially appropriate when Oliver is being a jackass.”

Laurel took the bowl and cracked the barest hint of a smile. She fiddled with the spoon, carving slices out of the ice cream but not taking any bites. “Why,” her voice cracked, “why are you guys here? It’s the middle of the night, or it was…”

“Yeah, uh, once I spilled the entirety of the story and got to the Red Hood part, Oliver sort of freaked and wanted to get back immediately. He wanted to get to work tracking this guy, getting up to speed, time of day be damned,” Felicity took a tiny spoonful of ice cream.

Laurel snorted. “Well, I guess Oliver knows where he can find the Red Hood now, doesn’t he?” She continued poking at the melting ice cream.
Felicity set her bowl on the adjacent coffee table and sat up a little straighter. “Please don’t take his...crappy outbursts personally. Which I know is a shitty and impossible thing to ask, but I know he doesn’t mean it. He cares about you so much.”

“He’s always had a very funny way of showing it.”

“I know. I watched him obsess over you when he first got back, and then when...you know...”

“Tommy died and I spiraled into becoming a fall down drunk?” Laurel interjected helpfully with a wry smirk.

“That’s not how I would have phrased it, but okay, that. He just snaps at you and gets so angry with you. He’s not like that with anyone else. We all see it. I don’t know why, but I want to believe it comes from some place of caring about you. If he didn’t care he wouldn’t be so angry, right?”

Laurel’s ice cream was slowly dissolving into soup as she sat quietly, her thoughts a tangled mess of Oliver’s anger, her own self doubt and the broken path that lead her to this point.

“It was hard, at first, to let go of the idea that he would ever be there for me the way I had been there for him and his family. I thought I was doing so well, until tonight. No one has ever been able to cut me down like he can.”

Felicity felt tears sting, “I’m so sorry, Laurel.”

Laurel shook her head, “You don’t have to apologize for him. I shouldn’t even be talking to you about this; complaining about your boyfriend.”

“Oh please,” Felicity rolled her eyes and swallowed the pain she was feeling for Laurel, “If you can’t talk to me about this stuff, who can you talk to? I know the situation is kinda weird, but you can count on me.”

Laurel nodded, and finally let a soft, but real smile form. “You’re a good friend.”
“This is where I’d normally suggest a chick flick, or maybe a really empowering karaoke session but Thea is asleep and the sun is coming up soon...so, nap and then girl’s brunch later?”

“That is the best idea you’ve had since...well, I’m not sure, you have a lot of good ideas. You can stay here as long as you want, but I’m sure Oliver is going to start to worry.”

Felicity scoffed, enjoying the ice cream and idea of her boyfriend suffering over this just a tad too much. “Good. He can squirm for a few days. Serves him right. I’m sure you’re not, but even if you and,” she gestured with her spoon and puffed her cheeks out childishly, “him are, you know, it’s none of his business.”

Coughing and trying not to choke on the icy dessert, Laurel took on the resistant look of a dieter caught in the cookie aisle. “No, oh no, Felicity, it’s not like that. We were sparring and Jay doesn’t seem to ever hold back and when you walked in, the timing was just a little weird. That’s it.”

“Uh huh,” Felicity responded trying to keep a straight face. “So, it’s ‘Jay’? And you should know you’re actually managing to turn the same shade of red I get whenever I’m even in the vicinity of someone I find attractive.”

Laurel chewed her lip and tried to hide the blossoming smile. “It’s not that he’s not attractive. He’s very good looking and can be weirdly charming when he isn’t trying to push everyone’s buttons. I’m just not ready for anything yet and certainly not with someone who-”

“Puts Oliver’s bad boy vigilante ways to shame?” Felicity finished helpfully.

“Exactly,” Laurel said. “I’ve been in mourning, and an alcoholic, and then in mourning and in AA, and in mourning again and it’s too much. They say we’re really not supposed to form romantic relationships in the early stages of treatment, and it seems to be...easier to keep going like this.”

Felicity shifted so she could rest her head on her friend’s shoulder. “I know it’s easier. Trust me, do I ever know that. But it’s not always happier, ya know?”

Laurel looped an arm around Felicity, setting her finally empty bowl on the table. “I am getting there.”

Felicity shifted her blue eyes up to Laurel’s, “I just don’t want you to miss out on something good
because you have this voice in your head that sounds oddly like Oliver when he’s all bitchy telling you that you shouldn’t have it.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. It wasn’t long before both women passed out on the couch, where they stayed until Thea emerged hours later, loudly banging cupboard doors and complaining about the absence of food.

“Oh, brunch sounds great!” Thea beamed at their groggy faces.

Quentin ground his teeth but kept his face in what he thought was a blank receptive expression. He really didn’t need the city’s tax collector and, who even was that? The commissioner of the health department? telling him about the string of Ghost robberies, child disappearances and assorted vigilante activity that his police force hadn’t been able to contain.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the numbers,” he cut off the larger man across the table. “My department only has so many bodies and in case you missed it, these Ghosts are a little bit more than your average street crook.”

“Why don’t we just call in the National Guard? I think this qualifies as a state of emergency,” a woman at the end of the table queried.

“Why yes, Captain Lance, why don’t you call in the National Guard?” Damien’s voice rang out cheerfully as he strutted into the council chambers.

“Excuse me,” the councilwoman interjected, “this is a private city council meeting.”

“Mmm, yeah, the whole government-by-committee thing, how’s that working out for you?” Damien approached the table with a predatory smile. “I know I don’t have to introduce myself to you,” he playfully smacked Quentin on the back, “but hi everyone, Damien Darhk. I figured tonight’s meeting would be a good opportunity for a little face-to-face time.”

Some of the council members were watching Darhk warily, but a few were now shifting accusatory glances at Quentin. His thin facade of cool detachment was melting. *This was not part of the deal*, his thoughts began to muddle into a frenzy.
“Quentin,” one of the councilmen began carefully.

“Oh don’t worry,” Darhk interrupted with a dismissive handwave. “Captain Lance didn’t do anything that you all aren’t about to agree to yourselves, and for very good reason. You’ve done a bang up job letting this city slowly circle the drain, but did you know there is finally some idiot with the money and clout to run for mayor? And she’s doing it? Nuts.” Damien chuckled at the very insanity of the idea. “And running unopposed. You’re about to be out of your jobs. Well, this job at least.”

Damien made his way around to stand at the head of the table, the councilmember seated there silently moved his chair aside.

“What do you want?” the braver councilwoman asked. Linda Nguyen, Quentin suddenly remembered.

“I want you fine people to continue performing exactly as you have been. I want this city to keep up its sad little facade at attempting to survive while I and HIVE accomplish our mission here. Maybe lay off the army talk, I could live without that.”

“What is HIVE?” Linda asked.

For his part, Damien looked genuinely surprised and more than a little pleased to explain himself. “Oh! I’m HIVE. Well, I founded and run HIVE. It’s my professional organization. All those worker bees you people call ‘Ghosts’ are my employees and let me tell you, I only hire the best. HIVE is going to save the world. Don’t you all want to be part of that?”

Hooded eyes from around the table slowly lifted up to Damien’s icy smile, except Quentin who kept his attention locked on his meeting notes.

Linda seemed to be growing more defiant. “A lot of impressive men in fancy clothes have made big, scary speeches about saving this city and saving the world. All that’s gotten us is a drop in population by almost 40%, skyrocketing poverty, a life expectancy comparable to the Dark Ages and one of the most impressive rises in organized crime since Prohibition. Why should we listen to anything you have to say?”

Damien gave a cat-like smile and licked his lips before responding, “I like you, Linda. You have
backbone. That’s something I look for in partners.” He motioned for one of his men to bring forth a carefully packed box, then the man slipped back to his place by the door without needing to be told. Damien pursed his lips as he thumbed through the contents of the box, before letting out a pleased “Ah ha!” and pulling out a neat manila envelope. “Nguyen, Linda. Three children, all girls, Micah, 9, Allie, 5, and little Tristin, just 2. No wonder you’ve got spit, all that empowerment. A mother cat. Their pediatrician is Dr. Tobias Aldermann, down on 5th. Allie is allergic to nuts. How unfortunate it would be if her school lunch got mixed up and someone fed that little girl almond milk instead of 2%? Or, what if -”

“Stop.” Linda slammed a hand on the table. “Enough.”

“Good,” Damien beamed. “I’m sure you’re all aware I have dossiers like this on all of you. I’ve always been a big picture man. I’m not afraid to do what it takes to make the world a better place. Somewhere in there is some cliche about an omelette and eggs, but you get the picture. You’re the eggs,” he added helpfully. “I don’t really want to crack all of you if I don’t have to, but I will if the need arises. Does anyone at this table think that need will arise?”

His frozen eyes flitted from person to person, most were staring with trembling lips and an ashen pallor. Damien’s hawkish grin grew wider as none could muster the courage to answer him.

“Excellent!” he clapped his hands together. “Are we all ready to get to work?”

Laurel swirled the red and white straw in her ginger ale. Another ginger ale. At yet another Danforth campaign party. She couldn’t help but wonder if these fundraisers weren’t a tad self indulgent given that Jessica was the only candidate in the race. As a city official and long-time friend of the Danforth family, Laurel felt a responsibility to make as many appearances as possible. Even when she would rather be anywhere else. Literally anywhere. Diggle and Jay were at the cave using some accounting software Felicity had set up to track those marked bills they’d planted. That could be exciting, right? Come to think of it, she had a pile of work blouses sorely in need of ironing and starching. Yeah, that would be a good thing to do tonight.

“I wonder how much funding a one-person mayoral race really requires?” Thea appeared with a fresh drink. “Not that I mind the excuse to put on a dress again, but doesn’t this seem a little…”

“Excessive?” Laurel offered. “The Danforths did always throw the best parties.”
This party was even more crowded than the last. Supporters - potential donors - were crowding tables, milling back and forth around the dance floor, eager to introduce one to the other and discuss all of their grand designs for the city.

Thea shrugged, “I think it’s more than that. Jessica, even Madison, seem really committed. And she’s right, it’s past time for someone to step up and take over for the city council, at least until things settle down and more experienced politicians start coming back.”

A quizzical furrow fell on Laurel’s brow. “Did you guys meet up to discuss campaign platforms or something?”

Thea’s face took on first surprise, and then guilt. “Oh! Yeah...I shouldn’t have said anything. It was just lunch, at my old loft.”

Now more confused, “You felt the need to do lunch in the loft where you got stabbed to death and haven’t set foot in since they brought you back from Nanda Parbat?”

The younger woman shrank and began to look more like a child caught in a lie with each word. “I just didn’t want to say anything because, well...it was Oliver and Felicity’s idea to have lunch. And I told them they could stay there instead of a hotel. So that’s how we all ended up there having lunch. Please don’t be mad.”

Laurel blinked slowly and swallowed, trying to process first why on earth Oliver and Felicity would even want to stay in that awful place, then how weird it must have been for Thea to be back and pretending it was normal, and finally that Thea thought she’d be mad. “There is nothing to be mad about. He is your brother. We’re not even fighting.”

Thea sputtered and coughed on the drink she had the misfortune of sipping at that moment, then she broke into open laughter. “Laurel, I think his broken nose and twin black eyes would disagree with that statement. I convinced him to tell everyone he was in a jet ski accident.”

“Jet skiing?” Laurel responded incredulously.

“Yeah, it was the douchiest thing I could think of, and now he’s telling everyone. You’re welcome.”
Biting her lip and trying unsuccessfully to hide her grin, Laurel just shook her head and continued scanning the crowd. She wasn’t excited to see Oliver this evening, so spotting him before he could ambush her would at least make her feel better.

The crowd was growing, and more guests were bumping into the pair. And then, speaking of unwelcome dirtbags, a large body checked awkwardly into Laurel’s backside, as if he’d stumbled. Both women turned to see what sort of klutz had collided with them.

Laurel felt her face take on the rigid mask of downturned lips and narrowed eyes she often wore into a fight as she was met Adam’s deer-in-the-headlights expression. “Uh...uh...Miss Lance...” he shot a panicked look between the two women, and half-stumbled, half-scurried away, running into more guests and leaving behind him a wake of confused and annoyed party goers.

Thea turned slowly to her friend, gave her a critical, slow up and down look, before asking with just the faintest lilt of amusement, “What did you do to him?”

Before Laurel could formulate a response, Felicity cleared her throat. At some point during Adam’s little scene, the couple had arrived and found their friends. Of course, Laurel tried to hide her wince with a thin smile.

“Thea!” Felicity greeted with a slightly too-high note of cheeriness, “let’s go find Madison to talk about that thing that we were talking about earlier with, you know, the, computer and fashion, thing.”

The bespeckled blonde herded an obviously skeptical Thea away while she was still arching a brow and mumbling questions about the alleged need to go find their friend’s daughter.

Oliver and Laurel watched the pair leave, both aware of the obvious attempt to force them to speak. And apologize. But dammit if his nose didn’t still hurt. Oliver clicked his jaw and made an elaborate show of avoiding Laurel’s gaze as she crossed her arms implacably.

Finally, Laurel let out the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “That looks bad.”

“I’ve had worse,” Oliver gestured to his splinted nose. “And I think I might have deserved this.”

“Might?” Laurel’s mouth ticked up and Oliver bit back the laugh bubbling up on his own lips. “I
“No,” he shook his head, serious again and bringing his clear blue eyes to hers, “no, Laurel, I have not been a good friend to you in a long time and the other night was just another notch in that belt. I’m sorry.”

Retrieving her drink from where she’d set it earlier, Laurel lifted her glass in a toast. “How about a fresh start?”

Oliver’s posture sagged like a weight had been lifted, and then he rose again, head high and smiling despite the lingering pain in his face. He tapped his glass against Laurel’s and said, “To fresh starts.”

They sipped their drinks, finally smiling at each other as friends for the first time in, It’s been years, Laurel realized, trying to keep her face happy and not show him just how much it hurt that it took this much effort to take such a small step.

“So,” Laurel cleared her throat, eager for an excuse to derail that train of thought, “how’s Thea’s loft working out for you two?”

Oliver cringed and then tried to laugh it off. “It’s uh...it’s a little weird, but Felicity wants to make a good impression with the board and renting a hotel suite indefinitely on company funds isn’t really going to do that, so…”

She put a gentle hand on Oliver’s arm. “It’s okay, you don’t owe me an explanation. I know it’s weird for you and you wouldn’t be there if you didn’t have to be. If I had more room I’d offer you guys a place to stay.”

“Thank you,” he squeezed her hand in return before releasing her. “I’m actually thinking maybe a rug, or just redecorating altogether to give the place a new vibe-”

He abruptly stopped talking and they both turned to the stage as the house lights dimmed, the stage lights lit up and an aide began her introduction of Jessica for the expectant crowd. The ballroom filled with applause as Jessica made her way to the podium, the picture of class and confidence. Perfectly coiffed blonde hair set in a tasteful French twist on top of the classic politician-blue suit (American flag pinned loyally to her collar), she certainly looked the part of the experienced politician, even if nothing in her resume supported the image.
“Good evening, thank you all for coming,” she began through a pristine white smile. “I know these parties must be getting old, but I really couldn’t do this without your support, so thank you.” A smattering of chuckles and applause. She went on about the importance of community and leadership and some of the basics of her plan for her first six months in office.

Oliver leaned closer to Laurel and whispered, “She’s really brave, you know?” When Laurel gave him a silent, slightly confused look, he continued, “Star City is a wreck. City officials have a bad track record of either giving into the criminal element or getting murdered. She’s standing up to that, in the light, with her own name. I think that’s brave.”

Laurel looked up at Oliver and felt the stirrings of pride for her friend. She opened her mouth to agree with him, but was cut off by the explosion of gunfire and screaming. People were sprinting and shoving and tumbling over each other in a desperate attempt to get away from the seemingly ubiquitous gunfire.

Instinctively, Oliver had pulled Laurel behind him and ducked them both low. From a place of cover, they could try to get a grip on the situation. “Do you see where it’s coming from?” Oliver shouted over the din.

Laurel shifted so they were back-to-back and she rapidly scanned the room, following the sound of the gunfire. “There!” she pointed to the second floor balcony where she could just barely make out the barrel of a large machine gun and flashes of light from the heat the gun was generating. Before either of them could move, Thea vaulted a table and came to a baseball sliding stop next to them. “I got Felicity out the door, where is it?” she barked. All Laurel had to do was point, and true to her name, Speedy was off in a flash, using curtains, trestles and handrails to launch herself to the balcony. “Oliver, we have to get to the stage!” Laurel shouted, directing his attention to where Jessica and a few of her staff were barricaded behind the fallen podium and chairs. A smaller man in a mask strolled in from offstage, playfully twirling a handgun. He paused to shoot the aide nearest to his feet, then used the gun to gesture for Jessica to stand. He had her by the hair and the gun pressed to the temple before Oliver and Laurel could get through the mass of people.

Laurel ascended the stage first, barrelling after him but stopping short when he skidded to a halt, turning himself and his hostage and tapping the gun threateningly against her head. “If you make me kill her here, it’s not going to send the same message,” the man spat.

Laurel raised her hands cautiously. “Just let her go, and we can walk out of here.”

Behind his mask, the man reeled back and laughed incredulously. “You’re kidding, right? Are you
seriously trying to give me the ‘we can talk this out’ talk?”

“Actually, I’m just trying to distract you.”

Oliver sprang up behind the man and wrapped his neck in a chokehold. Laurel rushed forward to pull Jessica away, and then wrench the gun out of the man’s hand. When he was disarmed, she turned back to Jessica. “Get her out of here!” Oliver barked. Laurel paused for a moment, unwilling to leave Oliver alone with an unknown assailant, but relented. He was right, she had to get Jessica as far away from this person as possible.

The two women ran back toward the ballroom. “Where’s your security detail?” Laurel asked as they picked their way through the mess of the backstage area.

“Two are dead on stage, I don’t know what happened to the others. I have a back-up team on standby at my hotel. They’re to meet me at the east stage door in the event of an emergency, so they should be here any minute. This way,” Jessica nodded solemnly, slowed her breathing, and pointed in the direction of the appropriate door. Laurel nearly had to pick her jaw up off the floor. This was not the Queen family shopping partner and party planner she remembered from her youth.

“What about Madison?” she asked, catching up and then taking the lead, keeping an eye out for more threats.

As if on cue, “Mom!” Madison cried from the doorway and ran to her mother’s arms. Felicity was also at the door. Both women looked shaken, disheveled, but unharmed.

“Oh honey, where’s your guard? What happened?” Jessica brushed her daughter’s hair from her eyes.

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen him since the party started. It was Thea. She got us out,” Madison’s eyes cleared for a moment. “How’d she do that? Where is she?”

“Krav maga,” Felicity spat out. “Yeah, krav maga. She’s been super into it, ever since the, um, the Undertaking. You know, girl takes self defense so seriously. I’m sure she’s fine. Hey, is that your car?”

A black sedan pulled into the alley blessedly interrupting Felicity’s rambling. Nearly identical
bodyguards stepped out of the vehicle, one opened the back door and the other guided Madison into the backseat.

Before Jessica followed, she turned to Laurel and took both of her hands. “Thank you. It seems I owe you and the Queen family quite the debt.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Laurel pulled the woman into a hug. “You should go, get somewhere safe.”

“You too,” Jessica said meaningfully before sliding into the vehicle.

The vehicle sped away and Laurel turned back toward the door, but paused before walking back in. “You should head back to the cave, Felicity. Let the guys know what happened.”

Felicity’s brows furrowed, “It’s not really a cave, but it’s not the foundry. It should have a different name.”

Laurel turned and stared at the other woman silently and until she finally returned the gaze. “Felicity, you don’t have to go back inside. It’s not going to be pretty.”

With a grim smile and determined set to her shoulders, Felicity took one of Laurel’s hands. “You jump, I jump, Jack.”

“Okay, our perp is Lonnie Machin,” Felicity slid her chair back so the group could get a better look at the old mugshot she’d found. “He’s been associated with every major crime syndicate across the nation from, well, Gotham to here. I think he was even working for you at one point,” she ventured a look over her shoulder to Jason, who stood further from the group. He didn’t need to see a mugshot of the guy.

“Machin’s a nutcase, but he’s not a leader. He was an overly enthusiastic errand boy who was busy trying to brown-nose his way into better positions. You said there weren’t any other Ghosts there? No one?” Jason said gruffly, arms across his chest.
Thea shook her head, “No, the minigun I disabled was rigged to a timer. I found a few explosives on timers around the building. The security had been killed or knocked out sometime after the party started.”

“How does a 5’6”, 160-pound guy with no real experience beyond gofer work take out an entire security team, set up ambush weapons, and even get past Laurel and Oliver?” Diggle leaned back, away from the computer, turning slowly to Oliver who was only shaking his head and running a hand down his face.

Oliver threw his hands up angrily and then to the back of his head, his jaw flexed and ground together and his muscles were taught like he was poised to blow up. “I...I don’t know. I had him. He had a taser, he got away. I tried to run him down, but he was too fast.”

A snort from Jason got every eye in the room to turn in his direction. “What? Oh come on, it’s a little funny. Either his reputation is way blown out of proportion, or Ollie is having the worst week ever,” Jay didn’t fight the grin.

Oliver took a step toward the larger, significantly more relaxed man. “Oh, you think this is funny? He worked for you, right? Why aren’t you out there running Machin down? You know him. He’s your man. How do we know he’s not still working for you?”

Jason’s eyes and nostrils flared, he leaned forward, matching Oliver’s posture before rocking back on his heels and letting out a huff of smug laughter with a smile that held more threat than mirth. “Trust me, green weenie, if he was working for me, he would have gotten the job done. And if he hadn’t, you would have found his body already. When I’m not working with you, you’ll know.”

No one moved or spoke while the pair had a silent staredown, each willing the other to throw the first punch. Finally, Diggle stepped up to the plate. “Let’s all back down for a second,” he put a hand on Oliver’s shoulder. “It’s safe to say Machin was acting either on his own or for HIVE. You know I wouldn’t bring anyone in if I had any doubts.”

At that, Jason’s eyes flickered to John. Diggle didn’t acknowledge the look. Oliver took a small step backward and turned toward the rest of the group. He found Laurel giving him a calm, steady gaze, and he let out a breath. “Felicity, do you think you can run him through the facial recognition software and see if we can spot him on any traffic or security cameras?”

Felicity waited a beat, still unsure if the tension had fully broken in the room, before popping up from her chair. “Yeah, it’s already running,” she said, making her way to a covered display case. “...But if you’re going to be hitting the streets with the team, you’re going to need a mask.” She
stopped at the case and turned with a sly smile to the now expectant crowd. Jason remained uninterested.

“Felicity,” Oliver sighed, taking a slow step toward his girlfriend, “The Arrow is dead, I can’t go back out there as him.”

“Ah ha!” she pointed playfully, “that’s why I made some tweaks.” With all the pizazz of a magician’s assistant, she whipped the curtain off the case and revealed a modified costume for Oliver, still in his signature green but with some tactical upgrades, and, to Jason’s everlasting amusement, short sleeves. “What do you think?” She wrung her hands like a child who had just presented her parent with a school project for approval.

Oliver’s face flashed between pride to concern. “Felicity, did you spend any part of our vacation not working?”

Felicity blushed, took Oliver’s hand and leaned into his shoulder, “It’s got woven kevlar and fire-resistant fabric, the plates are a new ultra-lightweight anti-ballistic armor in testing at Palmer Tech. I also had a new batch of arrows made with a new tip. It's a titanium-vanadium alloy we've been working on. You can shoot through a tank with those bad boys, and they have all the different heads you like; the exploding ones, the flashbangs, the grappling hooks, and the non-lethal arrows are more durable than ever. And look, it’s in your size!”

The taller man pressed a kiss to Felicity’s forehead. “Thank you, but hopefully I won’t need to wear it more than once.”

“Speaking of new gear,” the sudden, quiet voice next to Laurel’s ear nearly made her jump out of her skin. She jerked to find Jason behind her, holding her canary cry device out to her. “I made the upgrades Oracle recommended.”

The group’s attention was still focused on Oliver’s new suit, so no one noticed Jay and Laurel drifting away. “When did you do this?” her brows drew together suspiciously, snatching the device out of his hand and turning it over, trying to get a better look at these alleged upgrades.

Jason rolled his eyes, “The other night, you left it out. Oracle told you I could add the new hardware.”

“But she didn’t say you would. And you didn’t say you had taken it. How do I know it works?
What if it’s broken?”

“Then you’ll just have to call up your League buddies and get a new one,” Jason’s face hardened. “I spent the majority of my teen years in the Bat Cave disassembling and reassembling every gadget Batman ever came up with, but please, continue treating me like an incompetent. Smash it with a hammer, throw it in the bay, I don’t care,” he tossed his hands and turned to walk toward the alley door.

She winced and reached a hand out to stop him, but hesitantly pulled it back. “Jay, wait, I’m sorry.” Laurel looked down at the collar in her hands. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

Jason stopped his exit and half-turned back to Laurel. “Do you want to test that thing, or not?”

“I do,” she nodded resolutely.

“Meet me out back. I’d bring a jacket.”

Less than five minutes later, Laurel sat in the front seat of a very beat up Toyota Forerunner with her hands firmly in her lap, trying her damndest to not look at her driver from her periphery. She hadn’t let anyone know where she was going, or even said goodbye for the night. She thought that might have been a mistake, but they were all so mellow and caught up in Oliver’s fancy new suit, she hadn’t wanted to interrupt.

Her eyes shifted ever so slightly to her left to Jason’s muscular arm casually draped over the steering wheel. The scruff of a three-day beard and his tactical cargo pants in the truck gave him the look of some kind of war mercenary.

“Go on, ask it,” he said without looking at her.

“Huh? What?” Laurel jumped in her seat. She was grateful night had fallen to hide the blush creeping up her neck.

“I know you want to ask me about the SUV.”
Whew. Laurel plastered a serious frown on her face. “Where did you get the truck?”

Jason took his eyes off the road to slowly turn to her and deadpan, “Don’t worry about it.”

Laurel’s mouth fell open as her face took on a comical mask of shock. She slapped him on the arm and barked, “Jason Todd! You turn this car around and return it right now! I am not driving anywhere with you in a stolen car!”

Jason broke into laughter and made a half-hearted attempt to defend himself against the smack. “Hey, hey, easy there, Mom! I paid for it, with money and everything. I’m screwing with you.”

Defeated and deflated, Laurel sat back into her seat, lips pursed and huffing out of her nose while Jason sniggered away in the driver’s seat. “Where are we going, anyway?” she finally asked.

He paused and hummed to himself, as if purusing for the right answer. “I was thinking the salt flats,” he nodded in confirmation to himself.

Laurel recoiled, “The salt flats? That’s like three hours away.”

“Exactly. And miles from nowhere. Oracle said the upgrades to that thing,” he nodded toward the collar in Laurel’s lap, “can make it a heavy duty weapon. Better to test it where no one will be around to hear it. Or possibly get their brain melted.”

Laurel rubbed a hand on her face. “You know, I really don’t want to melt anyone’s brain…”

“I said possibly,” Jason looked over to her with mock hopefulness. “I brought plenty of targets. We can work the bugs out tonight.”

“Brain melting is not a bug,” Laurel shook her head, running a thumb over her sister’s former canary cry. She set it down in her purse at her feet and leaned forward to turn on the radio. Three hours of small talk with Jason Todd could only lead to problems.

Jason’s eyes lit up and he moved to stop her, shaking his head and saying, “No, no, don’t, the radio’s busted-”
Jason Todd was a liar.

The pristine bass in the trunk immediately began thumping out the vaguely familiar beat of… “Is this the Ruff Ryders song? This is DMX.” Laurel thought her brain might actually melt. “I haven’t heard this since high school.”

He had both hands now white-knuckling the steering wheel and he winced his way through possible excuses. “It was in the CD player when I bought the truck,” he spat. “The radio antenna doesn’t work for shit.”

“Uh huh,” Laurel mumbled, her eyes now searching around the vehicle. Her face brightened when she found what she was looking for. She reached behind her seat and returned with a clear plastic CD case with sloppy handwriting in permanent marker on the cover. Jason cringed and waited for it. “It says, ‘Jaybird’s Party Mix 99.’” She held it up in front of her mouth, but her eyes were alight with laughter.

He kept his eyes on the road and his hands on the wheel, biting back the urge to snatch the case out of her hands and throw it out the window. Jason made a mistake when he cocked an eyebrow to get a better look at Laurel on his right. She was a barely contained ball of giggles, eyes sparkling, just waiting for the dam to break.

He let the music roll on, not changing his stoic expression, waiting until just the right beat, before jumping in, “Cause now you on the floor, wishing you never saw, me walk through that door with that .44, now it's time for bed, two more to the head, got the floor red, yeah, that bitch’s dead; Laurel I swear to god if you tell a soul about this I will never stop hunting until I find the most embarrassing secret I can find about you and sell it as a Super Bowl ad.”

“Oh my god,” she threw herself back in her seat in a fit of giggles over the thumping music, “your nickname is Jaybird and you still listen to 90’s hip hop. You’re adorable.”

Jason snatched the CD case out of Laurel’s hands and tossed it to the backseat. It took everything in his power to keep a straight face between her laughter and the music. “It’s just a dumb nickname from when I was a kid. I’ll bet your iPod is full of all kinds of embarrassing crap like Taylor Swift and Britney Spears and I am not adorable,” he snapped a warning finger in Laurel’s still laughing face, “I am terrifying. I am on ARGUS’s most wanted list. I have single handedly taken over Gotham more than once.”
Still grinning, Laurel leaned back over the center console, taking Jason’s hand, still pointing staunchly at her, and gently lowering it to cup it between her hands like something fragile and delicate. “Oh, I know. The witnesses from the biker bar I interviewed kept calling you the Terminator. One tried to tell me there were at least five of you and a few of them tried to convince me you were some kind of meta who could grow to be ten feet tall and pick up a car. That’s why this,” she nodded at the radio, “is the best thing I’ve seen in weeks.”

Jay let his eyes drift from the road to see Laurel sparkling at him, dangerously close and cupping his hand. He couldn’t keep up the stony expression. His face softened and his hand felt warm cradled in hers. In the passing headlights of traffic, he noticed flecks of gold and blue in her eyes. The air inside the SUV grew heavy and the laughter left Laurel’s expression. Suddenly aware of how close they were, Laurel abruptly dropped his hand and sat back in her seat. Jason felt like a warm light had suddenly been extinguished, leaving him in the cold dark. He cleared his throat and brought his eyes back to the road. She was right, he had no business trying to step out of that darkness. It was one thing to tease and flirt, it was something else entirely to start entertaining any thoughts of getting involved with a woman who had a successful day job, wasn’t on the run from anyone, was so inherently good, …

“Do you have any N.W.A.?” her question shocked him out of his spiraling thoughts. Just like that, he was fighting the urge to smile again.

“The CD pile is under your seat,” he replied without taking his eyes off the highway.

He didn’t have to look over to know she was grinning as she dug through his near ancient collection of CDs.

Three hours and several increasingly smaller highway changes later, they were bouncing down an obviously seldom used fire access road through the desert when Laurel realized why Jay had chosen the Forerunner. He glanced at the GPS mounted on the dashboard, made what sounded like an affirmative grunt and brought the vehicle to a slow halt in the middle of nowhere. It was a good thing he had an actual GPS, because a quick glance at her cell phone confirmed that they were nowhere near anything that resembled a cell tower.

“How did you even find this place?” Laurel squinted into the darkness. She was glad she’d worn flats and taken his advice to bring a jacket. The moment Jay opened his door, the vehicle was filled with icy desert air.

“A map,” he responded from the open trunk. “You wanna help me out with these?” She turned to
see him retrieving...were those mannequins?

Shivering, she pulled her jacket on and joined him at the back of the truck. “Did you pay for these with real money, too?” she asked, picking skeptically through the haphazard pile of mannequins, old dress forms, even a few cardboard cutouts of celebrities folded at the bottom of the pile.

Jason paused with a pile of target parts under each arm and looked up thoughtfully. “Do I have to pay for stuff when I get it out of the dumpster?”

“Ew,” she jerked her hand away from the pile.

Laughing at her, Jason was already walking into the starlit desert. As her eyes adjusted, it wasn’t quite so dark. Without any other buildings, the stars and moon shone so brightly she could see the brush and cacti and terrain around her. “C’mon, princess. Start setting this up around here,” he pointed to a vague area near one of the mannequins he set down. “Keep them about ten feet apart.”

All set up and with a mix of black and white trash bags draped over them, the targets made the landscape exceedingly creepy.

“Allright,” Jason rubbed his hands together, whether against the cold or in anticipation of what was to come Laurel couldn’t tell, “the targets with the black bags are bad guys, white bags are civilians.”

Laurel pulled the collar out of her pocket but hesitated to put it on. “Did Oracle happen to explain how it’s supposed to be different?”

In the bright moonlight, the concern was plain on Laurel’s face. Jason opened his mouth to make a joke before remembering how upset she’d gotten when she found out he had tampered with the device without telling her. A more serious approach would probably be better. “She’s been working on new kinds of wearable tech for a little while now. I have no idea how it works, it goes way above my head, but she said it should be more responsive and adaptive to you. She also said you should be able to focus the sonic waves in the direction you’re facing, more of a laser-guided missile effect, less carpet bombing with sound.”

The calm, serious response was what she needed to hear. Laurel sucked in a breath and donned the collar, then shot a look to Jason. “You might want to get back.” Jason only winked in response and pulled a pair of ridiculously large aircraft grade headphones out of one of the pockets of his
military-style jacket.

Laurel turned back to the eerie field of targets. She zeroed in on the one she had intentionally set a little further apart than any of the others. The device was tingling against her throat in an unfamiliar sensation. It felt strange, but not wrong. She could actually feel it responding and adjusting to the muscles in her throat as she swallowed and carefully cleared her throat.

Now or never.

Focusing on the hunk of human-shaped plastic draped in black, she sucked in a breath and unleashed the sonic cry just as she had countless times before. But it wasn’t like any other time she’d ever used the canary cry. For a split second, it was louder, deeper, it resonated in her bones and boomed through the sky as something so much more than a high-pitched noise. It was so much more than what she had been expecting, the shock and power of it sent her tumbling backward into the dirt. She clapped a hand over her mouth, as if that could stop another disaster, as the dust settled and revealed all the carefully placed targets, cacti, brush and debris blown apart like a bomb had gone off.

Jason let out a whoop, tore off his headphones and ran toward the target area, then skidded to a halt and ran back to Laurel, grinning like a child. He gripped her shoulders, a wild joy she couldn’t reconcile written across his entire person, “Oh my god, that was amazing!” Still radiating uncontrolled happiness, understanding crossed his eyes and he tried desperately to rein in his own reaction. He brought a more gentle hand to smooth her hair and cup her chin. “Are you okay, you didn’t hurt yourself, did you?” he couldn’t keep the smile from his lips.

Laurel kept her hand firmly over her mouth as she shook her head, eyes wide. How could he be so happy about the a-bomb on her throat? How could he look so young and carefree like this? She couldn’t replace Sara’s canary.

But Jason’s calloused hands were cupping her face softly, pulling her hand away from her mouth. “It’s okay, you’re not going to hurt me,” he was smiling brightly, without any hint of teasing, or the undercurrent of sarcasm or bitterness that usually tainted most of his expressions. Laurel wanted to believe him. His hands shifted to hers and he pulled her back to standing. “That was amazing!” He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He turned to look at the damage again, then back to Laurel. “Seriously, the sonic scream thing was cool before, but this is awesome. C’mon, let’s do it again. There’s a tree over there you didn’t get.”

“No, Jason, I think that’s enough -"
“No,” he cut her off, “don’t chicken out.” He stood behind her, gripping her shoulders and pointing her in the direction of a lonely tree about 50 yards away. “The sonic device was designed for the League, right? They designed and used it as a distraction tool, and whoever made it into a collar for you just made it the same thing but wearable. Oracle made it a wearable weapon. You control it. You control the volume, intensity and where you want those sonic waves to land, got it?”

She looked up at him over her shoulder. He was so confident and serious, but she could still see the hope in his eyes. “You should still stand back,” Laurel said quietly.

“Nope,” Jason kept one hand on her shoulder and moved the other to her waist, “you need to focus on control and aim. And I don’t really want you to fall on your butt again.”

Laurel repressed an eyeroll and focused on her new target. “You know what to expect now,” Jason’s voice was low and smooth. “Focus. You have all the control.”

Like the tingling at her throat, Jason’s hand at her waist was unfamiliar, but not unwelcome. The strength standing behind her was a bolster. She could do this. Every screwed up step in her life had lead her right to this moment. She could be so much more and the new sensation at her throat was thrumming in her bones, through her blood. This was her’s now, not Sara’s.

She unleashed. Jason’s grip tightened on her as they slid backward ever so slightly against the force, but she kept going. It took all of her concentration, but she found the place in her throat where she could focus the sound just on her target. Her confidence blossomed as she found she could master the volume and resonance of the cry. The power of the sonic blast was no longer pushing her back. Instead, she felt herself leaning into it, stepping forward. Laurel was so focused, she didn’t notice that Jay was no longer holding onto her. She took another step forward and let out the cry with a deeper pulse that uprooted the tree and sent its leaves and branches scattering.

A cocky smile hit Laurel’s mouth. No damage except exactly where she had intended it. Behind her, Jason let out another cheer and pumped his fists in the air. “Hot damn, that is cool!” he clapped her on the back a little too enthusiastically. “That felt better, right? Did you feel in control?”

“Yeah,” Laurel finally returned his zeal with an eager nod. “At the end it felt natural. This packs a lot more punch than it used to, but I don’t have to worry about hitting everyone with the sound now. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Jason put his hands up. “That’s all you. And Oracle. She’s gonna be stoked. This is one seriously cool weapon.”
“My sister would have loved this,” Laurel touched the device at her throat, looking down to the ground.

Jason let silence hang for a moment, weighing his options. Now was probably as good a time as any. “Your sister...Sara?” he ventured.

Laurel’s face shot up to his. Jason watched her eyes shifting, face scrunching into shock, betrayal, then understanding as she put the pieces together. “Did you meet her while you were with the League?”

“No,” Jason quickly shook his head, “we crossed paths a few times. I knew her mostly by reputation. We were both the prized pets of the al Ghul sisters. Well, that’s not true. I was a pet. From what I knew, Nyssa actually loved Sara.”

“Wait, back up,” Laurel was incredulous, “Nyssa has a sister?”

“Don’t take it personally, that family isn’t really big on sharing.”

Laurel moved to sit on the open rear hatch of the SUV, her face knotted in thought. “Was she okay? What was she like?”

“Sara?” Jason slowly followed, but leaned against the vehicle instead of sitting. “Like I said, it’s not like I knew her. She seemed like everyone else in the LoA. Talia made a few comments about Nyssa showing weakness, but other than that...she was strong, beautiful, she was taking really well to her training, and I was off on another training mission the next day. I saw her once more a few years later all suited up as the little yellow bird, but that was it.”

Laurel let her head rest against the side of the truck, staring up at the star-filled sky. “She could have been whatever she wanted, but she never even had a chance. I knew she had a crush on Ollie, if I had taken her more seriously, I might have seen the boat thing coming, I might have stopped her, I could have even been on the boat instead of her. I could have done or said anything to stop her from going back to the League and I actually smiled and let her go.”

Jason straightened and squared off with Laurel. “Take it from someone who knows, some of us get so lost in the dark we are the only ones who can pull ourselves out. Sara could have walked away, Laurel. Nyssa wasn’t holding her prisoner. Sara didn’t want to come out of the dark. She wasn’t
With his arms crossed and a stern set to his face, Jason had regained some of the menace he temporarily abandoned with his display of youthful glee. No, Laurel dismissed the idea, menace wasn’t the right word. He radiated strength and a demand for the same from her.

“You got anything else in here for me to blow up?”

“Great googly-moogly, I thought you’d never ask.”

The video was all over the news. Madison Danforth, tied up and gagged against the backdrop of the anarchy symbol, while Lonnie Machin called for Jessica to immediately withdraw her bid for mayor and leave Star City, or Madison would be the first to die.

Work at the DA’s office had ground to a halt, then exploded into furor as lawyers, investigators, officers, even interns and secretaries scrambled to find a way to be helpful. Laurel made a quick phone call to her father. They were working on it, but didn’t have any leads. She and Quentin agreed there was a team much better suited to this sort of thing.

She was already in her car when she got the text that Felicity had something. Perfect.

Oliver’s voice was barking orders before Laurel had made it through the door. She paused next to Diggle and Thea, who were standing with matching crossed arms and unimpressed expressions. Laurel couldn’t help but adopt the same pose, listening as Oliver went through the standard litany about who would be doing what, teams, weapons, timing, etc. It took him an impressive amount of time to notice that no one was responding or even moving to suit up.

Oliver cocked his head and frowned. “What?” The frustration got the better of him.

Diggle pursed his lips, then turned to Thea, “I think you and Oliver should take the back entrance, nice and quiet. Felicity, will you pull up all the schematics on the building?”

“Right on top of it,” Felicity slid her chair to her computer station and began pulling up all the intel
she could.

“You and I should come in loud in the front, get their attention focused on us,” Laurel added.

“Exactly,” Diggle concurred. “Felicity, you said you ID’d this place through the IP address?”

“Mmm, yeah,” Felicity’s face scrunched and frowned. “Painfully easy. I’m actually surprised SCPD isn’t already there. This was stupidly obvious.”

“HIVE trap?” Laurel queried to Diggle.

John shook his head, “I don’t know. I’m getting the impression this guy isn’t HIVE-sanctioned, but we need to plan for the worst case scenario.”

Oliver was left standing in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips, looking at his feet and clenching his jaw. He looked up only to see Thea shoot him a “you should have seen this coming” look before she went to change.

“Where’s Jason?” Laurel asked as she moved to collect her uniform. “Didn’t anyone call him?”

The silence from the group was her answer. Felicity let shame color her features where Oliver only jutted out his chin and crossed his arms.

“I’ll call him,” Diggle said from the weapons locker. “You and Speedy just get ready.”

Laurel opened her mouth to thank him, but settled for a nod and a small smile. John returned the subtle look knowing this tiny gesture was understood. It hadn’t taken him very long after Oliver left to realize there were very few times when Laurel’s judgment was incorrect. Even if he didn’t understand it, it was time to trust her on this, too.

Diggle slipped his helmet over his head and risked a glance in Oliver’s direction. His tension was affecting the whole team.
Tonight would be a good opportunity to ease him into their new dynamic in which he was no longer the lord and master of Team Arrow.

Damien ran a finger down the crudely drawn anarchy symbol on the wall. How quaint. He remembered seeing these all over Britain and Ireland not very long ago. Now this little child chose it as his calling card. It would be cute if it didn’t reflect so negatively on his own business.

His Ghosts were setting up a defensive perimeter around the derelict warehouse. What was it with these guys and warehouses, anyway? With all the abandoned real estate in Star City, couldn’t he have set up shop in a nice condo? That poor girl had probably been breathing in black mold and asbestos for the past 24 hours. Horrible.

“Lonnie, what part of, ‘Your services are no longer required’ did you not understand?” Damien absently twirled one of Madison’s matted locks before shoving his hands in his pockets and sighing loudly.

“You wanted Danforth out of the way, now she’s either going to step down or be crucified by the public for letting her daughter die like a sacrificial lamb!” Machin’s eyes were wild. “This is a win-win for us.”

“Well, first of all, there’s no us,” Damien moved away from the girl. “I thought I made that part clear when I fired you and gave you the opportunity to leave the city unharmed. Second, this is sloppy, is what it is. Do you even know what a firewall is?”

Lonnie faltered, but puffed himself up again. “I’m not afraid to die for this. I believe in your cause.”

“Yeah that’s great,” Damien rolled his eyes. “Look, I’ll give you some credit for accidentally creating a nice opportunity to funnel all of these earnest little masks into the same place for me to kill, but if they don’t kill you tonight, I will. We’re done.”

Damien straightened his jacket, snapped his heels together and strode out of the room, pausing once next to Madison where she hung from her shackles. “Sorry, dear, I wouldn’t have killed you, but Mr. Machin is kind of a jackass.” He patted her on the cheek and strode away, leaving her screaming and crying against her gag.
“Just a heads up, we made some upgrades to my CC, so don’t be surprised if it sounds a little different,” Laurel spoke into her radio. They were only a few minutes away from the warehouse. Her heart was fluttering like it had the first few times she’d gone out in costume. Her palms felt sweaty. *Good thing I have gloves*, Laurel thought sardonically.

Diggle shot her a look from the driver's seat. “When did you make the upgrades?”

“Oh, Jason did, actually. We tested them a few nights ago. It definitely packs more punch with less collateral damage,” Laurel patted her various pockets and pouches and the collar once more to be sure everything was secure. “Speaking of, where is he?”

“I gave him the rundown, he said he got it and hung up,” Diggle snorted. “Laurel -”

“John,” she stopped him before she could hear more about her bad judgement, “I know he has a bad history, a really bad history, but I *believe* him. I believe he genuinely wants to do the right thing here. I think he probably always wanted to do the right thing and just got messed up. If we give him a chance -”

“Laurel,” Diggle interrupted her with a wide smile, “I know. My first instinct is to not trust anyone, but your gut is telling you this is the right call, and your gut has never been wrong since I’ve known you.” Laurel sat back, stunned. “I can think of a few times when we could have saved ourselves and this city a lot of trouble if we had trusted you. I trust you, Laurel. I’m with you.”

Her heart no longer fluttering with nerves, Laurel’s chest swelled. She took Diggle’s free hand and gave it a squeeze. “You ready to go catch some bad guys?”

Diggle put the van in park when they reached the alley he’d determined to be their best bet earlier. “I was born ready for that,” he slid his helmet on and jumped out of the van. Laurel followed him up a fire escape. It was three buildings to the northwest, closer to the harbor. “We stay on the high ground,” he said so low she could only hear him in her radio. “The warehouse has shipping containers all around the entrance. Makes for a good ambush, so if there are Ghosts on this, we need to draw them into their own kill zone.”

Laurel cringed at the term, but she’d been slowly coming to learn John’s different “military-isms” as she called them. “Overwatch, BC and Spartan are moving into position.”
“Is that really my gonna be my codename?” Felicity’s voice came back in Laurel’s earpiece. “I was hoping for something more fight-y.”

“Well, you turned down Pale Horse,” Diggle replied. Laurel stayed low behind him. John’s helmet had a heads-up display that would allow him to see any hidden threat on their way across the rooftops.

“Yes, because while I want to sound badass, I don’t want to be associated with the omen of death,” Felicity clipped.

“Overwatch,” Oliver’s voice sounded over everyone’s radio with an evident scold. “We’re standing by for your signal, Black Canary.”

The pair crouched at the end of the last roof, taking stock of their target. “Not-Arrow,” Laurel smirked at her own joke, “we have at least a dozen Ghosts setting up around the perimeter and entrance to the building. They’re placing gun nests at each corner.”

“You guys weren’t going to start this party without me, were you?” Jason’s voice crackled over their radios. John and Laurel both jerked their heads around, looking for him. “Hello, yes, yes, no, to your left, your other left, yup, hello,” he waved cheerily from a rooftop on the other side of the warehouse’s entrance, standing casually with that ridiculous drum-fed shotgun he was so proud of resting on his hip, his bright red helmet glinting in the dim street lights.

“This fuckin’ guy,” Diggle said to no one in particular. Laurel tried to cover her laugh with her hand.

“We take out those nests, and then BC, do your thing,” Laurel could actually hear him smiling. She and Diggle stood at the edge of the roof, overlooking one of the two gun nests below. The stacked shipping containers made the fall not dangerously high for them, but she was glad she and Thea had been working on their free running. A lot. She looked to Diggle, then across the lot to Jason, who had his weapon in his shoulder, ready to fire, and with a nod, they dropped into the gun nest.

Spartan managed to bring down one of the Ghosts as he was landing - ouch - and Black Canary used the momentum from her fall to land a punishing blow from one of her tonfas on another Ghost, dropping him instantly. The other two were more of a fight. Single loud gunshots told them that Jason was smoothly dispatching his targets, hopefully with the nonlethal ammunition. They’d have to talk about that later.
The shotgun blasts caught the attention of the other Ghosts, who were now abandoning their posts to consolidate where the attack was. It was too obvious. There were more.

“Speedy,” Laurel said, breathless, taking stock of the oncoming surge, “stay frosty, I think there’s a lot more Ghosts inside than we anticipated.”

“We’re getting that,” Speedy replied, also huffing and puffing into the radio.

Bunched up on top of the shipping containers, the group of mercenaries made an excellent first target. She stepped in front of Spartan, who was busily placing a small explosive on the machine gun to permanently remove it from the equation, and unleashed the cry for the first time in battle.

Spartan froze as he placed the detonation cord in the explosive. She had been right, there was almost no blowback from her cry. He watched in awe as the pack of trained killers blew away like they were nothing more than leaves. At least half of them were knocked clean off the containers onto the ground below, and the others tumbled away like debris in a storm. Diggle thought he heard a jubilant cheer from the other row of containers where Jason was mowing through his own pack of Ghosts with a mix punishing fist and knee strikes and, whenever it seemed to amuse him, a wicked-looking blade.

Black Canary paused for just a second to look back at Spartan and gauge his reaction. Reading his face, she let a cocky smile quirk her lips before rushing forward to continue working on the Ghosts who hadn’t been knocked to the ground.

One swift kick sent the first opponent hurtling to the ground. She flipped one of her tonfas in her hand so that the handle was out, striking the next Ghost with it then hooking the handle into his body armor to launch him over the other side of the container. Spartan appeared at her side, making quick work of two more Ghosts, and a small bomb resounded behind them signaling the end of the gunner’s nest.

“We could really use some help in here!” Oliver’s voice was muffled by booming from inside the building.

Red Hood was already on the ground, brutally working his way through more Ghosts. He had moved on from the shotgun and now had a pistol in one hand and the large blade in the other. They would really need to talk about the minimal killing thing later.
Spartan and Canary joined him and together the trio made quick work of the remaining Ghosts. Spartan kicked in the front door of the warehouse, but they were met with no resistance. The rest of the Ghosts must have been engaged with Oliver and Speedy. When they got to the open warehouse, only Red Hood remained nonplussed by the sight of Madison hanging in shackles and the two archers, bows at the ready, back-to-back and completely surrounded by Ghosts.

Lonnie Machin was gripping one of Madison’s chains and laughing maniacally, waving a gun in the general direction of his hostage. “Is that all you got?” he shouted down to the pair, still not aware that three more vigilantes had entered the building. “We have an army! Star City isn’t yours anymore!”

Under his helmet, Jason rolled his eyes so far back he thought he could see his own brain. “Ugh, is this guy for real?” He raised his own pistol, aimed, and from clear across the large room nailed a clean shot in Machin’s arm. He was aiming for the guy’s head, but it was well over 25 yards. That was a tough shot with a pistol.

Machin howled and fell back away from Madison, and every eye flew to the new arrivals. Black Canary lunged forward, screaming at the edges of the circle of Ghosts, trying to keep the noise away from her teammates. They looked a bit taken aback by the new sound, but recovered quickly and were launching arrows into the Ghosts who weren’t hit by the cry.

Speedy launched herself into a series of spinning kicks, clearing the way to pursue Machin. Oliver, seeing his sister charging after the man on her own with a trail of Ghosts recovering and following, took a broad swing with his bow to clear his own path after her.

He quickly caught up to and disabled first one Ghost, then another before finding himself in a dark, narrow hallway. The passage was empty except for the sounds of what had to have been Speedy engaged in a fight on the other side of the wall and a lone man in a crisp suit with ice blond hair at the other end of the hallway, squinting at Oliver with an expression somewhere between delight and confusion.

“You can’t be him,” the man said. “The Arrow died. What is with this city and Christmas-themed archers? Is there a club I don’t know about? Now, the banshee on your little team, that’s something you don’t see everyday.”

“Who are you?” Oliver growled through his voice modulator, nocking an arrow and drawing down on his target. “What do you want with the Danforth’s?”

Oliver’s opponent made an exaggerated wince and shrugged. “Nothing that hasn’t already been
done. You, though,” he wagged a finger at Oliver, “I am very interested in you and your people. This town’s vigilante problem is almost as bad as its crime problem.”

The man took a step forward and, innately sensing the danger, Oliver released an arrow. The man didn’t break his smile. He simply held up a hand and the arrow froze mid air, just before it would have entered his body, then clattered uselessly to the floor. Oliver felt his stomach flip. In a blink, the man appeared in front of him, still smiling like a cat and boring down on him with crystalline blue eyes. “You’ll find the Robin Hood schtick isn’t so effective with me,” the man whispered before placing his palm over Oliver’s heart.

Ollie was drowning. It felt like his heart was being crushed. His lungs were frozen in place. The blood in his veins was grinding to a halt. He could only stare open-mouthed at his opponent, trying to force his brain to think of anything beyond immediate panic.

A wall of sound slammed into his back like a car, but the instant relief of the man being thrown away from him and breaking the connection was so profound he barely registered the pain or ringing in his ears. He felt small gentle hands patting him over then pulling back to standing. Laurel’s bright green eyes flooded his vision and peace washed over him. He was able to stamp down further thoughts about what he had just experienced, and move on to what was next. A quick glance down the hall showed that the man was already gone. Speedy …

“Through here!” Laurel was already ahead of him, leading the way through an open door. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight that greeted him in that room. The Ghosts who had gone after his sister littered the ground in various states of consciousness, some clearly dead, broken limbs, bleeding from stab wounds.

Machin was cowering near a toppled shelf of canisters marked as having held various chemicals, fuels and oils. His clothing was soaked. “No, please,” he held out his hands, begging as Thea lunged at him.

Oliver saw the arrow in her hand a split second too late, one of Felicity’s creations that emitted a low-voltage shock. “Speedy no!” he roared and leapt after her, but she was too quick. In a flash she had struck him high in his chest with the arrow and pulled back. The sparks from the taser caught on the chemicals in his clothes and within a breath, Machin was engulfed in flames.

The bright red and orange flames, and Machin’s screams, cleared the cloudy rage from Thea’s eyes. She stood, dumbfounded and in the way as Machin lurched forward, lost in the fire and trying to find a way out. Laurel bear-hugged Speedy from behind and threw them both out of the way just as Lonnie broke into a run back into the hallway. Oliver followed close behind, finding a discarded packing blanket among the trash piled in various spots along the hall. Tackling the smaller man, Oliver used the blanket and his own body to smother the flames, but Lonnie’s screams didn’t die
Police sirens began to grow louder as the few remaining Ghosts in the building came barrelling through the narrow hallway, like rats escaping as flood. Oliver popped to his feet and drew his bow, Black Canary and Speedy already at his side with weapons drawn.

The hallway descended into chaos as the two groups crashed together. Spartan appeared, easily taking out one Ghost, then becoming entrenched in a surprisingly difficult sparring match with a much smaller opponent.

“Where’s Madison?” Oliver called over the noise.

“Red Hood’s got her,” Spartan replied without breaking from his attack. The fight felt achingly familiar, like something he remembered from a dream but couldn’t place. His opponent was strong for his small stature, and anticipated each hit, matching Diggle’s footwork seamlessly.

A series of red blurs flashed through the hallway, instantly ending the fights. Speedy and Black Canary’s opponents took the distraction to hobble away. Oliver looked back down to realize that Machin was long gone.

Diggle’s opponent caught a bright red batarang across his protective goggles, the force of the hit sending him tumbling to the floor. He ripped off the goggles, and inadvertently his baklava, shooting a quick situational gauge around himself before following his compatriots out the door.

Diggle didn’t move to stop him. He couldn’t move, or even breathe. The face that had looked right past him was a face that was long dead.

“Madison’s with the cops, we have to move!” Red Hood snapped at the disjointed group, collecting the few batarangs the ghosts had pulled out of themselves before fleeing. Speedy was already on the move, but Black Canary and Oliver were both looking at Spartan strangely, who was still rooted in place, breathing heavily.

“Spartan,” Oliver began, taking a step forward to encourage his former partner, who only winced defensively.

“John,” Laurel said softly, placing a hand on his arm. Her voice seemed to bring him out of his
shock. He sucked in a deep breath and turned to her, eyes wide behind his helmet. “Are you okay?”

“Can we talk about it at home and not after we have to beat up a bunch of cops?” Red Hood gestured with a gun in each hand toward the door.

Spartan shook his head and lead the way at a run, Oliver and Black Canary not far behind. Jason groaned, sighed, and followed.

Later, after John had kissed Sara goodnight and long after Lyla had fallen asleep, he sat up in bed, brows furrowed and a deep frown lining his face.

The idea roiled in his mind. It was impossible, but he couldn’t deny what he saw. Slowly, he let the name form on his lips quietly.

“Andy.”

Quentin took a slow breath through his nostrils and grimaced at the crowds around the train station. It was too many people. His own forces were spread thin around the city, and he doubted that the special detail on security for this event would stand up against Darhk’s Ghosts.

If Darhk was even intending on attacking. He hadn’t shared his plans with Lance, or any of the other council members, since their last meeting. His weekly encounters with the man made him itchy.

He’d seen a lot of wild crap as a police officer. He thought it couldn’t get any crazier when Oliver Queen came back to life and began running around town as a hooded vigilante killing criminals with a bow and arrows, then some egghead blew up his science experiment in another state and the country was slowly being overrun by super fast runners and weather wizards and assassins and roided-out soldiers. Now he was at a crowded train station awaiting the arrival of the first bullet train from Central City, wondering if a bunch of elite mercenaries and a magical psychopath were going to show up and kill everyone.

Quentin considered, not for the first time, that he chose the wrong moment in his life to quit drinking.
If Star City was Gotham, Quentin’s agitation would be his very own Arrow Signal. Perfectly on cue, Oliver Queen’s blonde head appeared in the crowd, flanked by the smaller blonde, her head buried in a tablet, seemingly unaware of the masses around her. Quentin grimaced at the woman. From this height and distance, it looked too much like Oliver and Laurel. As he moved toward the stairs, Quentin let his thoughts wander over what sort of power Queen had over otherwise intelligent, successful women who seemed universally blind to his chronic lying, philandering, oh and all the delightful hostage-taking, murder and myriad life-and-death situations.

“Detective Lance,” Oliver said without moving his gaze from the crowd as the older man moved to his side.

“Oliver, Felicity,” Quentin offered them both a curt nod. “You people know anything we don’t?”

Oliver looked to Felicity who only shook her head as her fingers flew across the tablet. “Nothing so far. I’m not seeing anything that could be a bomb, no weird radio or electrical signals, and the secure areas are...secure. Knock on wood, but I think tonight might be quiet.”

“Hmph,” Quentin’s mouth drew into a line. “Is the new green guy going to make an appearance? I know he ain’t the Arrow, because the Arrow’s dead.”

The muscles in Oliver’s jaw twitched. “Right now we’re going with inspired copycat, and no. Laurel, Dig and Thea are in place tonight. Felicity and I can help clear people out in here if anything happens.”

“Inspire?” Quentin leaned forward with an angry smile twisting his features, gripping one of the banister rails until his knuckles went white. “Is that what you think you do? Inspire people?”

Oliver finally turned to face the older man, shoulders drawn back and chin out. “Yes, I have been fighting for this city -”

“A hell of a fight you put up while you were honeymooning in Ivy Town. And if you haven’t noticed, we don’t need you to fight for us. Your sister, your best friend and my daughter were doing just fine. And now we have that lunatic in the red helmet who makes you look like Captain Sanity. No, Queen, this city doesn’t need another nutcase in a mask taking the law into his own hands.”
Felicity’s hand stopped on her tablet, but she didn’t dare raise her head. Oliver stood stock still, jaw locked and fists clenched at his sides.

“Inspire people? Like you inspired my baby girl to betray her own sister and get on that boat with you? Get her mixed up with assassins and get her killed?” Oliver opened and shut his mouth, but Quentin pressed on, the rage quaking through his body. “Like you inspired that masked maniac to breed a bunch of super soldiers out of our own citizens and start a war here? Or inspired Harper to put on a mask and take the fall for you? How about how you inspired my other baby girl? I see her every day at the precinct or the D.A.’s office, hiding bruises, limping, bags under her eyes. You think I don’t know that one of these days I’m going to have to bury her right next to Sara?”

“Laurel can handle herself,” Oliver gritted out.

“Oh, that I know. She is better than you will ever be. But she is in danger every single day, and it’s your inspiration that did this. Every problem you’ve ever solved as the Arrow is a problem you brought with you as the Arrow.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” Oliver’s voice dipped low, “but all of this existed long before I put on that hood. The Undertaking would have killed thousands if I hadn’t intervened. I never meant for anyone else -”

“You never mean to,” Quentin snapped a finger at Oliver. “Have you ever thought that if you had just tried to inspire people as Oliver Queen, maybe your inspiration would have less of a body count? I don’t know why, but people follow you, Oliver. Good people. If you actually meant to, you could inspire them to help each other in ways that don’t involve projectiles and dumping petty criminals at the station backdoor with busted kneecaps. Maybe I won’t have to bury the child I have left.”

Felicity loudly cleared her throat, halting the argument before it could continue. “Ah, I hate to interrupt...this, but the train is arriving in the next sixty seconds. If anything is going to happen, it’s going to be now.”

The men exchanged a tense look before each turning away. Quentin pulled his radio to his lips, reminding his team to be on high alert.

“Anything?” Oliver returned to Felicity’s side.
She gave a small head shake. “Nothing on any of the cameras, no change in any of the radio signals, and the team hasn’t seen anything suspicious.”

The train came and went without incident, but Oliver didn’t share in his friends’ relief.

He dawdled in their basement lair, making an excuse to meet Felicity at the loft later. Laurel was the last left, seeming just as reluctant to leave as he was.

“How do you do it?” He asked, picking up one of her tonfas, testing the weight and balance.

Laurel’s head popped up from where she was bent over, pulling on her boots. “Um, would you like a tonfa lesson?”

Oliver couldn’t help the smile and laugh, “No, I’m rusty, but not tonight. I mean, how do you do this,” he gestured around the room, “and still go to work every day as Laurel Lance, A.D.A.?”

Laurel finished pulling on her boots and stood up, feeling less relaxed in her street clothes than she should. She met Oliver on the raised computer platform and gently took her tonfa back, comfortable flipping it in her hand and pursing her lips. “It’s pretty tiring, but both jobs are important. I can do both, so I do both.”

“I don’t know if I can do both, Laurel. And, I didn’t want to admit this, but when I went to Ivy Town I wasn’t even being Oliver Queen, businessman and city leader. I could have let the Arrow go and still been a positive force in this community. That’s all Mom ever wanted and worked for. And I cut and run the first chance I had.”

“Oliver,” Laurel set the tonfa down on the nearest desk, “you’re doing that thing where you blame yourself for the world’s problems. I know you came back from the island with this mission to save Star City, but you didn’t have to do it alone and you didn’t have to do it forever. It wasn’t and isn’t your job to keep sacrificing your life for this city, as Oliver or the Arrow.”

“But you do. And so does Diggle. And my sister. You’ve been fighting for this city as Laurel Lance since the first day I met you, and you went out and got all these new skills to fight for this city in a mask, too,” Oliver sighed and put his hands to his hips, feeling them itching to reach out and hold hers. “The Arrow is dead, and he needs to stay that way. The Arrow was never a positive light for this city. But I just don’t know how…”
“You be you, Oliver,” Laurel reached out and took one of his hands with a reassuring squeeze. “You have a good heart. And between you and Felicity, you have all the resources you need to make a difference without the hood. You know we’re all going to support you, whatever you decide.”

Laurel’s face held the genuine warmth and kindness it always had. After Tommy, she was his oldest friend. Despite all the garbage he knew he’d put her through over the years, she still stood in front of him, holding his hand and promising her support, telling him that she believed in his goodness. If there was one person who had free license to hate him unconditionally, it was Laurel.

Instead, her smile widened, she threw an arm around his shoulder and lead him out of the cave, declaring the night officially over.

Thea had long since lost track of how long she’d been sitting on the balcony, staring out over the Star City skyline but not seeing any of it.

The train station had been a bust, and although the higher part of her brain was relieved, something deeper and darker was angry. She felt it clawing in her chest to get out. It wanted to hurt someone and was furious that an opportunity for violence had been missed.

She nearly popped out of her skin when Laurel slid the glass door open behind her. She wasn’t even aware of her immediate surroundings.

“Mind if I join you?” Laurel asked as she sat in the other patio chair.

“No, yeah, of course,” Thea sat up straighter, smoothed her hair and tried to pretend she was smiling. “I was just enjoying the fresh air.”

Laurel nodded solemnly, “Yeah, that Star City air is something special.” Thea snorted and let her gaze drift back out onto the city. “Are you feeling okay?”

The smaller brunette shrugged. Laurel saw Thea’s usual snark flash across her face before she shook her head. “I feel like I set a guy on fire and this thing in me wants to do it again. I feel like maybe I should be on lockdown because it’s getting worse,” her voice cracked.
Laurel leaned forward and chewed on her bottom lip before starting. “What if…what if we went to Nanda Parbat?”

Thea’s brows scrunched together, but when she didn’t say anything, Laurel continued. “Your dad is the new Ra’s. He might have some answers. Something to help you. You are is his daughter.”

“Don’t you think if he knew anything he would have reached out by now?”

Laurel reached a hand out to her friend’s knee, “But not if he doesn’t know how bad it’s getting, Thea. Look, Jason was dead for days when they resurrected him, and he’s gotten his symptoms under control…”

“After how many years of mass killing?” Thea scoffed. “I am not going on a ten-year killing spree just to feel better.”

“I know that,” Laurel sat back. “But Jason said that since it’s magic, it affects everyone a little differently. He didn’t have any help. They wanted him to be a killing machine. You have people who want to help you. No matter what Malcolm’s intentions are, I don’t think he wants you to suffer.”

Thea rolled her eyes playfully. “That’s a pretty serious vote of confidence for the Father of the Year.”

A snort of laughter escaped Laurel’s mouth. “I know it’s a big leap, but he’s the best chance we have. He is in control of everything the League knows about the Pit. And he kind of likes you.”

“Okay,” Thea nodded. “Okay, we can’t be worse off than we are now, right?”

Laurel winced at that and then rapped her knuckles three times on the wooden arm of her chair. “There’s one more thing I want to ask you, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to say yes.”

Thea shifted in her seat to more fully face her friend, who had grown somber. “Anything, what is it?”
Laurel took a deep breath, looked down at her hands, and then let the words tumble out. “If we go to Nanda Parbat, I want to bring Sara.”

She waited, teeth digging into the inside of her mouth. Thea’s eyes widened and her mouth formed an “O.” Before Thea could respond, Laurel felt more words coming out. “It’s just, Jason was fully dead, and they were able to resurrect him. If they can, I just want Sara -”

“Yes,” Thea said with a resolution that brooked no argument. “I get it. Yes, we’ll bring Sara.”

The air rushed back into Laurel’s lungs. She felt her shoulders sag and, embarrassingly, tears of relief filling the corners of her eyes. “Really? You don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

“I don’t know, but I know I’d do it for Oliver. She’s your sister. This is worth a try.”

A bright smile lit up Laurel’s face. “So, spa weekend at Nanda Parbat?”
Episode 3

Chapter Summary

Thanks again to DreamsofNever for beta reading!

I do need some more help on beta reading/editing, so if you're interested, please let me know.

Also, I realized that the tumblr I set up specifically as a redirect for questions about this story didn't actually have asks/submits available. That's been fixed. I am much easier to get a hold of there. redcanary-renegades.tumblr.com.

If someone had told her even four years ago that she would ever have any reason to visit the Hindu Kush, not once, but enough to apparently rate her own room, Laurel wouldn’t have laughed. She would have been vaguely concerned about the sanity of the person suggesting this, wondered where exactly the Hindu Kush Mountains were and then quickly forgotten the exchange as yet another interaction with the best of Starling.

Okay, so it was a guest room, but it was much bigger and more private than her last visit to the League headquarters. Probably something to do with the daughter of the new Ra's wanting Laurel in her adjoining room. Maybe it was her connection to Nyssa. Probably somewhere in the middle those relationships had promoted her from background fixture at the League to honored guest.

Fall hadn’t yet come to Star City, but there was a bite in the air here reminding Laurel that summer was coming to a close. In a matter of weeks, these mountains would be dusted, then covered, in snow. Star City would be rainy, but the leaves would turn and the air always took on a special smell in the fall that made her feel warm and happy. She could entrench herself in pumpkin and apple spice and soft sweaters and memories of a simple, happy childhood that always seemed so magical every fall.

Sara had loved fall. More accurately, Sara loved Halloween. She loved cheesy and scary movies, carving pumpkins, picking out costumes, eating candy until she got sick (well before Halloween, usually); she loved stringing orange and purple lights the way most people love Christmas lights, and some other special fall magic that Laurel only knew as her sister’s joy. The burning knot in Laurel’s throat whenever she thought about Sara’s bright face giggling her way through another viewing of Halloween II was a feeling that predated Sara’s death by many, many years. The fractures that separated them were older breaks; something more noxious than death. It was something they could have fixed if Laurel had been more forgiving.

Laurel started getting angry at fall and swearing that summer was the only season worth having around her freshman year of high school. Even though she was a few years older than Sara, they both hit puberty at the same time. While Sara blossomed overnight into a beautiful, bubbly, vivacious force of nature, Laurel sprouted acne, baby fat that warred with the new adult weight trying to find its place on her suddenly disproportionate limbs, and crooked teeth that needed more orthodontia than she knew existed. Watching her baby sister excel in everything she tried, and didn’t try, sent Laurel into a spiral of hate. She hated her body. She hated her voice. She hated the way she couldn’t simply be great at dance and gymnastics like Sara. She hated that everyone – teachers, friends, even their parents – gravitated toward Sara but looked to her with sad pity and
maybe even a gentle word of encouragement. “Don’t worry, D, you’ll get there.” It was like living each day in the shadow of the sun.

Until one day she got mad at the sun. One day she decided she could be a sun, too, and she directed that anger into the one natural trait she always had in spades over Sara: an unstoppable drive to succeed. By the time they were both in high school, Laurel had become as much a sun as Sara ever was, at least as far as everyone else was concerned. No one but Laurel remembered the awkward chubby teenager who couldn’t keep up in P.E. They only saw the varsity cheerleader who was never in public without perfectly applied lipstick, smooth hair, an electric smile so enchanting it finally caught the attention of the city’s most notorious 17 year old rich kid.

To everyone, they were the gorgeous Lance sisters. Perfection achieved. Goals for everyone else to reach. Only Laurel knew that each ungodly-early alarm to do her hair and makeup, each gym session, each extra dance and gymnastics lesson, each bite of food she denied, each hour of her day spent pouring over fashion magazines and meticulously digging through discount bins so that no one would ever know she didn’t roll out of bed a fashion plate, all of it was fueled by anger. Sara knew, on some level, that she was the source of Laurel’s gradual shift into sniping sarcasm, judgmental frowns and backhanded compliments, and never understanding why, she gave as good as she got. Their parents blamed the rift on teenage hormones and tried to ignore it and hope the girls would grow out of it.

But Laurel went off to college, where she and Oliver started dating. She never admitted it to Sara, but it had hurt her in an unfamiliar way when she saw Sara's reaction. Of course she knew Sara had a crush on Oliver, but Sara had a crush on everyone and everyone had a crush on her. Sara seemed to have it all so easy. After years of toxicity, all Laurel could do was roll her eyes, make a snide remark about Sara being a child and pretend like she didn’t care.

Laurel knew Oliver cheated on her. She wasn’t stupid. But she loved him, and saw a goodness bubbling deep inside of him, aching to come out. As she grappled with the pain of his repeated betrayal, she also grew up, realizing more each day all the time she had wasted trying to outpace her sister. How much energy and love had she squandered by being angry at Sara? Nothing she did changed the outcome: Oliver still cheated. Laurel still wouldn’t get the fairy tale ending and would have to find happiness in herself.

Just as Laurel was realizing how badly she needed her sister, Sara got on the Queen’s Gambit with Oliver and was gone.

Laurel let her hands slide over an elegant bottle of some foreign alcohol on a shelf near the bed. It was probably ancient. It was probably delicious. It would probably burn through the knots in her throat and stomach, still her shaking hands and soothe her nerves. But it would also be a betrayal of Sara, who needed her sister strong, together and sober right now. It would be a betrayal of every second of sweat and tears and sickness and belligerent self-restraint she had clawed for to get to this point in her sobriety.

A quiet knock at her door sent Laurel’s hand fluttering away from the bottle so quickly she almost tipped it off the shelf. She felt her face flush as if she’d been caught with the bottle on her lips. She closed her eyes and counted slowly to five, breathing in and out until she was sure she had regained her composure.

She opened the door and felt the tension coil even tighter: Nyssa looked more somber than usual. The faintest hint of red around her eyes betrayed other emotions.

“Hello Laurel,” the barest hint of a smile when she spoke Laurel’s name softened her features. That
was all it took for the dam in Laurel’s chest to break, sending her rushing into her friend and mentor’s arms. Never easily moved, Nyssa didn’t budge except to return Laurel’s embrace for just a moment before firmly pushing the other woman back by her shoulders. “Follow me, please.” Nyssa simply turned, all dark hair and flowing League robes, and lead the way down a torch-lit passage.

“Right,” Laurel nodded and pressed her lips together in a tight, forced acquiescence. Nyssa could inspire more childish guilt, fear and shame in her than her parents ever could. Laurel was more worried about Nyssa’s reaction to this decision than her own father’s. Laurel had no doubt that Nyssa had reasons – good ones – for never so much as suggesting that Sara could be resurrected.

But Nyssa, for all that she loved Sara, wasn’t Sara’s sister.

As they moved deeper into the mountain, the insulated air turned from crisp to downright cold. Laurel pulled her arms tight around herself, annoyed that she’d been too distracted to bring a heavier jacket than the light blazer she wore off the plane. Neither woman spoke on the long walk through the fortress’s labyrinth of passageways and corridors. In the time that Nyssa had spent training her, Laurel quickly learned that Nyssa’s silence belied the woman’s innate ability to communicate with anything but words. Nyssa didn’t need to speak, or even look back and check, to know Laurel was just a few paces behind her. Laurel didn’t need to see Nyssa’s face to know she was warring between anger and relief, and unsure of how to express either.

Torchlight faded into candlelight in the small room Nyssa finally chose. The guards at the door parted seamlessly for the pair and Laurel felt her heart leap into her throat when she saw the casket, surrounded by candles but blessedly still closed. Laurel wasn’t sure she’d ever get the memory of how Sara looked in that box out of her head, but knew when they exhumed the box that she needed to see her sister. She needed the push.

Nyssa ran a gloved hand over the top of the casket, where Sara’s head would be. She parted her lips to speak, but then closed them, then her eyes and took a deep, unsteady breath.

Laurel moved to Nyssa’s side, but kept her arms crossed, staring down at her sister’s casket. “I’m sorry, Nyssa.”

“Don’t do this,” the soft note of desperation jerked Laurel’s eyes to Nyssa, who was staring at her with a look of pain Laurel didn’t know her friend could even feel. “If this would help her, don’t you know I would have done it myself?”

“I can’t not try,” Laurel let her hands rest on the casket next to Nyssa’s. “I know there’s a risk, but…”

Nyssa’s eyes narrowed. “It’s not a risk, Laurel. It is a guarantee. Sara will not return to us the same. She never wanted to be a monster,” Nyssa turned her face back to the box, mouth tight and her fingers beginning to dig into the casket.

“She won’t be,” Laurel took one of Nyssa’s hands in her own, trying to coax her friend into looking at her again. “Sara never even got a chance. I know it won’t be easy, but I’ve seen that they can recover. We can get her through it. I need to give Sara this chance.”

Nyssa’s lips curled and she pulled her hand away. “You need? This isn’t about you, Laurel.”

Laurel winced and stepped back as if struck. “I know that. Sara needs this. Sara’s life got snuffed out a long time before Malcolm had her killed.”
The pair stared at each other in locked silence, neither willing to move or breathe. Laurel watched a flurry of emotions pass through Nyssa’s face until her brows creased and eyes squinted, she settled on a thought. “Why do you believe a resurrected person can recover from the effects of the Lazarus Pit?”

Caught. Nyssa locked onto the flash of fear and guilt in Laurel’s eyes before she could hide it and recover. “It’s true then?” Nyssa drew her shoulders back, standing straight and tall, “Jason Todd has come to Star City to continue his path of destruction? I had hoped the rumors were false and that Bruce Wayne and his cohort had finally put that animal to rest.”

Not ready to quit, Laurel shook her head, “No, Jason is helping us. He’s in control and he’s…did you say Bruce Wayne?”

Ignoring the question, Nyssa strode past Laurel, pacing and turning. “Laurel, I saw Jason’s resurrection and I saw what my sister molded him into. What came out of the Pit was barely even human. He was a monster then and that is all he is capable of. His singular purpose in this world is death. You need to get rid of him.”

“No,” Laurel reared up, stepping to her full height and blocking Nyssa’s agitated movement. “We can help Sara. She isn’t going to be taken on a leash and trained like an attack dog like he was. You and me and my dad and God, even Oliver. We love her. It doesn’t have to be like that and you know it.”

Nyssa raised her chin, choosing her words carefully, “If I had my rightful place here, Laurel, I would send you all back to Star City and destroy these Pits so that this discussion could never happen again and my beloved could be at rest.”

“Well, lucky for Sara, you’re not in charge,” Laurel crossed her arms and stepped away from her friend, blocking her view of Sara’s casket.

Nyssa blinked slowly, nodded and swept out of the room without another word.

Thea stalked back and forth across her balcony, squinting into the dark night skyline. After attacking Lonnie Machin, she’d felt blessed relief from the thrumming in her veins and tightly wound tension pressing against her chest that seemed to heighten every sense. And make everyone she encountered look weak. Pathetic. Annoying. Human nails on chalkboards that, if she could just silence them…

She had been catching herself zoning out, drifting into daydreams that featured her grabbing the nearest semi-sharp object and plunging it into the chest of the person talking to her. She even thought about using her teeth, just to be closer, to taste them while she did it.

The thoughts kept her up at night between desire and horror.

Whenever she did act on those impulses in the field, before the team could stop her, she reveled in days without the feelings. The cycle took her back to her youthful drug days when she mimicked the process to forget about her family, her dead father and brother.

At least I was only hurting myself, Thea took a slow, deep breath. She could meditate, yes. That would help. It had helped when she was studying with Malcolm and wanted to rip his throat out,
too, albeit for different reasons.

With a sharp pivot, Thea marched back inside her room and plopped herself on one of the many luxurious mats and set to meditating the murderous impulses away.

Yes, she could do this. Maybe it’d be easier if it wasn’t so stuffy in the room. Why hadn’t the League added A/C to this joint? They have a magic pit that resurrects dead people and a better intel network than the KGB but they can’t install central heat and air? Okay, focus. Let it go. Conceal, don’t feel. *That backfired spectacularly for Elsa,* she winced. She was much worse at meditating than she used to be.

A quiet finally settled over her mind and she could begin the process of focusing on each body part, progressively tensing and releasing her muscles until her mind and body could meet in a soothing rhythm.

But in the quiet she could hear him. The soft rush of fabric rubbing together as he moved, a footstep just an ounce too heavy, his measured breath moving evenly through his nostrils. A blade whispered out of a well-oiled leather sheath.

She had kept a blade in reach, probably some instinct related to her post-Pit killing spree. The moment she opened her eyes, she was already on her feet, sword in hand. Whirling, Thea brought her weapon up just in time to catch her attacker’s as he swung his down on her. They struggled, locked in the contest of strength for a moment before Thea whirled away again, out of his reach. She was back on him in a flash, dropping a spinning kick onto his head. Before he could recover, or she would question why a League member had attacked her in her room, Thea spun into him again, dragging the sword across his throat as she moved.

Thea stood over him as he sputtered, hands clasping at his neck to no avail. The blood pouring out of him washed over her like a haze. It was a balm. The tension left her body. Her chest unwound. Her hands stopped shaking.

When her eyes cleared, and she saw the man drowning in his own blood at her hands, her stomach roiled. Thea didn’t know if it was from the horror at what she’d done, or how wonderful she felt now that she’d done it.

“It’s called bloodlust,” her father’s voice didn’t surprise her. She hadn’t been sure he was there in her haze-induced distraction, but she was well accustomed to his mysterious appearances. “The magic that healed you is blood magic. It requires blood sacrifice to work.”

“Is that what he was?” Thea asked without turning away from her victim. “Just a sacrifice?”

Malcolm stepped forward from the doorway to Thea’s side. “You are my daughter. I would sacrifice thousands to keep you alive and healthy. And they will gladly fall on your sword in my name.”

“I don’t want anyone to fall on my sword,” Thea spat, squaring off with her father.

“Oh don’t you?” Malcolm arched a brow and folded his hands behind the small of his back. “You’ve stopped shaking; you have color back in your cheeks. Your eyes are clear and focused. I think you feel better right now than you have in weeks.”

Thea threw her sword to the ground at their feet. “Find. Another. Way.”

“There isn’t,” Malcolm continued, ever the calm teacher he had been since she first came to him to learn how to fight. “The bloodlust calls you to kill the person who sent you to the pit, and well,
he’s already dead. So you will have to kill regularly to sate it. Otherwise you will die.”

Thea raised her chin and crossed her arms, taking on the posture she’d learned from her roommate. “You know there’s another way. You wouldn’t be letting us resurrect Sara if there wasn’t.”

Malcolm gave a small shrug and pursed his lips. “You’re an adult. I’m explaining the risks to you. If you decide to proceed, I won’t stop you. You’ve demonstrated time and again that you will do whatever you’ve set your mind to. I’ve trained you well enough that I believe you can handle yourself against whatever comes out of the Pit tomorrow. Besides,” a genuine smile fell on his face all the way to his eyes, “forcing you to kill Sara all over again will really send your brother into a tailspin, and that tickles me.”

Thea recoiled and turned away. She couldn’t hold the posture the way Laurel could. “You’re sick.”

“I prefer realistic,” Malcolm reached a hand out to his daughter’s shoulder, but she predictably shrugged him away. “If you truly feel like you need to do this to atone for something, I’ll allow it, and I will intervene if necessary. I’m your father, Thea. I’d do anything for you.”

She turned back to him and regained her crossed arms and straight back. “Then you need to find me another way. One that doesn’t involve murder. Jason Todd did it, so can I.”

Malcolm tossed his head back and belly laughed. “Jason Todd? Oh, honey, if he sated his bloodlust, it’s because he either killed the focus of his revenge, murdered enough people over the past fifteen years to fully satisfy the magic, or he’s still killing. There’s no in-between here.”

Thea kept her eyes on her father, slowly backing away like he was a snake poised to strike. He wasn’t wrong. “If you’re keeping anything from me, some cure…” her voice was softer now; she’d lost her edge.

He held his hands up peacefully, “You’re my daughter. I want you to get through this as much as you do. I’m with you all the way, Speedy.”

She slowly turned away again, letting her gaze drift over the corpse on the ground before finding the mountain sky again across her balcony.

All she saw was a sea of bodies at her feet.

Felicity sucked her teeth and kept her eyes locked on her computer, pecking away at the keyboard. Focus, focus, focus, she blinked too hard, do not think about the sweating, grunting, shirtless Diggle and Jay going at each other with bo staffs like there’s no tomorrow. I love my boyfriend. I love my boyfriend. I love my boyfriend. I love my-boyfriend. I love my-boyfriend. I love my-

A shrill beep from one of her adjacent computers caused her to nearly leap out of her chair. The sound and her excessive reaction brought the sparring partners to an abrupt halt on the training mat. They wordlessly dropped their weapons and strode to the computer bank where Felicity was now clattering away and making various “huh?” and “ah ha!” noises without explanation.

The men stood over Felicity’s shoulder, exchanging confused shrugs while making valiant
attempts at following her rapid-fire keystrokes and coding before Diggle finally cleared his throat. “Uh, Felicity…”

Her face widened in surprise, reminded that she wasn’t alone, and she gave a quick look over her shoulder before wincing and turning back to her computer, reminded again that they were still shirtless. “Okay, so we have a hit on those marked bills Thea planted. A big time deposit was just made to an offshore account and very creatively routed right back here to a Star City citizen.”

“But you tracked it?” Diggle smiled fondly at his girl.

Felicity beamed, “Of course I did. The account holder is one Travis James. He works private security at Kord Industries.”

“Kord Industries, that’s your big rival, right?” Jay arched a brow down at Felicity, who only huffed before responding.

“Not exactly. Their tech is focused on weapons. They deal with defense contracting. We’re more of a technology-for-the-people company.”

Jason’s face crinkled as if in pain and he shot a look to Diggle who’s expression mirrored his own, “Okay, that’s not better. HIVE just paid a metric butt load of money to a security contractor for a weapons technology manufacturing company. Do we all see the problem here?”

“Right,” Diggle leaned onto the desk to get a closer look at the computer, “can you find out where exactly this guy is in the food chain? When he’s next scheduled to come into work? Maybe any big projects he’s on?”

Felicity nodded wordlessly and as her fingers flew, pictures of the man, security badges and clearances, his background check, position description, schedule overview and more popped up on one of the larger monitors, now featuring a large Kord Industries logo wallpaper.

“He looks like one of their senior security advisors. There’s something happening tonight but no plan on the computers. They’re not dumb. They’ve called in extra drivers for the night shift, doubled down on vehicle maintenance, and there are about three times as many security personnel coming in tonight for no apparent reason.”

“Including Mr. James?” Diggle stood up with his arms crossed.

“Including Mr. James,” Felicity confirmed, sitting back in her chair, satisfied with a job well done. “Alright,” John slapped the back of Felicity’s chair, “you call Oliver, we need to suit up.”

Jason furrowed and then arched a skeptical brow at Felicity as he walked away, listening to her mutter, “Yes, yes please. Do that. Put clothes on. Dear God.”

By the time Jay had rinsed off and donned his tactical pants, boots and body armor, Oliver was sweeping through the basement office barking orders and snapping questions to the trio. Felicity was concentrating even harder on getting the intel Oliver wanted, while Diggle looked like he was toeing the line between acquiescence and biting the smaller man’s head off.

“Oliver, the best I have is that they’ve been steadily increasing production on a new line of body armor and some kind of new ammunition,” Felicity’s jaw cracked a little under Oliver’s implacable stare. “I might be able to find out more, but this isn’t magic. It’s going to take a while for me to get past their firewalls without setting off alarms.”
Oliver let out a frustrated sigh and turned away with his hands on his hips. “That’s not good enough. If they’re moving something tonight, we need to know what and where. We can’t just go rushing into one of their warehouses blind and hope they’re even there.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jason’s voice brought every eye to where he stood, calmly watching the tense exchange.

Oliver’s eyes narrowed and the muscles in his jaw clenched. “Todd, when I want to go in shooting wildly at anything that moves, I’ll ask for your advice.”

Jason’s blue eyes darkened and a corner of his mouth pulled up in a challenging smile. “Or, *Queen*, Travis James’ shift doesn’t start for another two hours. One of us tags him, tracks him, we stay in contact and roll with what comes up. But if you aren’t adaptable enough, then we can just let this one go and call it a loss.”

Before Oliver could let out his lip-curled response, Diggle stepped up with a firm voice, “That’s a good plan. Best one we have. If it’s too much for the four of us, we’ll have to back off, but between the three of us on the ground and Felicity’s Overwatch skills, I don’t see why we can’t at least bring this guy in for questioning and maybe stop an arms deal.”

With a curt nod, Jason moved back to one of the weapons lockers while Oliver pulled Diggle aside quietly. “I’m not sure about this, John.”

Diggle narrowed his gaze down at the man he once considered his best friend. “I’m not sure, either. This isn’t the Arrow show anymore, Oliver. You left. A couple of times, and at least once with my wife as your hostage. You didn’t want to be part of this anymore. I’m still not sure why you came back at all, but this isn’t your team. I don’t care if you don’t like him. He knows what he’s doing and so far, he hasn’t done anything to make me doubt *him*.”

Oliver swallowed hard and blinked slowly. The words had come out in a harsh whisper, hitting him square in the chest. “I’ve told you why -“

Diggle raised a hand to stop him. “I don’t care. Get your head in the game or stay here tonight.”

John moved away in long, aggressive strides, leaving Oliver blinking and dumbfounded. John set out his gear for equipment checks to clear his mind. It had been many years since he’d used that voice on anyone. It was the same tone and language he’d become proficient at as a senior special forces soldier when dealing with a belligerent junior troop who’d stepped out of line. His large hands betrayed a faint tremor as he checked and then re-checked each magazine, carefully loaded with non-lethal ammunition. His handguns were clean and oiled, each pocket and pouch was secure. He moved on to the array of ear radios and throat mics, ensuring they were all fully charged and on the correct frequency.

Falling into this lifestyle with Oliver had been more natural than he’d ever admitted to the younger man. Sticking with it with Laurel and Thea after his friend’s betrayal had been no question. Lyla wasn’t worried about their potentially conflicting job loyalties, and she knew how much Diggle needed this. He needed the whole package - from the technical stuff, like weapons and radios and intel and recon, to the bigger issues. John joined the Army because he wanted to be part of something important and help people. This vigilante lifestyle had turned out to be the ultimate extension of that. Coming home at night after stopping a gang-related beating, busting a drug ring, freeing the victims of human trafficking, even helping an old lady deal with an abusive landlord, he could sleep better. He was still helping people the best way he could.

Oliver’s betrayal had been so much more than the risk to Lyla. Diggle had believed in Oliver’s
commitment to their mission. He believed that Oliver wanted to help people and do the right thing and set the example for others to follow. Oliver had been the one to set the example for Diggle in the first place, leading him back from private security into the world of selflessness and putting their lives on the line on behalf of others.

And then Oliver left. First to the League, and then to Ivy Town and Felicity. Growing up with a liar for a brother, John could spot the lies as easily as an eagle finds its prey. They both felt like lies, but the actions both spoke to an undercurrent of truth: Oliver didn’t want this life. He wanted to run from it. He wanted to die when he went to the League and when that didn’t work out, he wanted to cultivate the façade of normalcy on the other side of the country with Felicity. John was well-versed in the pain of loving someone who wanted nothing to do with the life you love so much, and the sting of it with Oliver was no different. His own brother had balked and run from him, until he died - or been absorbed into some shadow criminal organization - and now his brother-in-arms couldn’t stop balking.

It was easy to blame his anger on the risk to Lyla. That was a hurt he could communicate and Oliver could understand without lashing out. But truthfully, there was no one more qualified to shoot her way out of a no-win scenario than his wife.

It was not easy to explain the gaping hole he felt when he thought of losing another brother, of no longer standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Oliver while they fought for the people who needed it the most.

A deep “ahem” stirred his attention. Jason was standing next to him, domino mask on, donning his ear piece and throat mic in case he someone how separated from his helmet.

“I’ll head out now,” he didn’t look at the other man. They both kept moving through the gear-prep process like well-salted veterans. “You and Not-Arrow can work out whatever issues while I’m gone. I’ll radio when it’s time to roll.”

Diggle nodded, “Don’t wait too long to call for back up.”

Jason turned, but stopped to look John in the eye, “Don’t let him come out tonight if you think he’s not ready.”

The friend instinct in Diggle wanted to argue, but the soldier knew Jason was right. He nodded firmly and went back to work as Jason left into the early evening.

He couldn’t shake the tingling on the back of his neck, the same feeling he had before any questionable mission in the special forces.

He saw Oliver quietly donning his gear and stretching his shoulders, a somber shadow on his face, and John stamped the feeling down. They would never get past this if they didn’t even try to take steps forward, together.

“Ms. Lance, you do understand that you will be held responsible for your sister after she is resurrected from the Pit,” Malcolm was standing just above Laurel and Thea in the vast ceremonial cavern, arms primly behind his back. “The League will hold you responsible if you cannot control her.”
His eyes flickered to Thea just enough for Laurel to get his meaning loud and clear: if Sara’s bloodlust hurt Thea, he would rain the full might of his new army on her and probably everyone she loved.

He had explained the risks ad nauseam. There were almost no records of dead people being successfully resurrected and reintegrated into any form of society, League or otherwise, including Jason. “Mr. Todd hardly counts as a successful resurrection, Ms. Lance,” he’d said with a sardonic eyeroll.

There were none about a person who had been dead longer than a few days, let alone months.

The full effects were impossible to predict, but they did know for certain that Sara would come out of the waters wild, feral, and with a base need to destroy Thea, the person who killed her. With most resurrectees, reason and sanity returned with time, exposure to people, training and meditation.

Those who could not satisfy the blood debt often stayed with the League as a safe place to continue sating the magic. Malcolm offered this option to Laurel, should Sara have the inclination. Laurel had frowned at the suggestion and changed the subject.

Swallowing hard, Laurel gave a resolute nod.

“Well then” Malcolm clapped his gloved hands together and turned toward the Pit, where her sister’s body lay wrapped in delicate white fabric on a suspended platform, “proceed.”

Laurel’s heart thundered in her ears as she watched the League priests begin lowering her sister’s body into the murky waters below. It was so loud she couldn’t even hear the chanting, but she could sense Nyssa’s strangled breathing just behind her, the tension rolling off of her in waves. If she could, Laurel knew, Nyssa would cut through everyone in the room to stop this.

Sara’s body had been under the water for…was it minutes? Seconds? Days? Laurel couldn’t breathe. Blood was rushing through her ears and then diving back to her feet, making her sway. A firm hand gripped her arm, steadying her. She turned to see that Nyssa had moved to her side and had her arm in a death grip, eyes wide in terror, locked on the Pit. Without thinking, Laurel reached her other hand blindly and found Thea, who returned the grasp.

The chanting fell silent. Everything in the room stilled. Disciplined League soldiers and priests stayed frozen in place. The priest who appeared in charge slowly turned to Ra’s and shook her head without speaking.

The air seemed to go out of Nyssa. Laurel could feel her friend’s relief, but the head shake would have sent her off her feet had the other two women not been holding onto her so tightly. Tears flooded into her eyes. Her stomach flipped and bile threatened to leap into her throat.

She opened her mouth, whether to scream or cry or call her sister’s name she didn’t know, but all that came out was a choked sob. She’s dead, she’s really dead, there is no second chance, of course there’s no second chance, she got her second chance when she survived the boat, I wanted this too much, I did this to her, her thoughts swirled and blurred together in the all-too-familiar sickening haze of fresh grief.

She wasn’t aware that Thea and Nyssa had gently eased her to the floor, where Nyssa was now crouched, stroking her hair and whispering that it was alright, that their beloved was at peace, and that this was for the best.
Suddenly, Thea’s grip on Laurel’s hand became iron as she gasped, “Laurel.”

Laurel lifted her head and blinked back the tears to see that every eye in the room was locked on the Pit, where the water was bubbling, moving, alive. Nyssa and Thea helped her stagger back to her feet, but Nyssa instinctively kept Laurel shielded behind her body, stopping Laurel’s advance directly to the Pit.

The priests stepped away from the waters and the head priest was issuing rapid fire instructions Laurel didn’t understand. Two were standing by with a set of fresh, heavy League robes. More had ropes and large nets.

Without warning, Sara’s form seemed to fly out of the waters, landing in a low crouch just before the Pit, seething and panting like an animal.

“No Laurel!” Nyssa cried out, torn between a deep desire to not see Sara in this state, and knowing that she had to be aware of the woman’s location. She was too dangerous in this state. On cue, Sara’s head snapped up at the sound of Laurel’s voice, her eyes found a target on Thea. She unleashed a snarling scream and dove in a flurry of clawed hands and kicking feet after the younger woman.

Thea didn’t move. As Sara made for her, her heart fell. It was true. Sara would never know peace as long as she was alive. She closed her eyes, willing Sara to just move faster, before they could stop her.

But nothing came. Sara was yanked back, screaming, growling, hissing, by a small crew of League soldiers. They restrained her as best they could, threw the robes over her for some semblance of decency and respect, and Malcolm gave them a nod to move her to the designated holding cell.

Laurel watched helplessly as they dragged her sister away. Tears were streaming down Nyssa’s face unbroken.


Malcolm stepped toward the trio, taking a slower look at his daughter before answering, “She’ll be fine. We’ll have her cleaned, fed and rested. Tomorrow you’ll all be flown back to Star City.”

“That’s it?” Laurel felt like the world was stabilizing under her feet at last.

“I’ve given you more than the League ever gives the uninitiated, mostly at the request of my daughter,” Malcolm let out a long suffering sigh. “I’ve done what I promised. Now, Ms. Lance, you do what you promised. Take your sister and leave, and don’t let her become a problem I have to deal with.”

Laurel debated arguing the issue, but then thought better of it. She turned to leave with Thea not far behind. Thea paused when Malcolm reached a hand out to stop her. “Don’t do that again,” he said in low voice.

Thea didn’t respond; she only held his gaze for a moment before breaking his hold and following Laurel.

“A word, Nyssa,” Malcolm spoke, though Nyssa had remained where she stood. “Don’t think you’re leaving with them.”
Her tears had already dried and felt a predatory smile tug at her lips. Yes, this was so much better than helpless rage. “Do you honestly believe you can stop me, Ra’s al Ghul?”

His hand unconscious drifted to the weapon at his hip, and the guards in the room mimicked his response. “If you think, for one second, I am letting you out of here, so you can run off and plan a coup or whatever it is you think you’re going to do -“

Nyssa huffed an insincere laugh. “I have a rightful claim to name al Ghul. More than you,” her eyes flickered to the soldiers and assassins stationed around them. “Who do you think is loyal to me, and who to you? Are you willing to find out?”

Malcolm watched his rival’s eyes glittering in the torchlight. She wanted this. She wanted him to lose control right now. If she wanted it, it was something she could not have. He moved his hand from his sword and assumed his normal posture, clasped at the small of his back.

“Fine,” he ticked a brow, “run off to Star City with your little birds. Plot your little coup. It’s not going to get you anywhere but in the ground. You will never amass the support to overthrow the acting Ra’s.”

Nyssa cocked her head and seemed to consider his words. “Perhaps you’re right. But you are the reason my beloved suffers. You were the cause of her death and you are now the cause of her living torment. If I die, I will bring you with me.” She stepped into his space, letting her gaze rake him up and down, nostrils flaring and in disgust. “And I may not have enough followers to defeat all of yours. But Talia does.”

Malcolm stepped back, appraising his opponent anew. He had underestimated her.

“You will not stop me from leaving with Thea and the Lance sisters tomorrow, Ra’s. If you do, my followers are all under strict instruction to get word to Talia, and we both know that will be the end of the Magician,” her voice rose with the command of a general and she swept from the cavernous hall in a swirl of robes and weapons.

Ra’s al Ghul was left seething, clutching the ring that signified his hold over the League.

_I shouldn’t have even called them_, Jason seethed, letting a low growl rumble in his throat. _I could have taken care of this by now, told them I got made and had to improvise or die. Problem solved._

As he thought it, he knew the idea would have had messy results. Even for him. His slow stakeout had led him to follow a small convoy of armored trucks and SUVs to the harbor, where they waited until a complement of similarly armored SUVs pulled up and teams of Ghosts poured out. The deal was in process. The Ghosts would take the trucks, and lead their own convoy back to their base of operations. Couldn’t ask for better intel. He could get in there, start a fight, and stop everything but one truckload marked with a tracking device. Wham, bam, thank you, Ma’am.

Working alone, Jason couldn’t count on nonlethal methods against this many opponents. He’d be firing kill shots and lobbing grenades. His new teammates wouldn’t care for that, nor would the old Bat family. He said he’d give the no-killing thing a try, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t fall off the wagon every now and then, right? Especially when his back up for the evening was arguing amongst themselves like a couple going through a nasty divorce.
The Bats wouldn’t be surprised if Jason popped up in the midst of an epic murder relapse. Neither would Oliver or John.

Jason was used to letting people down. But something Barbara had said to him before he left Gotham continually reined him back when he wanted to unleash: “You owe it to no one but yourself to find out if you got a second chance at life for anything other than this.”

Something else kept him from stepping over the ledge and kick-starting what he knew would be a bloody fun massacre: Laurel. For some insane reason, that woman kept standing by him and defending him. She told him (and herself) that it was his knowledge of the Pit and resurrection and recovery that made him useful to her, but he saw the hope in her eyes. She believed in her soul that he was someone worth rooting for. How would she take it when John told her that Jason had gone full Red Hood in her absence and turned a stakeout into a bloodbath? Would she be shocked? Or worse, would she crumple with the acceptance, as one addict to another, that his fall was inevitable?

Jason Todd had disappointed everyone who ever put faith in him, but he hadn’t disappointed Laurel, yet. He gritted his teeth, cracked his knuckles inside each fist and determined tonight would not be the night he’d start.

He didn’t turn to acknowledge the pair when the silently flanked him on his rooftop position.

“Nice of you to join me,” he grumbled from behind his helmet, eyes narrowed at the tense exchange happening below them. “Did you guys work it out, or…?”

Oliver fought the urge to smack him on the back of his helmet and instead directed his attention to the activity. “What do we have?”

“Uh, well, what we have here is a bunch of bad guys. You’ll recognize those bad guys in the tactical pajamas as Ghosts, and the other bad guys as Kord security officers,” Jay gestured dramatically between the two groups. John bit back a smile and raised his binoculars to hide his amusement. “James is that one in the center there in the Kord uniform making a deal with the short Ghost. I guess they let Napoleon run the show, I don’t know. But that’s about it.”

Oliver sighed loudly and shook his head, “Obviously I have eyes. I mean, do you know what the cargo is? Where they’re going? Is this even all of them?”

“Do you mean, did they bust out their contraband and wave it around for the world to see? No, I haven’t had eyes on it. And no, they each posted four-man teams at the front and back entrances to this lot. They don’t trust each other very much,” he turned his blank masked face slowly to John, who pretended to be busy assessing the situation.

Jay didn’t miss the tension coming from Spartan, or the fact that he had his binos locked on the short man who seemed to be leading this troupe of Ghosts. Whether the tension was a result of the bickering and jockeying for position the trio seemed determined to maintain, or something else, he couldn’t say, but he was beginning to regret his earlier to decision to call the pair in the first place.

Oliver grimaced at the insult and sarcasm, but powered past it, pulling out his bow and nocking a grappling arrow. “Spartan, you concentrate on taking down James and bringing him in. We need Red Hood and I will disable the trucks and keep the others off you as best we can.”

“No,” Jay shot out a hand to still the other man’s bow, “let one truck go as long as it’s being driven by Ghosts. I’ll mark it. We need to know where they’re operating from.”
Jerking his bow away, Oliver snapped, using the weapon to gesture at the scene below. “We have no idea what’s in those trucks. The off chance that they won’t know they’ve been tagged or that they’re taking these weapons directly back to their base of operations isn’t worth the risk that they have some kind of nuclear weapon or God-knows what. They didn’t pay that much money and orchestrate this for standard guns and body armor. Whatever is in those trucks cannot leave with them, and that’s final!”

Without waiting for response, Oliver shot off the grappling arrow and launched himself into the middle of the exchange. Red Hood and Spartan had only a second to exchange a tired look before following into the melee.

Oliver kicked the smaller Ghost in the chest as he released himself from his grappling line, and spun around to shoot a net at Travis James, who fell in a surprised tangled mess before he fully grasped what was happening around him. The Ghosts were faster to react.

Spartan popped up from his landing and, after checking that James was still stuck in the netting, got in between Oliver and the Ghost, taking up the fight. “Go, man, I got this,” he called over his shoulder. Oliver hesitated, but turned away to engage the other fighters rapidly closing in.

While Jay was laying down suppressing fire, keeping more Ghosts and Kord guards from moving into the fight, Oliver began launching arrows into the truck tires, systematically disabling each vehicle. The Ghosts were ahead of him though. Held at bay by Red Hood’s gunfire, they refocused on pulling crates from the backs of the trucks and loading anything they deemed important onto the remained undamaged trucks, blocked from Oliver’s arrows.

Jay used the HUD in his helmet to gauge the situation around him, now lamenting that he hadn’t just called in sick today. Spartan was busy sparring with the same Ghost he’d been so distracted by the last time they’d tangled with these guys, and from a place of good cover, a pair of Ghosts had unpacked one of the boxes and were passing out some kind of large pump-action weapon to their comrades.

“Spartan, you might want to wrap that up and secure our target so we can G-T-F-O,” Jason called over the radio, slinging his shotgun and drawing his pistols for closer targets.

Spartan didn’t seem to hear him and continued the uncompromising dance with his opponent. For the umpteenth time that night, Jason rumbled a growl out of his helmet, used the butt of a pistol to knock out a less-prepared Kord guard, and started making his way back to his partner. He was about to intervene when he saw Oliver drawing his bow to blow out the back tires on one of the remaining undamaged trucks, slowly rumbling away from the chaos. He drew and launched a batarang at the archer’s weapon just as he released the bow string, knocking the arrow off course and sending it exploding into one of the SUVs.

“Dammit, I said to let it go!” he roared behind his mask as Oliver whirled on him.

“It’s not even marked, now you’ve let a shipment of weapons just get handed over-” before Oliver could finish, the pair were hit by a punch of light that sent them both off their feet and tumbling into the asphalt. Jason struggled to rip his helmet off, as the blast had scrambled his HUD and radio, filling his ears and eyes with static and unbearable screeching. He groaned and struggled to his hands and knees, feeling like he’d been hit by a car. He could feel blood dripping out of his nose and ears. Blinking, he saw the emerald archer in a similar position, and Spartan was now on his knees with the small Ghost standing over him, shaking his head, and another pair with the same mysterious weapons drawn down on him.

More were moving in. There were no Kord guards left standing or in sight. They’d either made a
run for it, or the Ghosts had put them down, too. Well, this was just rich. All the dumb shit Jason had gotten himself into, and he was going to die - again - because Oscar and Felix couldn’t get their heads out of each other’s asses. He thought he could hear Diggle saying the name “Andy,” but his ears were still ringing.

The Ghosts were drawing down. There were too many and he was too hurt.

Then, as if the war gods could hear him and saw this as an unworthy death for someone they’d already raised once, a small drone helicopter whirred in, buzzing out the blessed rain of machine gun fire known only to those who have ever been desperately outmanned and outgunned and needed help from on high. A literal angel, as far as Jason was concerned.

His head was clearing, and their enemies were falling back into their vehicles. The small Ghost leading the charge stopped at the passenger side door of the last SUV to give a jaunty salute to Diggle, who looked a bit like someone shot his dog. Great, now Jason was the one making mental notes of who needed to talk about their feelings after the mission. This was just awful.

The trio each rose to their feet, not looking at each other. Oliver slipped what must have been his ear piece and mic back into place and began a quiet conversation with Felicity.

Jason left without a word, assuming he’d see them back at their basement lair.

Sure enough, he was greeted at the door by arguing.

“Why weren’t any of you on the comms? What is the point of these things?” Felicity chucked the ear piece at Oliver for emphasis. Her voice cracked as she yelled and her hair, usually so smooth and neat, was a frizzy mess piled on top of her head. Oliver winced and began to quietly apologize but Felicity practically snarled at him and turned away.

Diggle was ashen, but composed. “How’d you get that drone? That was quick thinking.”

“You can thank your wife,” Felicity snapped. “She answers her phone. She made some openings in the ARGUS network so they wouldn’t notice one of their drones was hijacked until it was too late. You’re welcome, by the way,” she swept out her arms and bowed in a grand gesture, with a smile that looked ready to bite off the head of anyone who spoke next.

Ever the bravest man in the room, Diggle cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Felicity. I turned off my ear piece because… I had something I needed to find out tonight about one of the Ghosts and I didn’t want any distractions.”

“Distractions?” her entire face seemed to actually widen. “You mean like critical intelligence that only I would have? Like getting a better look at those boxes from surveillance cameras and Jason’s HUD and knowing you were about to get ambushed with LIGHT guns?”

“Huh,” Jason mumbled, bringing the attention to him. “Well, that was definitely a great big ball of light.”

Felicity huffed and slammed herself into her chair, hitting her keyboard with much more force than necessary to bring up the information she needed to share. “It’s a shockwave, sort of like Laurel’s Canary Cry, but with light instead of sound. Not only does it hit like a Mack truck, it can also scramble any electronics it comes into contact with.”

Jason held up his helmet and frowned sadly at it. “I can fix that,” Felicity said flatly, without turning around.
“While you idiots were out having a who-can-be-the-most-self-centered-ass contest, I was busy trying to get the intel Oliver asked me for. They’ve had someone named Dr. Arthur Light working for them on a top secret weapons project ever since Harrison Wells - or, I don’t know, fake-Wells, whatever - fired him from S.T.A.R. labs,” Felicity punctuated the sentence by pulling up basic designs of the various weapons systems. They’d only seen the one model so far.

“In my defense,” Jason began, “I get all the text and imagery you send. I just turn off the chatter, because, to be perfectly honest, even when you guys are being nice to each other, I really can’t stand it. It’s sickening.”

Oliver’s eyes rolled back into his head and Felicity’s spine stiffened. “Not helping,” John offered quietly.

“John,” Oliver frowned, “What do you mean you had something personal to take care of? What could you possibly have to take care of in the middle of a mission like that without telling the rest of us?”

Diggle’s eyes narrowed and he crossed his giant arms. “Not everything is about you, Oliver.”

“It was tonight,” Oliver jutted out his chin. “You were so worried about me having my head in the game, and it turns out you had a completely different mission. You stayed engaged with one Ghost the entire time and we,” Jason quickly shook his head, trying to remove himself from the conversation, “couldn’t get any help from you. We lost our source, we lost at least one truckload of these weapons. What was so damn important?”

Jason raised a finger, “Actually, I marked every vehicle with sticky trackers. So we didn’t lose that truckload of weapons, but continue.”

Oliver opened and shut his mouth several times before throwing up his hands and turning away. “I don’t even know why I came back.”

“Why did you come back?” Diggle barked. “Huh? So what? You don’t get to be the boss and know everything about everyone and have a say in how everyone lives their lives so you don’t want to play in this sandbox anymore, is that it?”

Oliver turned back, putting his fingers to the bridge of his nose before dropping his hands to his hips. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You guys had a good plan and I…I just felt like I could do better. I’ve been making the plans and leading these missions on my own for so long, I don’t think I even know how to sit back and let someone else lead.”

John sat down slowly, easing his big frame into one of Felicity’s smaller desk chairs. He hadn’t expected an apology.

He flickered his eyes from Felicity, who looked more tired and run down than she had in a long time, to Jason, who looked like a horse ready to bolt, and back to Oliver, who was staring at the ground, unsure whether to continue walking away or stay.

“It’s my brother,” he ground out.

Oliver blinked, and slowly raised his gaze to John. “Andy? I thought he was dead.”

A sardonic smile lifted John’s lips, “So did I. Until I fought that small Ghost and got a look at his face. It was my brother.”

“Why…why didn’t you say anything, John?” Oliver took a small step forward.
Diggle shrugged. “I wasn’t ready to say it out loud. I have an inside source with HIVE looking into it. I don’t know if it really is Andy, if he’s been brainwashed, magicked by the blonde guy you fought, or what.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Jason raised a hand. “You’ve had an inside source on HIVE this whole time? And you didn’t think that was important to share?”

“That is still not something I’m going to share,” Diggle leaned forward. “The fewer people who know about this, the better. Trust me, if I get information that will help us, you all will be the first to know. I just, hadn’t heard anything, and then tonight he was there again. It’s my brother. We used to spar all the time. I know his style. And the way he saluted at me. That’s what he did the last time I saw him leave the wire in Afghanistan.”

Oliver slowly made his way back to the computer bay, half-sitting on one of the desks. “I wish you had told me.”

Diggle raised his eyes to his friend, but didn’t have an answer.

“C’mon man,” Oliver’s blue eyes lit up with something familiar, something John hadn’t seen in a long time, “let’s get your brother back.”

Laurel gently shut the heavy duty basement access door behind herself and Nyssa. After a long flight, and a lot of sedative administration, Sara was resting on a League-issued sleeping mat in fresh clothes and would wake to find food and water waiting for her.

Both women hated seeing her in a cage, but it was better than the shackles that had been recommended. Turned out, due to Thea’s inheritance from Malcolm, she still owned the defunct Verdant club, so their former foundry served as an excellent hiding spot for Sara while she recovered.

They had all agreed to stay mum on her resurrection until she became more lucid. Quentin wouldn’t be able to handle seeing his daughter like that and Laurel shuddered at the thought of Oliver taking unilateral action if he felt pressed. Thea would stay away altogether. Her presence alone seemed to pull Sara from her drug-induced sleep like a siren’s call, sending her raging and thrashing after the younger woman.

Laurel was surprised to see Nyssa had changed so quickly from her League robes into “civilian attire,” as she called it.

“There’s a Big Belly Burger around the corner,” Laurel smiled hopefully. “French fries dipped in milkshake are calling my name. Care to join me?”

Nyssa avoided Laurel’s eyes for a moment before straightening to respond, “No, thank you. I’ll be in one of the safe houses nearby. I’ll check on her regularly. You don’t have to worry.”

“She’s my sister, Nyssa,” the smile left Laurel’s face. “It’s not about worry. I’m here for this, too, the whole way.”

The corners for Nyssa’s dark eyes fell with something like pity. “She’s not going to get better. I know you can’t see it because you have seldom been in the presence of the mystic and your only
exposure the Lazarus Pit has been my sister-in-Law and Todd, but trust me, Laurel. I was raised as Heir to the Demon. I saw many resurrections, successes and failures. Sara is not in there. She’s not coming back. It will be easier on you to accept that now, because we will soon have to make a decision about how to move forward.”

So that’s why Nyssa had been so insistent on coming back to Star City. Laurel felt the air rush out of her lungs, but she stood tall and stepped back, away from her former teacher. “I know you think I don’t know anything because I grew up in the suburbs and not in Nanda Parbat learning to be some kind of magic warrior, but I know Sara has a chance, and if I don’t fight for her, no one will. If you won’t help me, you may as well go back to the League.”

Blinking, Nyssa took in her student. She felt pride. This was the woman she trained, standing up to her. She trained Laurel because she knew Laurel would fight regardless, with whatever tools she could get her hands on. That was a feeling Nyssa understood. “Alright, Laurel. I will help you as long as you require.”

A howling scream came from behind the basement door and both women jerked at the noise, and Laurel’s face crumpled in pain. Nyssa nodded and turned back to her friend. “We have to act quickly. The magic demands blood. Her fits will only get worse until they kill her to sate their need.”

“I’m not sacrificing Thea,” Laurel spoke through gritted teeth.

“I know, which is why we need to find another way to release her soul from the blood magic holding it.”
There, got ‘em, he smiled to himself and began a quick, silent jog to his next target.

The sight that greeted him shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did. He should have seen this coming, but he had let his guard down.

John Diggle and Quentin Lance were engaged in a very serious conversation next to Lance’s police car. Jason turned up the power on his omnidirectional mic to get a better idea, but he had a feeling he already knew the subject of their conversation.

“I told you I’m meeting with him tonight, you have to go now,” Lance ordered, snapping around at his surroundings. “I have already told you I will update you if I get anything, but I cannot just come out swinging at this guy.”

Diggle sucked in his breath and nodded, accepting the answer. “Fine. I won’t be far. You know where to meet me.” The larger man turned and jogged into an alley, presumably to his vehicle, well out of sight and sound from Lance’s position.

Jason decided to stay right where he was, just as Lance remained in his spot, to confirm his suspicions.

As predicted, a black limo pulled up minutes later, and a crisp-suited blonde man slithered out of the back.

“I wasn’t aware we had the sort of relationship where you call me for meetings, Captain Lance,” Darhk slid his hands into his coat pockets. “What exactly can I do for you?”

Quentin pushed himself off the unmarked police car and mirrored Darhk’s posture. “A friend of mine works private security for Palmer Tech. I don’t know how, but he got his hands on some surveillance of your Ghosts at that Kord Industries deal a few days ago.”

Darhk harrumphed at this. “My men were under strict instructions to ensure that no one from Kord left that exchange alive. Apparently they did not take my instructions seriously. Go on.”

“Anyway,” Quentin shook his head, “he came to me, swearing up and down he recognized one of the Ghosts and wants me to open an investigation into the death of someone named Andrew Diggle. It was an open and shut case from the Army a few years back, but this guy’s not stupid and he’s not crazy. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Darhk let his cold blue eyes drift off and up to the left as if he was seriously considering the question. “Maybe. Maybe not,” he shrugged. “Look, Quentin, you’ve been a great asset to me, so I’m going to help you out. I’ll look into it and I’ll call you if I happen to have a dead man named Andrew Diggle in my employment. I do acquire these men from all walks of life, and the afterlife, heh,” he laughed at his own little joke. “He could be working for me. I’ll check. Is that all?”

Smooth, Lance, Jason squinted suspiciously at the pair. Darhk knew Lance was lying. Lance knew Darhk knew Lance was lying. But they both kept up the façade anyway. Jason didn’t miss this part of being a crime boss.

The men didn’t shake hands. A single nod, and Darhk was back in his vehicle. Lance waited until the limo was gone before getting in his car and leaving.

So, Diggle’s inside man with HIVE is Laurel’s dad, Jason sat back on his haunches. This is gonna get so messy.
Laurel forced a thin smile on her face, standing back, away from the group.

Not that she didn’t want to be here, she just really didn’t want to be here. Sara’s fits were worse every day, and standing in Sebastian Blood’s empty campaign offices brought up vivid memories of her friends and family refusing to believe her when she rightly identified him as kind of a bad guy.

She tried, she really tried, to listen as Oliver talked to everyone about fresh starts and about stepping back from vigilante work for a little while to focus on other ways to help. That should be relevant to her interests, right? He was saying something genuinely kind about the great work she, Thea and John had done in the five months he and Felicity were away. But all she could think about was the pain and unadulterated fear in Nyssa’s eyes and how Sara had stopped eating altogether, how her sleep came in fits and starts, and…

“You with us?” Jason leaned and whispered her ear quietly, so only she could hear.

“Yeah, of course,” Laurel blinked and shook her head, as if she could physically remove the intrusive thoughts. “I don’t know what happened while we were gone, but good job. We call this an awakening in group.”

“Nothing a little near-death experience borne of selfishness and bad communication won’t fix,” Jason smirked and they both refocused their attention on Oliver, who was practically bobbing back and forth on his toes in excitement.

Oliver couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. “Okay, okay. I know I’m rambling. I’m sorry. I know this seems like an unusual venue choice for…well, anything, but hear me out. Sebastian Blood selected this building not only because of the square footage and centralized downtown location, but also,” he turned, with flourish, and pressed a hidden panel on the wall, which opened a hidden elevator behind him in what would have been Sebastian’s private office, where he had gathered everyone. “He chose it because the previous owner purchased it and renovated it during the Cold War and was famously paranoid about Communists and a nuclear winter. Below street level, there is an entire bunker Blood had retrofitted for his own secret operation. I want it to be our new base of operations.”

He beamed optimistically at the group, most of whom were still gaping at the secret elevator and scratching their heads.

Undeterred, Oliver pressed on. “It’s got weapons and gear storage built right into the walls, completely independent solar and wind-generated power, a bank of servers that you,” he pointed at Felicity who instantly perked up, “will be very impressed by. It has two fully-functional bathrooms with showers, hot running water and all, beds, training areas. And we don’t have to keep sneaking in and out of the Palmer Tech building to use it.”

“Oh,” Thea raised her hand like a student, “Won’t we have to sneak in and out of this building to use it?”

Oliver pointed at her and she lowered her hand, “Good point! No!” He just couldn’t stop smiling. It was infectious. Almost everyone had dropped their stony-faced confusion and were slowly brightening to match his enthusiasm. “I, or rather Felicity since she’s the breadwinner now, bought the building in my name. And we are all going to have a very good cover for being here all the time.”
Everyone looked on in expectation. Finally Diggle asked, “Okay man, what’s the big cover story?”

Oliver took a deep breath, looked around the room, before exhaling and saying, “I’m running for mayor. This is going to be my campaign office.”

You could have heard a pin drop. It was only then that Oliver’s bright smile finally faltered.

“Okay, don’t all congratulate me at once.”

Thea looked around helplessly, searching for the right words for her brother. “Ollie, I think we’re all just a little surprised. You’ve never seemed very interested in politics. Plus, all that stuff last year with you being outed as the Arrow…”

“And then Roy took the fall for that and faked his death and I am no longer connected to the Arrow. Plus, Felicity helped me leak some heavily altered footage from one of our missions to the media, so now they’re calling this guy the Green Arrow and a copycat. They aren’t making the connection.”

Felicity’s eyes widened in horror as every eye in the room turned to her and a flurry of “You did what?” “You can’t just release footage of us!” “How could you do that without warning us?” hailed down in her and Oliver’s general direction.

Oliver raised his hands plaintively to silence them. “Stop, no, I asked her to. We needed to do something to get people thinking I’m someone completely different. You’re all right, I should have talked to you about it first. It won’t happen again. But it’s done and it seems to have worked, okay?”

His answer was grumbles and a few headshakes, followed by reluctant nodding and a few affirmations.

“Back to the topic at hand,” Thea ventured, “Ollie, why mayor?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Jessica Danforth is gone, out of the city completely. The executive-by-committee isn’t working, and I think we all know no one is going to step up to the plate given what’s happened to the last few mayor’s and candidates, and what’s going on now. This city needs leadership it can see. Thea, this is what Mom wanted.”

Thea tilted her head and smiled sadly. “Oliver, I think Mom wanted you to mellow out and take over Queen Consolidated so she could retire in peace. I don’t think she had big government aspirations for you.”

“No,” Oliver countered, “she wanted me to grow up. She wanted me to fix what she and my dad screwed up, and represent our family well. That’s what I want to do now. It won’t be forever. I’m a stopgap measure until the city is safe again for real politicians to take over. And I can help you guys when you need it, as the Green Arrow, but you’ll run the show on the vigilante side while I’m running this campaign. I’m just here for backup and a very cool bunker.”

The group exchanged looks. Jason looked like he was in physical pain from having to sit through this.

“That sounds great, Oliver,” Laurel spoke up from the back. He met her eyes with a warm smile. “Thank you for trusting us to keep up the vigilante work. And I think I can probably secure an endorsement from both the D.A.’s office and the Star City police captain.”

Jason’s eyes shot to John, gauging the other man’s reaction. To his credit, he didn’t betray any
response to indicate that he knew there was no way Captain Lance would play ball with this.

His cheery demeanor returned, Oliver rubbed his hands together, and then gestured toward the open elevator. “Alright, who wants a tour?”

Jason crossed his arms, a frown tugging at his lips. He hadn't made his presence known, but he sensed that Laurel knew he was there. As soon as the larger group had cleared out from the grand tour, Laurel's first order of business had been to go home, change into gym clothes, and return to break in the training mats and one of the punching bags. With brutality.

She was getting tired, but not slowing down. With each hit, her exhaled breath came out with a soft grunt. Sweat was pouring freely down her shoulders and back, soaking her shirt. He wondered if Barbara felt the same mix of concern and arousal when she caught him in the same state.

He cleared his throat and moved around the floor, taking a firm stance on the bag. She paused long enough to let him get his grip on the bag and set his feet, before continuing her onslaught.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Laurel's green eyes snapped up to Jason's before refocusing on her target. She only shook her head and continued throwing combinations at the bag.

"Okay," Jason leaned around the other side of the bag, "how about we try something different then, since you seem to have a mastery of the basic combos. If you're not too tired, that is."

She didn't miss the playful challenge in his voice. Laurel finished one more punch combination before letting her arms fall to her side. "What do you have in mind?"

Twenty minutes later, standing on the roof of the Palmer Tech building with a beanie pulled low over her ears, she sort of regretted going along with him blindly. She fidgeted with her gear belt. It felt wrong affixed over black workout pants, but Jason had insisted. Now he was handing her an extra gear pouch, filled with meticulously wrapped wire.

She had trusted Oliver on a few death-defying grappling adventures. But now Jason was talking about the benefits of her having her own grappling gun. He was listing the importance of knowing the different lengths of wire she was supposed to keep and where to keep them on her belt, doubling down on the importance of checking gear before leaving for a mission and ensuring and each length of wire was untangled and the ends were already properly hooked to the belt. He kept referring to mistakes as "splits." Not reassuring.

Her pulse was thundering. How tall was this building, anyway? Jason was pointing to the next closest building and explaining how they could launch a line to one of the radio towers on top and swing up to land on the roof. Easy, right?

He had stopped talking. He was staring at her. His mouth ticked up at the corners, just a little. Just enough to make her want to shake him. "You still with me, Blondie?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course, radio tower," Laurel nodded vigorously. "I shoot this," she gestured with the grappling gun, "at the top of the radio tower, check for tautness, and then...woosh."
"Something like that," Jason smiled down at her. The first solo jump was the worst; like ripping off a bandaid. "Remember, don't worry about sticking the landing. Tuck and roll, or you can break an ankle, leg, hit your head."

Laurel closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then turned back to look at the roof of the other building. She flexed her grip on the gun in her hand. That tower looked awfully far away, and although she was good with trigger weapons at close range, she had almost no training with shooting targets farther than 50 yards or so.

Jason raised a single arm, pointing his grappling gun at the tower. He looked back down at Laurel and saw her hesitating. "Laurel, I'm gonna be right next to you the whole time. You're not going to fall."

The wind kicked up and bit into the pair, sending some of Laurel's hair whipping around her face. Laurel saw the seriousness in Jason's expression. The sounds of traffic dimmed and the radio tower suddenly looked very clear in the distance. She raised the grappling gun with both hands like a pistol and fired.

A distant thud followed by a sudden tightening in the wire told her that the grapple had found its target. Her face lit up and she secured the end of the wire to her belt to the appropriate length the way Jason had showed her. Jason followed suit, much faster and with the ease of someone who's been doing this for nearly a lifetime.

Laurel looked to Jason one more time. He nodded at her. They were both ready. It was time.

"Okay," she nodded in return and stepped off the roof.

It wasn't that she'd never jumped off the roof of a building before. She had, knowing Oliver would catch her, or was already holding her.

But now she was holding herself. Time seemed to slow down as she flew through the sky. The stars and the city lights blurred together into a mosaic. She could hear the sounds of cars, maybe a police siren or two, someone playing their music too loud, and Jason laughing next to her.

The building was screaming up to her, but the wire was true and pulled her high, higher and higher and she swung her legs up to just barely clear the roof's edge. She released the end of the wire from her belt, tucked her head and shoulder and dropped into a roll, somersaulting several times before coming to a halt. Jason, far more experienced, had landed on his feet and slid to a stop almost like a hockey player on ice.

He jogged over to her, offering a hand, concern written across his face until he saw that she was laughing too hard. Laurel accepted his hand and pulled herself to her feet.

"That was amazing!" she grinned, still holding his hand, bobbing and turning to look around the roof as if she was going to run and jump again that very moment.

"I get that reaction a lot."

"What, laughter?" Laurel countered, still smiling wide and looking for the next target for a grapple.

Jason slapped a hand to his chest like he'd been shot. "Ugh, wow! Ouch. Let's go for that next," he pointed to a giant crane. "Hook into the crane, once you're under it, unhook and roll onto the roof behind it."
They went on like this for at least an hour, swinging from building to building. Each jump a little different, a little more challenging. Jason said that Batman and the rest swore by this for getting around Gotham and she could see why. Not only was it liberating and thrilling, it was efficient, kept them off the streets and very few would be able to keep up with them like this. Thea was going to love adding this to her wheelhouse. She already had a mastery of freerunning and did a little bit of wire work, but not like this.

It was one more jump, swinging from one building around another, when Laurel felt her belt give out. It was a standard police-issue duty belt she'd modified for her work as Black Canary, and probably not meant for carrying her weight like this.

Her heart stopped as she felt herself free falling through the Star City sky. Laurel shot her hands up, blind and reaching for anything, and sure enough a strong hand caught her's around her forearm. Her shoulder yanked and burned, but she could have cried from the relief of the sudden stop.

Laurel focused her attention - they were swinging fast and their combined weight made their momentum unweildy. A smaller five or six-story apartment complex seemed to materialize out of the darkness. She couldn't quite hear Jason, but she felt the muscles in his arms flexing and caught his intention. She helped him swing herself backwards, then forward, releasing and launching up and over the apartment building's roof.

She rolled, less controlled than she had been all night, but couldn't muster the energy to clean up the landing. A thumping of footsteps followed by skidding knees and Jason was by her side, gently helping her sit up.

"Are you okay?" his frantic blue eyes were searching hers, brushing her mussed hair out of her face. When she let out a hiss of pain, his attention moved to her shoulder, which he began painfully prodding and pulling. His expression relaxed, "It's okay, it's not dislocated or broken. Probably just sprained."

Laurel was still wincing and nodded, "I'm gonna need to ice that later. Not bad for my first night out, huh?"

"Not too bad," Jason snickered. "I think it's time for you to invest in a better belt, though."

"I don't know," Laurel shrugged, sitting up straighter as Jason sat back on his haunches, "I do live for excitement."

Jason guffawed and sat down next to her. "Don't talk like that or Oracle will personally kill me for having a bad influence on you."

"Psh, please. I was totally like this before you," Laurel gave his shoulder a gentle shove. "Besides, I wasn't even scared."

"I told you you weren't going to fall tonight," Jason's expression turned somber.

Laurel lost her playful facade. She had been frightened for those few seconds, falling through empty air. "How did you pull that off, anyway?"

Jason looked away, making his hands very busy repacking the wire they'd used. "Oh, well, catching someone like that, when they're below you, basically involves letting go of your line, grabbing the other person, and then shooting off another grappling line before you both make sidewalk pancakes."
Laurel's eyes turned to saucers, but Jason kept his face turned away. The faintest hint of pink was creeping up his ears. He finally turned to her and tried to laugh it off. "Look, it's not that big a deal. This is not my first rodeo."

"Thank you," her words came out in a breath. "And thank you for doing this with me tonight. This is good stuff to know." She straightened her shoulders and tried to wipe the wide-eyed look off her face.

"It's a good skill to have," Jason gave up fidgeting with the wire. "And I think you were about to punch the bag right off the chains. You don't have to tell me, but you can't keep hitting the streets if there is something that bad hanging over you. Trust me, I know."

Laurel opened her mouth, ready with an excuse, then shut it again. Every time she went to Sara, her sister was worse. Nyssa's patience was wearing thin. All three women had basically stopped sleeping and eating. For the past hour though, she had been able to swing through the Star City skyline as free as a bird.

"I actually forgot, Laurel sucked in her breath. The tears had sprung to her eyes so quickly, she didn't know how to hide them from her partner.

Jason, for his part, couldn't hide the stricken panic when he saw her eyes glass over. He assumed she had beef with one of her teammates, maybe she suspected her father's involvement with HIVE. He lifted his hands and waffled for a second before settling them on her shoulders. Yes, the shoulders were a safe place. She had the look of a wild animal ready to bolt and he had half a mind to let her.

"I'm sorry...?" his face crumpled hopelessly.

His awkwardness managed to elicit a snort of laughter through her tears. "No, no," Laurel shook her head, "Jason, I did something really bad. I don't know what to do."

Jason whistled out a breath, "Whew, okay. I can help you. Did you kill somebody? I can, you know, take care of that. I know you didn't mean to, it just happens sometimes..."

Laurel's aghast expression stopped him. "No, I didn't kill anyone. I..." she looked away, unable to meet his eyes while she confessed, "I took Sara's body to Nanda Parbat."

Gooseflesh rippled down Jason's arms and his hands fell away from Laurel's shoulders. As he pulled away from her, Laurel felt the familiar pallor of shame color her features. After everything she knew about him, everything he had told her, everything everyone else had told her, she had barrelled forward anyway. And isn't that just my way?

"You had your sister resurrected?" Jason enunciated the words slowly, carefully. Laurel nodded, lips pressed together, afraid to speak lest she burst into a puddle of tears and apologies and begging.

"And I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess that it hasn't gone very well?"

Laurel shook her head, a fresh wave of tears flooding into her eyes again.

"Where is she?"

Her face blanched and she scrambled, hands reaching to grab him by the jacket and stop him as he stood up. "No, no, Jason no, please don't..."

"What?" Jason cocked his head in confusion, and then he realized what she was so afraid of. "Oh,
Jesus, Laurel, I'm not gonna kill her. Why would you think I would even consider that?"

Defeated, Laurel released her grip on his jacket and collapsed into a heap, shaking her head. "That's what everyone said. Malcolm said it. Even Nyssa..."

"No offense to Nyssa," Jason put a hand on Laurel's chin, gently guiding her face to meet his, "but she is kind of a 'sledgehammer will solve all problems' type of person."

Laurel stared at him in silence, searching for the judgment she knew had to be there. He had been the victim of other people selfishly using the Pits. He had to hate her for this. He had to know how wrong it was. "But Nyssa's right," she said softly, defeated. "Sara's dying. She's not going to last more than a few days like this. I did this to her," her voice cracked and broke. "I did this to her. Why aren't you angry with me?"

Jason returned to his seat next to Laurel, and, without regard to her squeak of surprise, pulled her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her small frame and smoothing her hair. She was stiff against him, suspicion written all over her features. He understood her fear, wondering if she was being tricked, waiting for him to spring the surprise and confirm every awful thing she was already thinking.

It was an exhausting feeling.

"It's what I would do, for family, someone I cared about," Jason watched her face, the struggle to believe him warring across her entire body. "And Sara is not going to die."

Laurel relaxed a little, but only to shake her head slowly. Jason stopped her head shake with a hand on her chin. "No," he said firmly, "look at me. She is not going to die. You know, again."

Despite herself, Laurel couldn't stop the spurt of laughter that bubbled out of her. Encouraged, Jason smiled a little and pressed on. "She's going to be part of a very exclusive Just Won't Stay Dead Club. We have buttons."

She finally let herself relax into his embrace, resting her head against his shoulder. She gave herself a moment to enjoy not feeling abject misery, tears drying and a mild sense of embarrassment at having broken down in front of him beginning to nag at the back of her mind. "How are we going to save her?" Laurel's voice was quiet.

Jason looked down to find a pair of wide green eyes staring at him, waiting for an answer he didn't have. "Sometimes," he began, swallowing hard, stalling, distracted, "she's so pretty, sometimes you just have to reach out..." Jason trailed off, his mouth suddenly felt dry and heavy.

"And believe that your teammates are going to be there to catch you?" Laurel added helpfully, whether he was pulling her closer or she was pulling herself, she couldn't say. Her stomach felt like it was doing backflips and her pulse had ramped back up, giving her the same dizzying tension she felt right before she'd stepped off a roof for the first time on her own just a few hours earlier.

"Something like that," Jason was so close to her face now. Why did boys get such long eyelashes? She could feel his heartbeat against her, racing nearly as badly as hers. His eyes were searching her face before landing on her lips. She couldn't see or think of anything but him; his pupils were so wide his eyes looked almost black, his mouth was open and she caught him give his bottom lip the tiniest bite. He looked so unsure.

So Laurel leaned forward and closed the distance.

Jason was frozen in shock. She kissed me. She is kissing me. The thought raced through his head on
a loop just long enough for him to feel her still and begin to pull back. No, no, no, he quickly tightened his grip around her waist and sank his other hand around the back of her head, stopping her escape.

Finally he was kissing her. He'd lost track of the number of intrusive thoughts he'd had featuring kissing Laurel Lance, but he knew that none of them lived up to the real thing. She was soft but strong, small but not fragile, and now she was opening her mouth and dragging her teeth along his bottom lip in a way that, had his eyes been open, would make him cross-eyed.

In that split second before he clamped down and returned the kiss, Laurel felt the sickening panic of rejection, thoughts tumbling and wondering how she could have misread his signals so badly. But then his massive hand had dug into her waist and the other tangled into her hair, pulling her impossibly closer. He matched her gentle pace, letting her slowly explore.

Laurel felt like she was waking up from a long sleep. Had it really been years since she'd so much as kissed anyone? The stubble from his day-old beard was scratching and rubbing against her cheeks. She let her hands wander, exploring the hard lines of his face, enjoying the feeling of his scruffy jawline in her hands, moving across the wide, hard planes of his shoulders, Dear God, he's huge, Laurel couldn't keep her thoughts straight.

There was something she was supposed to be doing, and instead she opened her mouth and let her tongue venture in Jason's mouth, which he was only too eager to meet with his own. Soon she was sucking on his bottom lip and she could have sworn she heard a low growl rumble out of him. Something, something important, Laurel tried to rein in her thoughts. She had to get past something other than how damn good she felt in that moment. He smelled so nice though, not like anyone else she'd ever been with, like soap and sweat and, was that gun powder and motor oil? Ollie hadn't smelled like this the last time...

And there it was. Her breath was knocked out of her and she pushed away from Jason so suddenly he was left blinking slowly, eyebrows creasing together in pained confusion.

"Sara," she struggled to breathe, forcing herself out of Jason's warm lap into the cool night air.

Jason blinked up at her, more confused than before, "Huh?"

"I shouldn't have..." Laurel stopped herself, "I know who can help Sara. I should go. I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't have what?" Jason asked, his words a quiet monotone. When she closed her eyes and turned away, his heart sank with the confirmation. She was hurting, scared, and needed comfort. Get a grip, Todd, he gritted his teeth, she's out of your league anyway. "Yeah, right, well, if you need anymore help, you know where to find me."

He didn't see her eyes narrow at his response, but he sensed her caught pause. She stewed for a moment before quietly saying, "Thank you, Jason."

He listened to her leave by the fire escape, and then let out a long sigh, running a hand through his hair and down his face in frustration. "Yeah, I'm real fucking helpful," he muttered to himself.

He wondered if he had the energy to make it back to his place. A cold shower was in order.
"Thanks for meeting me here," Laurel smiled with genuine warmth, but eyes still searching for a place to sit, or hide, or run away and pretend she hadn't called him.

"Of course I came," Oliver watched his friend, noting her cagey posture. They hadn't fully "moved in" to their new digs, so the bunker remained a little barren and cold, but apparently this had been the only place she'd felt comfortable talking to him. He knew he was probably to blame for that. But she had still called him, so that was something, right?

"I um, I need your help with something, and I'm not sure where to start," Laurel shoved her hands in her pockets and began pacing. "At least, I think you can help me. I don't know."

Oliver felt a sinking deep in hit gut. Had she relapsed? Had something happened between her and Red Hood? He would bury that guy so deep in the ground, no one would ever dig his ass up again. Oliver bit the anger down. He didn't even know what was wrong. "Well, what's the problem?" He tried to keep his voice as even as possible.

She stopped pacing long enough to stare at him, as if willing the answer to appear. When it didn't, she gritted her teeth in frustration. "It's just, the last time you knew about one of my screw ups, you held it over my head and just kept beating me up over it," her hand flew up to her mouth in shock that she'd said the words. Oliver's head fell, but he nodded solemnly.

"You're right, I did that," he spoke softly, head hung low. "I was not a good friend to you during that, Laurel, but I'd like to make it up to you."

Laurel wanted to believe him. She felt 20 all over again, staring into his pretty blue eyes, willing herself to believe his affirmations that he'd never cheat on her again. But they weren't kids anymore, and the sincere man staring back at her didn't even look like that Oliver Queen anymore. "I need to know, Oliver, that if I tell you this, you aren't going to spend the next two years punishing me for it."

He stepped forward and took her hands in his. "I swear, Laurel, whatever is wrong, I want to help. I have made some pretty shitty and selfish decisions these past few years. Whatever this is, it can't be worse than anything I haven't already done. Probably to you." His mouth ticked up a little and she returned the small gesture.

"Okay," she decided. It was time to jump and throw her hands out. "How much do you know about magic?"

Oliver blinked, "Magic? I had a few run-ins with it, outside of Nanda Parbat, why?"

Please catch me, she thought desperately. "I took Sara to Nanda Parbat. But something is wrong. She's not getting better."

Oliver stepped back, the blood left his face. "Sara's alive?" he could barely whisper the words.

"Not for much longer," Laurel's face fell. "I think the magic that brought her back is killing her. I don't know what to do, Ollie."

His head spinning, Oliver turned until he saw a desk that would serve as a place to sit. He rested on it, a hand across his face until the ground beneath his feet stopped waving and tilting. Laurel bit down on the inside of her cheeks, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

"Okay," his hand fell away from his face. "I know someone who might be able to help us. He owes
me a favor. Where is she? Can I see her?"

Now it was Laurel's turn to blink dumbly. In the past few years she'd become accustomed to Oliver's primary reaction to her bombshells being explosive anger. This was...new. "She's, um, we put her in the old foundry. Nyssa's probably with her right now."

"Nyssa's here?"

"Like any force on this planet could keep her away?"

"Good point," Oliver chuckled. "I think we should tell John and Felicity. I'm assuming Thea knows, since she went with you. And then I'll call my guy."

"That's very inclusive of you, Ollie. Sounds good."

"I'm trying this new thing where I don't act unilaterally on the assumption that I know what's best for everyone," Oliver replied.

Laurel winced comically. "I guess I should have considered that before running off to raise my sister from the dead without telling anyone."

"I think we're pretty much all on the same page now," Oliver chuckled and pulled Laurel in for a hug. "Thank you for telling me."

Laurel let herself fall into the hug. Even after all these years, Oliver hugs still held a certain comforting power that just couldn't be replicated. "Do you really think your friend can help?"

Oliver rested his chin on top of Laurel's head. "If he can't, he'll send us to someone who can. Sara's not a lost cause."

Everything would be alright. For the second time in less than twenty four hours, Laurel had reached out blindly for help, to find that someone was right there, waiting to catch her hand.
Episode 4

Chapter Summary

Time is running out to help Sara, but fortunately Oliver knows a certain Hellblazer. Things get hinky on the other side when the team is forced to confront their own worst nightmares before they can get to Sara and restore her soul.

Iris West is on the hunt for a great feature story, but Helena Bertinelli isn't playing ball.

Chapter Notes

If you are sensitive to suicidal thoughts, I highly recommend skipping the portion starting from Laurel in the nightclub until the next marked break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Palette rubbed a hand across his expansive chin. The man across the table was smoothing out schematics while explaining the basics of his plan. Well, their plan.

To be fair to himself, this was entirely Palette’s idea. There were far more criminal metahumans and experienced enforcers, crooks, killers and leaders than there were vigilantes, but you wouldn’t know it looking at the streets.

The vigilantes were organized and worked together as a unit. Criminals rarely did that. But Darhk’s leadership brought together HIVE. They were some of the best of the best, men and women too wild and rough for the League but far too talented to waste on petty crime.

Palette thought it was time to bring fresh blood to HIVE. Just outside of Central City sat Iron Heights prison - home to some of the most dangerous criminals and metas the Flash had managed to bag in his short tenure as a hero.

A whole army just waiting to bolster HIVE.

The small man rattling off ideas - points of entry, explosives, aircraft or convoy exit, etc - had been Darhk’s personal recommendation as his partner in this operation. The man was good, but not good enough to explain Darhk’s repeated bemused insistence to place him in the center of any interaction with the Star City vigilantes.

“My man will be the lead guard for the day. We need to bring in just two or three of our own guys as subs or trainees to get the plan rolling.”

“How do we know your man is good for it?” Palette’s chair groaned precariously under his weight as he leaned back, unwilling to admit that what he’d heard so far was a good plan.

The other man rolled his dark eyes. “I used to work for him back in the day. I had some Ghosts put
him under surveillance last month when you pitched this idea and he’s still dealing. If he doesn’t want to take the bribe, he will take the blackmail.”

Palette snorted, “You just can’t trust the good guys anymore, can ya, Diggle?”

“It’s just Dig,” Andy ground out. “As I was saying, we need maximum chaos. The Flash put each of the guys away, but not all at once. There will be interference. We can only expect maybe 60% to make it out of the prison, and even less to accept our offer.”

“Darhk doesn’t want us wasting anyone we don’t have to. He says it’s a show of good faith that will get more of them to come crawling back.”

“He’s right,” Andy began rolling the schematics back up into neatly packed tubes. “It’s a good recruiting tactic. And this is a win-win for us. Even if they don’t come to HIVE, the vigilantes will be left with the mop up trying to get all these sheep back in their pens.”

Palette watched his partner carefully for a moment. “So you’re a believer? You’re here for Darhk’s new world order?”

Andy shrugged, “When I was in the Army, I learned that it doesn’t really matter what I think. The boss has a vision. My job is to execute. I can fall in line and get promoted, or ask stupid questions until I end up on the chopping block.”

“In the Army, huh?” Palette stood, grinning as he spread out the photos and identities of their top choice prospects from Iron Heights. “Hooah.”

“What made you think to even ask me?” Oliver asked quietly, away from the chattering group.

Laurel watched the others for a moment. Felicity was crinkling her nose while laying out the supplies Oliver’s contact had requested, which Thea and John inspected with equally doubtful and perplexed expressions. “I know you didn’t spend all five years on that island, Ollie,” she crossed her arms and cast her gaze to the floor. “I have to be honest with you though, you were kind of the last person I asked.”

Oliver let out a sad huff of laughter. “Understandable. But I’m glad you did.” He gave her a small smile and rubbed her back for a moment before one of the computers let out a warning beep that someone was upstairs.

John left up the elevator and returned a few moments later trailed by a trench-coated blond man squinting incredulously at their bunker before his eyes landed on Oliver. He grinned and drew the taller man into back-slapping hug. “Oliver Queen, you look a spot better than the last time we met.” His Scouse accent could only be identified by the larger group as a brogue English.

“I wish it was better circumstances,” Oliver turned back to the group. “Everyone, this is John Constantine. Constantine, this is…everyone.”

Their guest let his eyes wander from person to person with an amused lilt before playfully smacking Oliver in the chest. “Mate, if you’d told me that everyone you know is this attractive, you wouldn’t have had to pull a favor just to get me to come visit,” he punctuated the sentence with a wink directed at Thea, who, as opposed to her blushing female counterparts, looked ready to
“…Anyway,” Oliver frowned at his sister, “you think you can help us?”

Constantine looked over the supplies, picking up one or two things for closer inspection before setting them back down with a subtle nod. “I won’t know for sure until I see her, but from what you told me it sounds like her soul didn’t make it into this realm.”

“I’m sorry, realm?” John crossed his arms. Of everyone in the group, he remained the least impressed with Oliver’s suggestion to call in a “magic specialist.”

“Yes, realm,” Constantine shoved a hand in one of his coat pockets. “The Lazarus Pit is some nasty magic that keeps souls in flux. To raise someone who is actually dead, you have to draw their soul back from wherever it was, drag it through the mess of souls trapped in the Pit and hope it gets shoved back in the body in one piece. The girl is just a reanimated corpse and the Pit’s magic alone can’t sustain life. She needs her soul.”

He pulled out a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, lit and took a short drag. Felicity grimaced, “Uh, this isn’t really a smoking…okay, I guess we’re not exactly up to code, anyway, so… whatever.”

Constantine arched a brow at her, snickered, and took an extra-long drag before extinguishing the offending cigarette.

“How will you know how to find her?” Laurel ventured, stepping forward from her place behind John and Thea.

“You gonna read her palm? Consult a crystal ball?” John cocked his head.

Constantine chuckled under his breath and pushed his coat back to rest his hands on his slim hips. “If I was running a game, I’d have your wallets and be gone already.” He turned to Laurel. “I need to use her body as an anchor point. The soul’s natural state is with the body, so we use the spell to guide us to where the soul is trapped. You must be Laurel, the sister,” he held out a hand.

Laurel took it graciously and was surprised by how calloused it felt. For a man who dealt in the “dark arts,” he was no stranger to actual dirty work, right here on this realm. “Nice to meet you.” She shot a look of caution to Diggle, who kept his hands firmly tucked under his arms. He had only agreed to this because the majority ruled against him.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” his eyes twinkled and Laurel felt the blush already flooding back to her cheeks. This guy was worse than Jason.

“How soon can we get started?” Laurel tramped down any passing interest about any topic other than rescuing her sister. There had been quite enough of that already.

A look of surprise, and maybe a little disappointment, flashed across Constantine’s face before he resumed his cocky half-smile. “Right to business then? I’m ready when you people are. Got everything I need, except the girl. Though you might want some more muscle around when it gets started.”

“Muscle?” John frowned, possibly more than he was frowning already.

Constantine shrugged and ticked his head back and forth, shaking the right answer out. “It’s complicated, but if anything happens to us while we’re in the other realm, God only knows what might get out. Wouldn’t want any beasties running free around the city, eh?”
“Beasties?” Felicity croaked and looked to Oliver in a panic. “I think this time I would have preferred it if your contact from Lian Yu was another beautiful woman.”

Oliver’s head whipped sharply to the smaller woman at his side. He stopped and started to speak a few times before quietly murmuring, “Felicity, now is really not the time.”

Her brow creased in confusion and, to the relief of everyone in the room, she remained silent.

Constantine shoved his hands back in his coat pockets and carefully looked to each person in the room with raised eyebrows before landing back on Oliver with a bemused head shake. “Anyway. It’s best that we go now to wherever you’re keeping her and get started.”

“All right, load up,” John had already moved on to gathering the spell supplies into a duffle bag. “Laurel, you want to call Jason on the way?”

Laurel caught Oliver’s protest before it left his mouth and stopped him, “Yes, if it’s that dangerous, then we need him.”

Oliver nodded, resigned. He clapped his hands together in an act of forced enthusiasm. “Let’s get going.” he began to move toward the exit before stopping short and turning back to Constantine. “Wait, what did you mean when you said, ‘us’?”

Iris chewed her bottom lip while studying the ginormous camera in her hands. Okay, okay, Linda had explained this. In detail. Bright fluorescent lights meant…she needed to warm up her white balance, or cool it down? To hell with it, she thought as she clicked the setting to auto. The pictures were happening now. The white balance could be adjusted in post processing.

She put the camera up to her eye and leaned forward, framing her subject, but a gentle tap on her shoulder stopped her. “Miss West,” the guard gave her a pointed look and gestured to the painted line at their feet she had accidentally stepped over while trying to get a good shot. “Please, I can’t have you straying into the prisoner’s areas.”

Iris wanted to correct him. She wanted to snark at him about being raised by a cop, about how he had no idea exactly how she spent her free time, about how this was her job, and maybe even about how this was the minimum security wing for blue collar offenders, not exactly the most dangerous people she’d ever encountered.

Instead, she gave him a tight smile and returned to what she was doing. Even though she was limited to a narrow square set safely away from all the prisoners, the set up for the photos was so good. Her subject stood out like a glowing light in a sea of hard, masculine, downtrodden faces, all looking at her with a mixture of awe and respect.

This was not at all what Iris had pictured when she first pitched the idea to her editor. She would do a series profiling three different Iron Heights prisoners - their backgrounds, their crimes, and most importantly, their redemptions. Her editor thought it was a good idea to get her working on something other than a Flash story and force her to stretch her legs in editorial and photography work.

The warden’s suggestion to follow Helena Bertinelli had come as a surprise. Iris knew of the Bertinelli case - multiple murder charges, organized crime and a stint working for the Arrow in
what was then Starling. She had turned herself in for reasons that were never publicly disclosed and began a rocky prison sentence, first mixed in with the most dangerous convicts in the D-block and finally earning approval to move to a less secure women’s wing and even start an in-house job.

Today was Thursday, and Thursdays were her weekly resume writing and editing classes. It had taken a lot of convincing to get Helena to agree to be photographed doing this. Iris had pounded right past Helena’s initial surly response to being interviewed at all, and she wasn’t going to let the woman’s reticence over being photographed slow her down.

Through the lens, Iris understood why Helena was so opposed to this. She looked soft. The sunlight filtering through the windows glinted off her snowy white skin, giving her a glow amplified by her gentle smiles and words of encouragement for students who had likely never been encouraged academically in their lives.

“No one needs to see me like this,” she had practically growled from across the table before agreeing to the interview. At the time, Iris assumed the other woman meant no one needed to see her in prison, but now she realized.

Iris unconsciously smiled as she clicked the shutter, snapping dozens of pictures as she went. Her tape recorder was set up and rolling on a nearby table and was hopefully catching the exchange between teacher and student.

“Bertinelli, the only straight job I’ve ever had has been in the C-block laundry room. How am I supposed to fill out a whole resume?” the young man looking up to Helena couldn’t have been older than twenty.

Helena leaned down and looked over the paper on his desk, her eyes bright and the upward tug of friendliness never leaving her face. “That’s why we’re working on spelling, grammar and how to format today. Having a resume that looks pretty is just as important as having a resume that says the right stuff. Next week we’re going to do a review and go over how to explain gaps in employment and better ways to tell possible employers about your skills. But for today, I just want you focusing on this lesson and trying to match the format I drew up on the board, okay?”

Iris stopped pressing the shutter when she realized Helena’s eyes had fallen directly at the camera. Her lips drew tight and her gaze hooded, abruptly reeling back her dewy halo as she stood straight and whirled back to the front of the classroom.

“Alright, we’re out of time,” Helena spoke brusquely, shuffling pens and scrap paper into the dented desk at the front of the room. “The white board will be in the library for reference until next Thursday.”

The guard was two steps ahead of Iris, grabbing her recorder and hustling her into the secure room at the back of the class where guards or instructors could watch the prisoners-cum-students. Iris watched the prisoners file out in practiced order from behind the protective glass. Helena was the last to go, pushing the rolling white board with her. They would meet again in a few minutes at the outdoor visitation tables. Arranging uninhibited visits with a violent felon had been no easy feat, but her persistent wheedling at the paperwork - and probably a few favors called in by her father at the Central City Police Department - had secured the facetime Iris felt was necessary to form a genuine connection with her subject.

Outside, Iris pulled her jacket tighter against the chilly air before settling into the designated table, preparing her recorder and her notepad. She flipped through her notes from previous sessions, though it was unnecessary. She knew the interviews better than she knew her own schedule. Iris shook her head, chuckling to herself. Only a year earlier she was taking a journalism class as an
elective she thought was a joke, now it felt as natural as breathing. Iris was now officially a journalism major, getting additional credits for her part time job at the paper, and she couldn’t fathom doing anything else.

Helena slid into the bench seat across from Iris, tapping out a cigarette from a pack in her pocket and fiddling with it before smiling wryly up at the amber eyed woman across from her. “You know they’re phasing out smoking here?”

“All the U.S. correctional facilities,” Iris nodded solemnly. “Turns out, smoking is bad for you.”

The taller woman lit and puffed her cigarette, exhaling a slow plume of smoke. “You know what’s really bad for you,” Helena gestured with the Marlboro, “dying in a prison riot because they took away all our smokes. This is the only place we’re allowed to smoke now, and they’re limiting sales at the commissary. Tobacco is about to become big business in Iron Heights.”

“Good,” Iris flipped her notebook to a clean page, “I’m sure your students could use some resume buffers like inventory management and direct distribution.”

Helena tapped the ash off the end of the cigarette, “Don’t laugh, for a lot of these people, those little resume bullets will make the difference between getting a straight job and ending up back on the street again.”

“Is that why you’re teaching on top of your normal library job? You want to help people?” Iris made notes without looking down at her pad.

Helena squinted across the table, then took another quick puff. “Maybe I just like telling people what to do.”

Iris dropped her pen to the table and sighed. “Helena, come on. I thought we were past this.”

Sucking on her cigarette, Helena slid her gaze around the prison yard, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed, before she returned Iris’s implacable stare across the table. “How much more can you possibly need from me? I know you didn’t do this many interviews with the other two.”

Iris crossed her arms and cocked her head, unwilling to be intimidated by the decidedly scary woman across from her. “The other two didn’t make each interview like pulling teeth. You still haven’t told me why you turned yourself in, or why you went from being so out-of-control they kept you in solitary to teaching classes in the minimum security wing. Kind of a big change.”

Even buried under the drab khaki prison scrubs, Iris could see Helena’s muscles tightening and flexing. Her face was still a cool mask of detached disdain, but her fingers had crushed the cigarette and her shoulders looked poised to take a swipe. Helena’s eyes were more focused on the other prisoners and guards, something Iris had never really noticed her doing before. For the first time since their initial meeting, Iris felt her pulse quickening. She didn’t know what Helena wanted, but she could sense that she was in the way.

Finally, Helena settled on a solution. “Okay, I’ll give you one answer to one of those questions, on one condition,” she pressed the destroyed butt into the nearby can. “This is the last interview. You don’t come back anymore.”

Iris felt her mouth drop, then forced it closed, shaking her head and letting her thick, dark hair tumble across her shoulders. “No, no way. I’ll just keep coming back. You can’t shut me out.”

Helena snorted, “Like hell I can’t. This is a prison, West. That’s the whole point. If I don’t want to see you, you won’t get past the lobby.”
Iris sat back, wincing and trying to understand why it hurt so much that this woman - a convicted killer - was slamming the door in her face. She gritted her teeth and leaned forward again, “Why are you doing this, Helena?”

Something like regret flashed through Helena’s eyes before she regained her mask of smiling disdain. “Aw, c’mon, Iris, we both know that’s not what you want to ask me. Don’t waste your last question.”

Nodding, Iris decided to let it happen. If that’s how she wanted to play it, then that’s what Iris would do. She’d be back in a few days, and then a few weeks, and keep coming back if that’s what it took. But for now: “Why did you decide to clean up and start teaching in here?”

Sitting up straighter, Helena let the vicious twist on her lips fall away as she thought. “You know about my dad, right?” Iris nodded, taking notes again without breaking eye contact. “He was a monster. He needed to die. But one day I woke up and realized that I wasn’t any better. I wasn’t trying to kill him for the greater good. I was just angry at him. I’m a monster, Iris. I deserve to be here. But most of them,” she shifted to look around the yard, trailing off. It was time for the male prisoners’ afternoon exercise. In an hour, they would leave and be replaced by a complement of female prisoners. “They’re not bad people. Wrong place, wrong time. Maybe they felt like they didn’t have any choices, or they just made bad choices. They don’t deserve this.”

She didn’t wait for a response. Iris had stopped writing and watched, bewildered, as Helena abruptly slid out of the bench seat. “Don’t come back next week, Iris.” There was no teasing or condescension in her expression. Helena took a deep breath, nodded, turned and strode away before Iris could protest.

Sara’s body looked like a corpse. Again. Getting her out of her cage and onto the platform where Constantine had drawn a bizarre series of symbols had been heartbreakingly easy for Nyssa and Laurel. She was so far gone, they didn’t even need to sedate her anymore. She had snarled quietly in Thea’s general direction before passing out.

They had run out of time.

“Okay,” Constantine rubbed his hands together, “I need the people who know her the best. People her soul will recognize on the other side. Miss Lance,” he held out a hand, which Laurel took, moving to his side. “Who else?” he opened the question to the room.

Jason and John remained stoic and detached at the edge of the platform, but close enough to be helpful in the event that Constantine’s alleged “beasties” showed up. Thea had taken a seat clear on the other side of the bunker, still thoroughly convinced that her very presence was hurting Sara. Felicity remained glued to Oliver’s side, Nyssa straight and tall next to Laurel.

At the invitation for others, Nyssa and Oliver shot each other a look, each with eyes narrowed in a silent standoff before Nyssa fired first. “Husband, Sara is my beloved. I rescued her, trained her and shared my life with her. I should be the one to accompany Laurel.”

Oliver jutted out his chin, flicked his eyes between Laurel and Nyssa before responding, “And I have known Sara her entire life. I loved her, too -“

“Not enough, apparently,” Nyssa scoffed.
“Stop it, both of you!” Laurel surprised everyone with a shout. “We do not have time for a pissing contest about who loved her more.”

Constantine nodded, “The bird’s right. Sara’s fading. You can both go. Everyone, take each other’s hands. You,” he nodded to Felicity, “please step back. We need an uninterrupted circle.”

“I, oh,” Felicity grimaced and stepped off the platform, taking a place next to John and muttering about being Sara’s friend, too.

Constantine stood over Sara’s head, and held out his hands. Laurel stood next to him, Nyssa at her side, and Oliver on the other side of Sara’s body. They remained blessedly silent about joining hands.

“Before we get started,” Constantine gave everyone a solemn stare, “we won’t be in the physical world, but that doesn’t mean we can’t die. Just like Sara’s dying here, if they get our souls, we’ll die in the physical realm.”

“Like *The Matrix*,” Thea chimed in helpfully from her safe zone away from the group.

The blonde magician chuckled, “Exactly. The rules that apply here don’t apply there, but they can still kill us all. So we have to stay together, don’t let them separate us, get Sara and get out, got it?”

Once he got three nods, Constantine began speaking in a language none of them recognized. Even Nyssa squinted and appeared baffled by the tongue. The trio was so focused on Constantine, they didn’t notice their surroundings shifting, melting and reforming into something else entirely.

Laurel blinked and looked down to see her hands in her fingerless gloves, met by her Black Canary jacket. She was in her costume. She looked up to see that Oliver and Nyssa were in their respective costumes, without the masks, in a torch-lit chamber surrounded by arched passageways on all sides. Only Constantine remained unchanged and unfazed.

“Ah, a maze, is it?” Constantine rubbed his hands together, turning in a circle and getting a better gauge on their surroundings.

“What is this?” Oliver asked, turning back and forth, cautiously touching different parts of his uniform as if pieces of himself might start floating away. “Why are we in costume?”

Constantine smirked, “It’s your soul, you chose the image.” He gestured between the trio with the cigarette he was preparing to light. “You three were a good choice, all have something in common, eh?”

Nyssa unsheathed her sword, stepping first toward one passage, then another, then another. “Enough nonsense, Magician, where is she?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t have needed to bring you people, would I?” Constantine dragged on the cigarette. “Look, it’s a maze. They want us confused and disoriented. The longer we’re away from our bodies, the easier it will be to trap us here.”

Laurel’s voice rose with annoyance, “You did not mention that earlier.”

The slender blonde man gave her a sideways smile. “I don’t mention a lot of things. Now that we’re here, I’m going to venture a guess that we’re dealing with astral parasites. These things live off of our energy. They will do everything they can to make us stay. So don’t stay,” he gave each of them a hard look.
A scream cut through the room, echoing off the walls, followed by Sara’s voice, clear as a bell, “HELP ME.”

The three sprang forward, but all stopped short, suddenly unable to remember where the voice had come from.

“Stop, stop,” Constantine’s voice rose, eyes widening as he watched his heroes immediately forgetting each other and ready to dart down separate passages. “It is a trick, do not follow it!”

“No,” Laurel’s voice pitched, “it was her. I know my sister.” She darted down a passage and around a corner. Nyssa, Oliver and John followed, but as they rounded the corner, they were met with only inky blackness and silence. She was gone.

“This is why,” Constantine growled, “we stay together or we die. Follow me,” he shouldered past the two taller warriors and used his lighter to guide their way.

They didn’t speak for several minutes, meandering through the total blackness, lit only by the tiny flame of Constantine’s lighter. They drew up short, Oliver nearly colliding with Nyssa’s back, as the sound of small feet pattered through the darkness, followed by soft, childlike laughter.

“Oh, that is never good,” Constantine spoke quietly, pressing the flame further out, as if it might show them anything the beings on this plane didn’t want them to see. The steps turned into long running steps and a short breath of air blew out the lighter. As quick as John could relight, he turned and realized he was already alone in the darkness. Nyssa and Oliver had vanished.

“Bollocks,” John cursed, turning slowly, hoping that the light would let him catch a glimpse of the creature sharing the blackness with him. “C’mon, beastie, out with you.”

The giggling returned and got closer, before a pair of bright, wide brown eyes came into view in his small light. John felt his heart sink and anger coiling in his stomach. The light bounced off of her skin, giving her an earthy, amber glow. Her hair was just as curly as he remembered. But it wasn’t her.

“You’re not Astra,” John leaned down and forward to meet her small stature, waving the light by her face. As it passed her eyes, they glinted and glowed silver against the flame. “You just look like her.”

The parasite giggled again, and tugged a well-worn stuffed bear close to her chest. “I am Astra, John. You’re so silly.”

“Oh yeah?” John continued to wave the light, each silvery reflection betraying the creature’s true nature. “Astra is in hell. I’ve been to hell, and this is not it.”

The creature leaned forward and cupped a hand around her mouth conspiratorially, whispering, “Yes we are! You’re in hell, John. With me, where you belong.” She held out a tiny hand, “Stay with me, John. You owe me a tea party.”

Constantine stood up and tucked his hands into his pockets, letting out a sigh. “Sorry, love, but you aren’t Astra and this isn’t hell.” He pulled a small, silver disc out of his pocket. The creature’s eyes locked on it, and her lips began to curl. “Oh good, you recognize this, do ya? You’re going to take me to my companions, and let us walk out of here, or I’m gonna say the magic words and you won’t be nothing but another piece of astral energy for your pals to eat up.”

Growling like a feral animal, the creature seethed, but the darkness slowly lifted and was replaced by a torch-lit passage. He followed the child-form, considering the possibility of telling it to stop
using Astra’s image, but decided that its true form was probably much less pleasant.

It sure is handy to always carry magical icons in your pocket, especially on the astral plane.

Oliver’s vision swam. His head pounded like he was waking up in the midst of his worst hangover since undergrad. He groaned and rolled to his hands and knees, desperate to make the earth stop moving and tilting beneath him. His eyes cleared, his vision slowly focused and but the pain in his head remained as he took in his surroundings.

A warehouse. He had his bow and a quiver of arrows. What was he doing at a warehouse? Where had he been before this? Had he been drugged? Amnesia?

Oliver stood, taking his bow in his hand and slinging the quiver of arrows. The sling on the quiver caught awkwardly on his uniform and he found himself fumbling and dropping arrows, nearly dropping his bow in the process, and cursing his clumsiness. He must have been drugged.

Low, familiar laughter echoed through the warehouse, freezing Oliver in place.

“Look at you, kid. A regular Robin Hood,” the man barked a laugh as footsteps flooded around the warehouse. Men in orange and black masks surrounded the building, drawing swords but not moving forward to attack.

Slade Wilson stepped from the shadows leaning casually on the railing of the high catwalk overhead. “You seem a bit flustered, Oliver. Surprised to see me?”

Oliver drew an arrow and nocked it, slowly, having to mentally walk himself through each step of the motion. “How did you escape, Slade?”

Slade smiled down, “You knew this day was coming. You’ve always known.”

At some silent cue, one of Slade’s fighters rushed forward, sword raised. Oliver released the arrow he had nocked, but it missed its target and clattered uselessly to the floor. Oliver was still blinking dumbly at the missed shot when the fighter brought a knee into Oliver’s gut, and then to his chin as Oliver doubled over.

Everything felt wrong. He was sluggish. His muscles weren’t reacting to the signals from his brain. He felt like he could barely keep his arms up in the defense. Through blind luck, he caught a few sword swings with his bow and managed to shove the other man back far enough to catch his breath.

Slade was openly laughing, sending derisive slurs Oliver’s way. “I know I taught you better than this,” he called down. “You’ve gone soft. Perhaps a little too much soufflé with the missus.”

Now there were two fighters squaring off with Oliver. He put himself into the best defensive fighting posture he could muster at that moment, desperate to shut out Slade’s voice. “You think you still have the right to wear a mask and call yourself a hero?” His thick Australian accent was muffled now by the blows raining down. “All you’ve ever done is walk away from that city, and your family, and your mission. This is who you really are.”

A third body joined in behind Oliver, repeatedly punching him in the back, bruising his kidneys,
knocking him down from the back of his knees.

“You are weakness incarnate.” Slade leapt from the catwalk, sailing through the air before landing with a boom and standing straight up, unhurt by the two-story drop. He drew a single blade from behind his back. The first two fighters stood aside to let their leader approach. He tilted Oliver’s chin up with the blade, forcing the smaller man to rise and look him in the eye. “Weakness has no place in our world. You know what I have to do.”

Oliver struggled against the man holding his arms behind his back, but it was useless. He was weak. The muscles he’d built from his years on the island and training were gone. The grappling and ground fighting skills he’d honed had evaporated from his mind. He was as useless now as he had been when he first landed on Lian Yu.

He closed his eyes, and waited for the killing blow, hoping that someday he’d be forgiven for his failures.

“Oliver!” a British voice broke through the warehouse. Slade’s sword faltered and pulled back. “Oliver you have to fight!”

Oliver ventured a look in the direction of the voice to see John Constantine and a small child standing just outside the edge of the teeming mass of Deathstroke’s warriors. “I…I can’t,” he shook his head. Slade laughed and shrugged, raising his sword again.

“Bugger that, yes you can!” Constantine shoved his way past the fighters, trailed by a child who was snapping and snarling in all directions. That caught Oliver’s attention. Why weren’t they stopping him? Why was he here? “This is all in your mind, Oliver. You have to decide to fight them. Now stand up and fight or you, me, Nyssa, Laurel and Sara are all going to die here.”

“All you do is talk,” Oliver’s face lit up with recognition. That’s right. He was in some other spirit realm, looking for Sara’s soul with Nyssa and Laurel and Constantine. None of this was real, except that it was. It was real enough to kill him. The masked fighters began to disappear like smoke blowing in the wind as Oliver straightened himself, jerked free and threw his captor over his hip before turning to face Slade, who no longer looked so amused.

All of the other masked fighters had faded away and the warehouse had melted and reformed into another cavernous, empty room, filled only with Slade, Oliver, John and the small feral girl.

Slade began backing away nervously, shaking his head and raising his hands, struggling to maintain a grip on the situation even while Oliver meticulously picked up one of the spilled arrows and nocked it. “Kid, you listen to me, I taught you everything you know -“

“You are not him,” Oliver barked, drawing the bow back and firing seamlessly into the other man’s chest. Slade fell to his knees, his eyes glinting against the torch light. Oliver seamlessly fired another, then another arrow into the thing’s chest, moving closer with each launched shot. Once he was standing directly over the parasite, he swung his bow across its face like a bat.

With a grunt, it tumbled to the ground. A thin puff of smoke drifted out of his mouth before the body vanished.

“Friend of yours?” Constantine cocked his head.

Oliver lowered his bow. “Where are the others?”

Constantine pulled the small disc out of his pocket and flashed it at the Astra-creature. “C’mon you git, take us to the girls.” John flashed a smile at his friend. “Always helps to travel with insurance.”
When Constantine’s lighter blew out, Nyssa found herself engulfed in darkness and solitude. In seconds, she knew she was alone. She took a few cautious steps in every direction, her hands out, reaching and grasping for the wall, or a table or column or anything to give her a sense of the space.

She knew she was truly alone when she bent down to find the floor, and found herself standing upright again without ever having touched anything. A nagging pain began to throb in her head. It was enough to drive her to distraction.

That’s when she started to run, heart racing, her breath puffing out of her nostrils with such noise she would have herself whipped if she was her own student. Nyssa pulled out her sword again, turning this way and that, waiting for the attack that never came until her arms shook and the extra effort made her head hurt even worse.

And then she ran again until it felt like her legs couldn’t carry her anymore. There’s no way out of here, the thought whispered past her ear. No, no, there is no such thing as a place from which there is no escape. There is a way out of here and someone barring that way, and she would find them and fight them and win. And then she would find Laurel and Sara and get out of this wretched place for good.

Met with only darkness and beginning to wonder if she’d been there for hours, or maybe days, her breath began to come out as a whine, and then a scream. Surely, someone would hear her.

But only silence answered back.

She screamed and screamed and screamed until her throat grew hoarse. She began slashing at the air with her sword, crying out with each strike that landed on nothing. Nyssa stumbled and fell, nearly catching herself on her own sword. How foolish, she thought, to fall on my own sword battling shadows in the midst of nothing.

On her knees in the darkness, there was only one thing she could still do.

She screamed.

Jason sighed and crossed his arms. Watching four people meditate over a basically dead body was simply not the excitement-fest one would hope.

Every now and then one of them would murmur or moan or sigh, eyes twitching and moving beneath their lids, but otherwise there was no movement. Thea had taken this as an opportunity for herself to meditate in a quiet corner of the bunker, something she was doing more and more. Felicity had almost immediately retired to her chair and computer bank, clacking away at some problem that eluded Jason.
Something about this rubbed Jason the wrong way. It rubbed like an ill-fitting piece of gear slowly wearing a raw spot into his flesh. Laurel had passionately defended his right to be here, because of what he knew about resurrection and Lazarus Pits. Would she still want him around once Sara was speaking human sentences again? He had been no help with Thea. And after that rooftop make out session, he knew he’d overstepped his bounds. Laurel had made it clear that she needed him for what he could provide, not anything more.

His spiraling thoughts were pulling up a phantom tension and pain in his shoulders, which would inevitably lead to a migraine if he didn’t back off.

Diggle caught Jason’s attention with a grunt and a nod toward one of the hanging punching bags in the training area.

“Mind holding the bag for me?” Diggle spoke in a low tone, as if a sudden loud noise might disturb the séance or whatever going on. “This is giving me the creeps.”

Diggle slid a pair of beaten gloves on his hands as Jason took his place on the other side of the bag. “Believe it or not,” Jason said, smiling, “this doesn’t even begin to touch the weirdest crap I’ve seen.”

“Well you have been dead,” Diggle replied, returning a tiny smile as he threw his first series of punch combinations.

“One of the places they sent me train,” Jason said, adjusting his grip so that the larger man’s hits didn’t send him tumbling to the floor, “I was training with this girl, woman, who was actually made of shadows. Shadows, man. She could only be seen and tangible when she wanted to be.”

Diggle paused long enough to arch an incredulous brow at Jason. “Shadows? Kinda makes our HIVE problem look a little trivial.”

Jason’s face darkened and he leaned forward, pressing his shoulder into the bag, letting his face getting dangerously close to Diggle’s strikes. “I don’t know about that. HIVE seems to have a lot going for them. Their Ghosts are way stronger than they should be, they have that one guy who definitely has magic, and they probably have the entire city council on payroll,” Jason paused and shifted to move his face to the other side of the bag. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Diggle landed one last punch with more force than necessary. “Dammit Jason, you just had to push on this.” He tore off his gloves, then stopped himself before he could draw the attention of Thea or Felicity.

“Push?” Jason scoffed and stepped away from the bag. “I didn’t push anything. I was on patrol and you got sloppy. Are you going to tell them, or should I?”

John whipped back to Jason, snapping and pointing at the other man. “Tell them what? That HIVE has Laurel’s dad and the entire city council by the throat? That if they so much as suspect that Lance is playing both sides, they’re not coming after Quentin. They’re coming for Laurel.” Diggle dropped his hand and shook his head, exhaling a deep breath. “They has my brother. I don’t know why or how, but they have Andy. Lance says they have plans on all the city council members - how to take out their families. If we lose this…the less people who know, the better.”

Jason straightened and stepped closer to Diggle, keeping his voice low. “Laurel has a right to know that she and her father are in trouble. And I don’t see how playing spy-versus-spy with Lance as the middleman is actually helping you get any closer to you getting your brother back.”
“She also has a right to know that her new favorite person is still going behind her back and leaving busted up criminals for the cops to pick up,” Diggle shot right back.

Jason sucked in a breath, but then pressed on with a blank expression. “That fact that I still patrol on my own is not a secret.”

Diggle almost snorted. “Heh, okay, sure, Todd. You know, I have been catching young men lying to my face for most of my adult life. You are good at a lot of things, but lying isn’t one of them.”

A boyish teasing lit into Jason’s eyes. “There are some very experienced interrogators out there who would disagree with you, Diggle.”

“They didn’t grow up with Andy for a baby brother,” John softened his expression. “I know you think, and you might even be right, that you are smartest guy in the room when it comes to this stuff, but this isn’t my first rodeo. If we don’t play this quietly, HIVE is going to hurt a lot of people.” Diggle turned his gaze to the platform where the four were still deep in their trance. He turned back when Jason didn’t respond, only to see the other man staring at Laurel, jaw tense and arms crossed.

"Lance hasn't dropped any names," Diggle continued softly. "But I stuck around for one of their meetings. He called the blonde guy Damien, and the blonde guy mentioned his mother picking up kids," John's face wrinkled in confusion

Jason blinked out of his own trance and went white. "He said 'Mother'? Not 'Mom' or 'Ma' or 'Mommy'?"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure he said 'Mother',' Diggle said cautiously.


Diggle held out his hands to stop the tantrum and thumbed in the general direction of the others. "Cool it, man, they will hear you. Do you know Damien's mother?"

Breathing hard through his mouth, Jason chuckled bitterly. "No, she is not Damien's mother. 'Mother' is what she calls herself. She's the one behind the human trafficking here, and I'm betting this Damien is Damien Darhk."

John's mouth formed a pressed line, "This is a lot of information. It's all bad news?"

"Very bad."

"Where do we start?" Diggle crossed his arms and took a deep breath, ready to keep moving forward.

“Your brother died,” Jason started, pacing, “in a pretty elaborate set up, right?”

“Deadshot took credit for the hit on him,” Diggled offered.

“That guy doesn’t miss,” Jason continued. “But then he shows up here, alive, as a Ghost working for HIVE. The last time I tangled with Mother, she wasn’t just into human trafficking. Her specialty was grooming and conditioning people.”

“Conditioning? Like…?”

“Mind control,” Jason finished the thought. “She specialized in orphaning children in horrific
circumstances and then raising them to be whatever she wanted them to be. Politicians, artists, math prodigies, -“

“Ultra-loyal and lethal black ops soldiers?” Diggle frowned.

“Exactly. And with all kinds of subconscious programming to go ninja assassin at her word. But she wiped the entire program when we got involved. And she only worked with kids, probably easier to train or something.”

Diggle was pacing now. “Andy would have been an adult when he got mixed up in this.”

Jason crinkled his nose. “This doesn’t smell right. The busts we’ve done so far have been kids, and not kids for any kind of conditioning program. It’s been your standard victims of human trafficking. It looks like she’s been doing things the old fashioned way since we tore apart her old infrastructure, but if she has access to Hive and if Damien Darhk is everything I heard about at the League, she definitely has the resources and qualifications to be doing more than just moving people.”

“I don’t know,” Diggle shook his head. “Jason, my brother was not a great guy, but he wasn’t a bad guy either.”

“You don’t think he’d be working for Hive unless he got brainwashed?”

“Oh, he’d have no problem getting mixed up in Hive,” Diggle huffed out a humorless laugh, “but the guy I’ve been fighting is one of, I guess, Darhk’s lieutenants. I just cannot believe that Andy would align himself to someone like that.”

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” Jason conceded. “I’ll hit the Mother side of this harder. We’ll shake something loose. Besides, I owe this bitch a solid beating.”

Diggle reached out and gave Jason’s shoulder a friendly squeeze. “I’ll keep the patrolling thing to myself. I get it. But please, try to not break so many kneecaps.”

“Hey, I’m not putting them in traction anymore,” Jason waggled a finger in the air. “Progress.”

Oliver and Constantine were running, keeping pace with the thing that looked like a small girl. They rounded a corner and came to a screeching halt when they entered yet another empty room, filled only with Nyssa sitting cross-legged in the center. Her eyes were shut and her face had such a look of serenity, it nearly took Oliver’s breath away.

At the sound of their thudding footsteps, Nyssa slowly opened her eyes as if awakening from a deep sleep.

“Hello, Husband,” she blinked up at him from her seated position, still serene.

Oliver sucked his teeth before responding, “Nyssa, please stop calling me that. No court in the world recognizes our marriage.”

“That’s not true,” she rose smoothly, sliding her sword back into its sheath. “Decrees by the League of Assassins are recognized by the Order of St. Dumas, the Crescent Order, and the Court
of Owls.”

Nyssa stared at him as he processed her words, a smile tugging at her lips. When he got it, he visibly deflated and Constantine chuckled.

“Well, I’m glad some of us are having a good time,” John said. He tried to suppress his amusement when Oliver shot him a menacing glare, but it only made him laugh harder.

“How,” Oliver spoke, gesturing angrily around the room, “how is it you just got to meditate and I got an onslaught from Deathstroke?”

Nyssa sighed and cocked her head at him. “When I was faced with an abyss of nothingness, I remembered John’s words and chose to rely on my training. You should have taken your time as Al Sah-Him more seriously.”

Oliver’s jaw fell open and he was left speechless. John took the lead in the center of the room, corralling the Astra-beast ahead of him.

“C’mon you,” he said as he gave the small girl a shove. “Take us to Laurel.”

The creature bristled and growled, and dropped her head, shifting her weight from side to side. She growled and shook her head more furiously, finally speaking in a voice that never belonged to the girl she was impersonating, “No. There are too many of them around her. She’s already lost to you.”

Constantine flicked her on the nose with the talisman, eliciting a hiss but more refusals to budge. “You already know I don’t believe in no-win scenarios, or a damn thing you have to say, so why don’t you do us all a favor and get on with it, eh?”

Astra rumbled and sprang forward at Constantine, but was caught short before her neck fully collided with Nyssa’s sword. Nyssa’s hands betrayed only a faint tremor. “What does she mean, Laurel is lost to us?” Nyssa’s eyes were on the small, growling and mewling thing held at bay at the end of her sword, but Constantine knew the question was directed at him.

“These things prey on spirit energy, I told you that. Not everyone has the same flavor. They liked Sara enough to keep her here, apparently they feel the same about her sister.”

“What does that mean?” Oliver pushed forward, separating Astra and Nyssa.

Constantine pulled out his lighter, but instead of following it with a cigarette, he spoke a few quick phrases in Latin before leaving it floating in the air, spinning rapidly. “It means they went easy on us because they’ve all been too busy with Laurel. It means we’re going to have just as hard a time getting her out now as her sister.”

When the lighter stopped spinning, John snatched it out of the air and returned it to his pocket. He turned back to Astra, his face grim. Her eyes flicked to the silver disc dancing between his fingers.

Astra’s eyes narrowed before she went screaming at him. He shouted a single phrase in a language Nyssa wanted to identify as Aramaic, but couldn’t be sure, clapped the disc between his hands, and the thing-that-looked-like-Astra dissolved into a wisp of smoke.

Oliver recoiled. Nyssa frowned and sheathed her sword.

“I thought we needed her to find Laurel and Sara,” Oliver gestured with his bow to where the parasite had been just seconds before.
Constantine shrugged. “I got the general direction. Besides, once that thing got with its friends, it would have turned on us, and that little talisman only had enough juice for one.”

“When we get to Laurel, how are we supposed to fight them?”

“It’s the spirit realm, mate,” Constantine spoke as he marched forward down a winding, dim passage. “Fight them the way you have been: with your mind. Just takes discipline. It’s like Thea said. It’s not that different from *The Matrix*, when you think about it,” he laughed a little to himself.

“Then I should lead,” Nyssa shouldered her way to the front. Oliver clenched his teeth so hard he thought he felt a molar crack. Constantine only raised his eyebrows in surprise. She stopped and turned back to her partners. “I have more mental discipline than both of you combined. Constantine has us in the right direction, now I can focus on finding Laurel.”

Oliver looked to John for help, but he only nodded and said, “She’s got a fair point. On you go then!”

Nyssa nodded curtly before marching off again, leaving Oliver trailing behind, grumbling about the ridiculousness of the entire situation.

The group picked up the pace when the thumping bass of club music started to drift through the hall. It grew louder as they ran. Oliver’s heart ticked up. He had his suspicions about the hellscape Laurel might cook up for herself, and the music was only confirming the worst of them.

He lengthened his stride, passing Nyssa, but had to skid to a stop before he collided with a glass-like barrier. The other two weren’t far behind him. Nyssa put her gloved hand on the clear wall, squinting into the darkened room but recoiling against the glaring strobe lights.

On the other side of the wall, a sea of bodies waved and grinded against each other in time with the music and flashing lights. Oliver pressed closer as Nyssa and John spread out, looking for a way around the barrier.

A broad shouldered man near the barrier stopped, realizing he was being watched. Oliver sucked in his breath as the other man turned, smirked at him, and then pushed deeper into the crowd.

Oliver watched in horror as his younger, long-haired self disappeared into the crush of people with a shot glass in each hand.

Laurel’s nightmare was exactly what he thought it would be.

Laurel pressed the cool glass to her lips and let the sickly sweet drink slide down her throat. With each sip, she was feeling better than ever.

She loved this song. She loved this drink. She loved this dress. She loved these shoes. How long had it been since she wore these shoes? *Too long*, she decided and took another drink.

She was disappointed to taste the last dredges from the bottom of her glass, and tried to look through the crowd to find her date. It was nearly impossible, though, there were so many people. Ollie did always get them into the best clubs.
Why does it feel like I haven’t had a break in months? Laurel let the serious thought mar her face with a frown for just a moment as she found a bar top on which to set her empty glass.

Oliver appeared through the crowd, a shot glass in each hand, and she lit up again. Before offering one to her, he slammed his own drink back. She reached for the other glass, but Oliver kept it just out of reach, forcing her to step into him and get an even better look at his mischievously twinkling blue eyes.

“C’mon, Ollie,” she whined over the music and put on an exaggerated pout.

He slowly lowered the glass to her lips, waited for her mouth to part, and then quickly pulled away and took the drink for himself. He nearly choked and sputtered the liquid back up at the sight of her shocked face.

“Oh, seriously,” he said when he finally caught his breath. He ran a gentle thumb down the side of her face. “You didn’t think any of this was for you, did you?”

Laurel jerked backward and swayed, “What?” Her head was spinning. All the drinks seemed to hit at once. Had she even heard that right? She winced against the flashing strobe lights and tried to maintain balance against the floor spinning beneath her feet.

A small brunette sidled up to Oliver and they slid their arms around each other. Oliver whispered something in the woman’s ear and she laughed out loud.

No, no, this couldn’t be happening.

“You remember this night, don’t you, Laurel?” Oliver didn’t have to shout to be heard clearly over the music, which had faded altogether despite the still dancing bodies around them. “This is who I went home with. This is why you couldn’t find me at the end of the night.” His hand was resting on the other woman’s hip, rubbing lazy circles into her exposed skin with his fingers.

Laurel blinked slowly. She just had to get the world to stop spinning. And maybe throw up.

“What...what are you...” she couldn’t finish the question. Opening her mouth felt too dangerous.

The other woman was openly giggling now and Oliver was trying to hide his own laughter. “You knew this would happen. You knew what was going on when this happened the first time. C’mon, let’s go,” he turned away, pulling the woman with him. “You were never enough for me, Laur,” he called over his shoulder before they disappeared into the crowd.

Laurel moved to follow, but she couldn’t make her legs cooperate. To her humiliation, she stumbled in her sky-high heels and fell to her hands and knees. The people around her turned to laugh, but no one offered a hand.

She stayed on her knees, rocking back and forth and buried her face in her hands. This couldn’t be happening. Not again. Again? He was right, she had experienced this night before. And she had chosen to ignore her gut instinct that he’d left with another woman. It was someone she vaguely knew, a woman she’d gone to school with.

Her stomach flipped and roiled in protest at all the booze. She took a deep breath and prepared herself to stand. She had to find a bathroom lest she further embarrass herself by throwing up right there on the dancefloor.

When she pulled her hands away from her face, her breath caught in her throat. She was in her apartment. Her father was sitting on the easy chair across from her. He’d found her stash of medications and bottles and laid them all out on the coffee table. He was staring at her, his fingers
steepled and his face drawn, exhausted.

Laurel’s head was spinning. If she didn’t get to a bathroom soon, or at least get a bucket, she was bound to make a mess. Her eyes nearly crossed with the effort of trying to focus on Quentin.

He let out a disgusted sigh and stood, shaking his head. “Of course you’re too messed up to even talk about this.” He opened a paper grocery bag and dumped the loot in. “I’m taking this with me. I’ll be back when you’re sober.”

“Daddy,” Laurel tried to stand, but stumbled back to her knees, nearly hitting her head on the coffee table.

Quentin stopped before he reached the door. “I can’t believe I had to lose Sara and keep you,” he spat before jerking the door opening and leaving.

Laurel choked out a sob. She could taste the vomit boiling in her throat, begging for release. Tears were now burning down her cheeks.

“You didn’t think any of it was real, did you?” her mother’s familiar voice jerked her attention back up. Dinah stood in the kitchen, leaning casually against the brick wall. “I mean, you really thought you could put on your sister’s mask and jacket and take some boxing lessons from her girlfriend and we’d all forget what you are?”

Laurel flattened her palms against the coffee table, gritted her teeth and forced her feet under herself to stand. The world was still swaying dangerously, but she would not face her mother like this. “Mom, what are you doing here?”

Dinah stepped forward; close enough to brush her daughter’s mussed hair out of her face. “Honey, of course I came. I had to be here when you woke up.”

“Woke up?” Laurel’s mouth felt tacky and dry. The lights in her apartment were already hurting her eyes. Her head was screaming in protest.

“None of it was real, sweetheart,” her mother smiled sadly. “You’ve always been this,” she gestured to Laurel’s rumpled, skin-tight nightclub attire, messy hair and smudged makeup. “There’s just too much of your father in you. You’re an addict and a drunk. It’s who you are.”

Laurel moved her head from side to side slowly - too quickly and she might fall down again. “No, no,” she said, pushing away from Dinah. “I quit drinking. I got clean.” She patted herself uselessly, looking for her keychain with her sober chip, but they both knew it wasn’t there.

“Clean?” Dinah clicked her tongue. “You can’t even stand up without swaying. You’re literally falling-down drunk, baby.” Dinah’s face darkened and she pressed forward, back into Laurel’s space. “I asked you to get justice for my daughter, and I should have known all you’d do is drink.”

Laurel stepped backward, shaking her head and muttering denials. The back of her calf hit the coffee table and she fell again, cracking her elbow and the back of her head against the table.

Dinah only stood over her daughter, stony-faced. “Sara is gone forever, and it’s your fault.”

Laurel rolled her side, clutching the back of her head. Her hand jerked away when she felt the sticky wetness of blood. It was throbbing. Blackness swam around the edge of her vision. Her mother seemed to flicker and disappear before her eyes.

When the darkness of unconsciousness abated and she was left only with the dizziness that
normally accompanies being this drunk, Laurel was able to look around her now empty living room.

She tentatively ran her hand back to the stinging wound on her head. Yup, still hurt. She was going to have the headache to end all headaches tomorrow, as if that was any worse than the pain she was in in the moment.

“Looking a little rough, Laur,” Tommy’s voice broke through the silence.

Laurel’s heart skipped and stumbled over itself. “Tommy,” she breathed, a fresh wash of tears flooding her eyes.

He knelt by her side and she drank him in: the lightness of his blue eyes, his soft brown hair, the easy smile on his lips, the way he smelled, everything. “It’s been a while for us, hasn’t it?”

Laurel could only nod as tears streamed down her face. She rested her forehead against his and breathed him in. He stroked her hair and whispered easy words to soothe her. She wrapped her arms around him and reveled in the feel of him again. His soft hands were stroking up and down her back now and she could feel the tension melting out of her.

Maybe the events of the evening had been a dream. None of it made sense and the longer she sat like this, the blurrier it all became.

“I missed you so much,” she finally said. Where had he gone? Why had it been so long since she’d held him?

“I missed you, too, beautiful,” Tommy replied, pulling back to peck a kiss on her cheek and brush away a tear.

“I’m so sorry,” Laurel sniffled. “I don’t understand…”

Tommy nodded, “I know you are. You should be.”

The blood left her face and ran cold through her limbs. Tommy brushed another stray tear away and continued, “It’s your fault I died. And you didn’t even do anything with it. You just became a drunk and a junkie.”

Laurel pulled herself away from him, still on the ground and pushing away with her hands and feet. But he followed, crawling after her on his hands and knees and grabbing her face by the chin. “We can be together, Laur,” he smiled. “You know what you have to do.” He directed her face back at the coffee table, which, empty only seconds ago, now held a stuffed dolphin that once belonged to Sara and a 9mm pistol. “You chickened out last time, but I’ll be here with you, the whole time. Neither one of us has to be alone anymore.”

Laurel’s mouth trembled. She remembered the night. She remembered it in her nightmares. She remembered it in therapy and AA meetings, too. Or had she just imagined doing it so much that it felt like a memory? Was this the time she’d finally do it, for real and not just in her imagination? Tommy eased off of her and offered her a hand. She stared at it for a second before accepting and letting him pull her to stand and guide her to the couch.

The dolphin was taunting her. Laurel picked it up and crushed it to her chest, bursting into fresh tears. Tommy stood behind the couch and put his hands on her shoulders, leaning down to whisper in her ear, “You owe it to me, and to Sara, to do this.”

Between sobs, Laurel continuously cried out for Sara and repeated that she was sorry, over and
over and over again.

“Sara wouldn’t want to see you like this,” Tommy reminded her. “Be brave for her, Laurel, just once. It just takes a second. It’ll be easier than the death I got because of you.”

Laurel felt collapsed, like someone had removed her lungs. Her fingers were digging into the dolphin and she held it tighter and tighter, as if the dolphin would make up for the gaping hole in her chest.

“You entire life you’ve been trying to keep up with her. You’re exhausted. Look at you,” he was still rubbing her shoulders affectionately. “You’ll feel so much better once it’s over. Your family will have peace. All this pretending to be a hero to cover up for the addiction stuff? It’s a burden on everyone, especially you. Come with me, Laur. Be with me.”

Laurel finally swallowed her cries for Sara and her eyes cleared enough to see the gun on the table. She reached for it, keeping a tight grip on the dolphin in her other hand.

On the other side of the barrier, Oliver felt his heart crack. Nyssa was raging against the wall, having long since lost her tenuous hold over her disciplined thoughts. John was sweating, spitting out every curse and charm he could think of.

But they couldn’t get past the wall. Laurel didn’t even seem aware of it.

“She has to let us in,” John said, resting his damp forehead against the wall, before forming a fist and hammering it uselessly against the barrier. “They’re too powerful with her.”

Oliver dropped to his knees and threw the hood off his head, and did the only thing he could think of.

Laurel let the weight of the gun rest in her palm. She knew it was loaded and a round was already in the chamber. She didn’t even have to check it to know that. All she had to do was release the safety, press the hammer back and squeeze.

“There you go, Laur. You won’t feel a thing,” Tommy’s lips brushed against her ear.

Another voice drifted through the apartment, sounding lost and far away, like it had floated in on a breeze. Tommy’s hands froze on her shoulders and he jerked away from her.

“He sounded broken, pained.

“Oliver?” Laurel started to turn her head to look around her apartment, but Tommy was there.

“No, Oliver’s not here. Come on, Laurel. Let’s get this done,” he motioned with his eyes back to the gun in her hand.

Laurel sat back into the couch and adjusted her grip on the pistol.

Another voice had her sitting bolt upright and nearly dropping the weapon.

“Dinah Laurel Lance, you listen to me!” Nyssa barked, clear as a bell but from some unknown location in the room. “You are stronger than this! This is not you! You are the Black Canary, now
Laurel’s mind cleared. She wasn’t drunk. She hadn’t had a drink in over a year. She stood up, setting the objects on the table and turning to Tommy, who was watching her with the narrowed eyes of a predator.

“You’re not him,” she confirmed. He was backing away from her, his lips curling. The facade of her apartment began to shudder and fade away. She could finally see Nyssa, Oliver and John, but a barrier still surrounded the room she was in. The parasites were floating and flitting, circling around her like vultures.

Laurel looked down at herself and breathed a sigh of relief: back in her Black Canary outfit. She pressed a hand to her throat and was disappointed to find it bare.

She trotted over to the trio who all looked as relieved as she felt. “How do I get out of here?”

“They’re still feeding off you,” Constantine nodded at the parasites. “You’ve got to kill them yourself. Trust me, we’ve tried everything to get in here.”

Laurel looked back and forth between the group and the astral parasites. “How?” was all she croaked out.

Constantine shrugged unhelpfully. “It’s all up here,” he tapped on his head.

“Like The Matrix,” Oliver added. He was so earnest, Laurel nearly laughed.

Laurel turned back to the chamber. She couldn’t quite get a count on how many of these things there were. They weren’t solid and appeared to float through each other at times. Her head was ringing, and now she wondered if that was a side effect of having a bunch of spirit whozits treating her like an open bar.

She had an idea, a feeling, really. Like The Matrix, right?

“There is no spoon,” she murmured, looking up at the offending beasts and then back across at the one that still looked like Tommy. Her eyes narrowed and she felt the hair on the back of her neck bristling. “How dare you come to me as him!”

Laurel stepped forward, took a deep breath, focused the muscles from her diaphragm all the way through her throat and unleashed her canary cry on the offending parasite. It resonated through the chamber, bringing down each floating wisp. She stepped closer to the one that looked like Tommy, getting even louder as he writhed and howled on the ground, until he burst into a puff of black smoke.

She stopped, took another breath and let out another cry moving around the room, breaking apart each parasite. The barrier around the room cracked, then exploded into shattered glass around her.

Only when Laurel ran out of breath did she stop. She stood over the destruction, huffing and puffing, and she slowly turned to her friends. They hadn’t moved when the barriers came down. Constantine looked impressed, Nyssa’s mouth had ticked up in one corner, and Oliver’s face had formed a near perfect “O”.

“You did that without the sonic device?” Oliver’s voice rose with question.

“You said it was like The Matrix,” Laurel responded, putting her hands on her hips.
Nyssa stepped forward, her boots crunching over the broken glass. She smiled fondly at Laurel. “You are a most excellent protégé.”

Laurel beamed at her mentor before Constantine stepped off again. “We have to keep moving, and let’s try to stay together this time, eh?”

They followed a labyrinth of passageways in mostly silence, periodically stopping so John could perform the lighter trick again to ensure they were on the right path. Or at least he hoped it was working that way.

Oliver stayed near Laurel’s side, closer than necessary. She could feel his eyes constantly checking her and the frown creasing deeper and deeper into his face.

When she couldn’t take it anymore, she finally spoke in a low voice, “Stop it.”

“Stop what?” he feigned innocence, his eyes now firmly straight ahead.

“Whatever guilt cycle you’re putting yourself on, just stop,” Laurel replied. “You’ve already apologized, we’ve already talked about it, it’s over, it’s done, let it go.”

“Laurel, those things went into your head to find your worst nightmare and they came up with me,” Oliver swallowed hard. Nyssa and John continued their path forward, dutifully pretending to not listen to the conversation. “And then, that thing in your apartment—”

“It was a low point,” Laurel stopped him with a hand on his chest. “And it was their mistake to pull that memory up because it was also the night I realized I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to be alone.”

Constantine and Nyssa had paused their march so as not to separate the group again. John leaned against the damp wall, his back to the pair, idly flicking his lighter. Nyssa was openly watching them, her forehead wrinkled and lips pulled downward.

“What happened that night?” Oliver asked.

Laurel looked back to her friend. “Thea called. She wanted to get dinner.” Her face softened as she watched Oliver’s eyes move back and forth, as he struggled to remember where he might have been that night or what he might have been doing that kept him away. “Tonight it was you. And Nyssa,” Laurel turned to the taller woman, “who has a strangely commanding voice in my subconscious.”

Nyssa didn’t respond except to raise her chin a little higher and smirk. John pushed himself off the wall and spoke, “I hate to break this up, but we really need to—”

A distant wail cut him off. The group went silent, all frozen and begging to hear the voice again. Constantine’s posture relaxed, but the other three remained tense. Only the sounds were the labored breaths and sputtering torches along the walls.

Sara’s voice cut through the silence again, stronger, calling “Laurel!” in a broken cry.

Laurel’s eyes turned to saucers. The group all looked at each other for a moment, silently confirming they all heard the same thing, before breaking out in a sprint in the same direction.

Sara’s cries grew louder and easier to follow, echoing through the halls. Laurel felt her heart thumping in her chest, ready to explode. She found herself easily outpacing Oliver and Nyssa, and she was the first to cross the threshold of the cavernous chamber swirling with black smoke and those creatures.
It took her a moment, but her eyes found the one thing that didn’t belong: her sister. Sara was struggling to free herself from what looked like a Lazarus Pit on the other side of the room, her arms flailing, coughing and scrambling to pull herself out, only to be shoved back in by one of the parasites.

When Laurel caught Sara’s eyes, everything seemed to still for both women. Laurel felt the relief wash over her. They were so close. Sara was right there. It wasn’t a trick this time. Sara’s eyes suddenly went wild and she lunged forward with renewed vigor to free herself from the murky water, only to be pushed and pulled back by ghostly hands on all sides.

“Get her out of that pit, and we go,” Constantine slid next to Laurel, holding a torch in his hands. Nyssa and Oliver stepped forward with their weapons drawn. The parasites were losing their focus on Sara now that new souls had arrived. “They’re stronger here.” It didn’t need to be said.

Laurel opened her mouth to clear a path with her cry, but quick as lightning a parasite latched onto her throat. Stars burst before her eyes as her head exploded with pain. She tried to pry it away with her hands, but it was too strong. Without warning, it screeched and peeled away, leaving Laurel gasping and clutching at her head, but relieved. Nyssa was almost dancing in front of her, twirling and slashing with her sword against the parasites that seemed to shift seamlessly from solid to smoke to avoid her blade.

Constantine was moving the other direction, using the torch as a flaming bludgeon against any beastie that dared get too close. Oliver broke off toward the other flank of the room launching an endless supply of arrows.

Laurel gathered herself and ducked under Nyssa’s sword arm, as she had so often during training, took a knee and finally let loose her cry on the offending parasites. Whether solid or smoke, the sonic waves still knocked them back, cutting a clear path to her sister.

She popped to her feet and ran. Her vision whittled down the noise of the parasites and fight still raging around her so that all she saw was Sara’s face and hand reach out for her. She couldn’t even hear anything anymore, but she could see Sara’s lips moving and forming her name. Nyssa, Oliver and Constantine must have been at her side because her rush forward was uninterrupted, but everything outside of Sara was a blur.

Laurel skidded, then slid on her knees to the edge of the pool, grabbed her sister’s arm with both hands and pulled with every ounce of strength she could muster. She braced her feet against the rocky edge of the pit, and kept pulling against the force of the parasites trying to keep Sara there.

The other three were busy hacking and slashing the beasts away. With each one pushed back, Laurel and Sara got further away from the sloshing, dark waters.

With one final push, Laurel yanked Sara free and they both tumbled away from the pool.

“Grab on!” Constantine knelt over the pair and motioned for Oliver and Nyssa to join. Once everyone was touching, John rattled off a spell in the same mysterious language he’d spoken to get them to the astral plane and before the parasites could descend, the group was engulfed in a bright light.
Jason ducked a swing from Diggle’s practice staff and dropped his own staff without a word to the other man. Diggle stopped his attack short and turned to see what had frozen his opponent.

The group on the platform was blinking awake, looking around the room in confusion. Sara gasped and swallowed air in huge gulps. Laurel got her bearings quicker than the others and she moved to her sister’s side, taking her hand and rushing out, “Sara, Sara, it’s okay, sweetheart, you’re okay. You’re in the foundry and you’re safe. I’m here.”

Sara propped herself on her elbows and drank in her surroundings for a moment. Nyssa and Oliver remained silent, wide-eyed and rooted in place, as if any sudden movement or sound would spook Sara back to her feral state. Sara turned back to her sister. They stared at each other for a moment, hands entwined, before her face crumpled and she launched herself at Laurel in a crushing embrace.

“You found me,” Sara whispered into her sister’s hair.

Laurel returned the hug with equal ferocity. “Of course I found you.” She pressed her lips to her sister’s forehead. “You are my sister.”

Both women squealed, and then erupted in giggles when Nyssa apparently couldn’t take it anymore and threw herself into the hug, silent tears streaming down her face. Laurel lifted her head to see Oliver still sitting awkwardly in his original place. Constantine had already stood and began gathering the supplies, while Felicity, Thea, Diggle and Jason kept a respectful distance away from the platform.

Laurel held out a hand to Oliver, “C’mon.” His face lit up and he rushed forward, tackling the hug and sending the whole group tumbling down in a fit of laughter. They all sat up again, gathered around Sara. Nyssa stroked Sara’s face smiling and crying and saying, “This is a miracle.”

Oliver pressed his forehead into Sara’s shoulder and stroked her hair, only to find Laurel doing the same from the other side.

“You guys keep that up and I might turn into a house cat,” Sara quipped. “Where’s Dad?”

“We’ll call him, whenever you’re ready,” Laurel gave Sara a reassuring squeeze.

Jason felt his mouth tick up at the unadulterated joy on display before him, but a nagging soreness in his shoulders and a dark cloud rumbled across his mind. He turned away and made himself busy putting away the sparring equipment he and Diggle had made use of.

“Quite the reunion, eh?” Constantine’s accent cut into Jason’s scowl. “In the time I’ve known Oliver Queen, I’ve only ever seen him express exasperation and outright anger. This is honestly fascinating.”

Jason ventured a glance at the blonde magician and then back up to the platform. Felicity, Thea and Diggle had finally joined in on the reunion. “It’s slightly better than the welcome back party I got. Laurel got what she was after; I’m happy for her.”

“Yeah you look it,” Constantine snorted as he lit and puffed on a cigarette. Before putting the pack away, he held it out to Jason. The other man looked between Constantine and the pack cautiously before something shifted in his eyes and he took a smoke, lighting with his own lighter and blowing out a puff up and over their heads.

“I’ve been voted off the island before. It’s nothing new. I still have a job to do.”
Constantine shrugged. He wasn’t particularly interested in the inner dynamics of this little gang. “I don’t know about any of that, but that one there,” he pointed at Laurel with his cigarette, and then flicked the ashes on the ground, “she’s a different bird.”

John watched the muscles in Jason’s jaw twitch and clench. He smiled a little to himself, noting the stubble and thinking about how rough it would feel. For his part, Jason didn’t betray any reaction except in his jaw. He kept his eyes down until he mastered his face, then ventured a glance at Laurel and mimicked Constantine’s shrug. “She’s very good. She’s under-utilized here.”

Jason put the cigarette back in his mouth, nipping it between his teeth while he finished cleaning up the sparring area. He could feel John watching him. Sparring with Diggle had been a suitable distraction, but he hadn’t been prepared for the feelings that watching this reunion would dredge up. He felt jumpy and angry and itchy all over again. He didn’t altogether mind knowing that Constantine was watching him. He needed to blow off steam, and if that involved a good looking and cocky Brit rather than pummeling criminals, all the better for it.

“Well, I don’t know about you, mate,” Constantine put out his cigarette on his shoe and flicked the butt to a nearby trash bin, “but I could go for a few scoops. Care to join?”

Jason shot a lingering look back at the group. Laurel was shimmering in happiness and lost in her sister. Despite all of it, the sight still made him feel warm inside.

He shook it off and slapped a hand on John’s shoulder. “That sounds fantastic.”

Felicity bit her lip and frowned. Oliver had barely spoken two words to her since coming out of the trance or whatever. Since they’d been home, he’d gotten a glass of water, sat at the kitchen bar and brooded in silence. The ice had long since melted in his glass and the condensation pooled in a messy ring on the countertop.

Resolved to not be one who allowed him to brood himself into abject misery, Felicity leaned down on the countertop from inside the kitchen and cleared her throat. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Oliver jerked, visibly surprised to find her just inches away from his face. He blinked and swallowed, then shook his head. “No, Felicity. I’m sorry. I don’t think so.”

Felicity pushed back from the counter, her lips pursed. She pressed forward anyway. “Well, I think we should talk about it. Clearly it has affected you in a big way…”

“Felicity,” Oliver held up a hand to stop her, “it’s not…” he stopped himself, searching for the right words. “It was very personal for everyone and it’s not for me to discuss.”

She recoiled. “Personal? Are we not in this,” she gestured between them and around the loft, “together? This is what a relationship is, Oliver. We tell each other things. No secrets.”

Oliver sat up and pushed himself away from the counter. “No secrets?” He could have laughed. “You were going behind my back and helping the team the entire time we were on vacation. You were lying to my face, and I haven’t once brought that up.”
Felicity stiffened and her eyes fell to the floor. “After everything that happened with you and the League, I needed to know if I still wanted to be part of the team. For myself.”

“And I understand that,” Oliver softened, stepping forward and placing his arms on her shoulders, rubbing small circles. “But can you please understand that this is something that I can’t share with you?”

Her eyes narrowed and she shrugged out of his grasp. “No, Oliver. No. You went on some kind of spirit journey with your League of Assassins wife and not one but two of your ex-girlfriends. And now you’re Broody McBroodface. Something happened and I have a right to know what.”

“Wow,” Oliver’s eyes widened and his hand went up to his mouth. He rubbed his chin and let out a sad chuckle. “Is that what this is about? Laurel and Sara are family to me. I had to go with her to help Sara. And God, I’m not even legally married to Nyssa. The only physical contact she and I have ever had is fighting. I’m sorry that I have a past with Laurel and Sara, but I can’t change that, and I’m sick of this, Felicity.”

“What are you saying?” The hair on the back of Felicity’s neck and arms rose.

Oliver turned to pace but then stopped himself and turned back to her, his hands on his hips, prepared to face the storm. “I’m sick of tiptoeing around the fact that I have had other women in my life before you. I’m sick of you talking about my time on Lian Yu like I was on Gilligan’s Island. I was tortured.”

Felicity flinched and tears welled in her eyes, but Oliver pressed on, unable to hold it back anymore. “I spent five years hungry, cold, and wet and tired. I was stabbed and shot and electrocuted and whipped. Where do you think I got all the scars? It wasn’t Fantasy Island. Shado saved my life and died because of me. I was lucky enough to find Sara alive before she was taken from me. Again. The way you talk about it, you’d think they were bikini models feeding me grapes on the beach. They both suffered and died because of me.”

Tears ran down Felicity’s face and Oliver had to bite back the urge to take her in his arms and tell her he was sorry and didn’t mean any of it.

In a measured, low voice, Oliver said, “I’m sick of this. I want this to work, Felicity, I do. But I need you to meet me halfway here. I can’t do anything about my past, and trust me, I punish myself quite enough without your help. Please stop with the comments. I can’t take it.”

Felicity nodded, but didn’t move or speak. Oliver turned and moved toward the door, pulling a jacket off a hook near the doorway. “It’s been a long day,” he said softly. “I’m gonna go for walk.”

He didn’t wait for a response. After the door clicked shut, Felicity puddled to the floor in a heap of sobbing tears.

Jason let his feet dangle and he drank in the cool night air. From this height he could even smell the salt from the harbor and the ocean beyond.

He took one last drag off the cigarette he’d bummed from Constantine - a parting gift before
leaving the man’s hotel room - and snuffed it out on the concrete ledge. He had needed that, all of it, and he hadn’t realized how badly until he got it.

Maybe the pit’s blood magic was affecting him more than he realized, but he felt better than he had in days. A “bit of rough and tumble,” as John had called it was just what the doctor ordered.

Jason did love the blondes. He pulled John’s card out of his pocket and inspected it again. “Master of the Dark Arts” - *master of something, that’s for sure*, Jason smirked. The hotel and room number was scribbled on the back. Constantine planned to lurk around town for a few more days to get a better look at Damien Darhk and investigate Thea’s situation. He wasn’t optimistic about either, and both men hadn’t been keen on discussing business once they got back to the room.

But boy he did feel better now. The cloud of negativity had cleared from his mind, and he suddenly felt compelled to apologize to Laurel. Everything she’d been going through and he’d jumped on her in her moment of weakness like a horny teenager. *Of course she came to her senses and put a stop to it*, he grimaced, shame coloring his features even in his rooftop solitude.

It took him longer than normal to traverse the Star City streets to Laurel’s apartment building. Going on foot in street clothes was frustratingly slow and his encounter with Constantine had left him with a bright energy that felt too constrained by just walking like everyone else.

Without thinking, he moved to the fire escape side of the building and launched himself into a quick, vigorous climb up to Laurel’s place. He was about halfway up when he realized that she most likely had her sister and other company, and showing up in her fire escape instead of the front door like a normal person would probably look a little weird. He cursed himself for a moron but decided he was committed to this route and continued anyway.

He swung his legs over the railing of her fire escape, and then onto her balcony, but stopped short and stayed in the shadows. Through the French doors, the brightly lit apartment was exactly what he had pictured and then some. Sara was on the middle of the couch, flanked by her father with his arm around her. Quentin, still a little ashen, couldn’t stop staring between Sara and Laurel, as if one or the other might simply vanish - or drop dead - at any moment. Nyssa held her place on the other side of Sara, undeterred by the detective’s open dislike of her. Jason was a little dumbstruck at the sight of Nyssa in street clothes, looking warm and smiling and affectionate, holding Sara’s hand. The image was a far cry from the League assassin he’d come to know during his time with Talia.

Thea and Laurel were busy setting out plates and containers from what appeared to be every take-out place in the city on the kitchen counter. Thea noticed him first. Her mouth twitched in a smirk that she quickly wiped away, before elbowing Laurel and nodding toward the balcony. Laurel furrowed and followed the general direction of Thea’s nod until she saw him, too.

Laurel made a quiet excuse to step away, but everyone was too happy and wrapped up in Sara’s reunion to be particularly concerned about why Laurel was stepping outside.

Jason moved forward, but not enough to be fully visible to the group at large. “Hey, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. This was kinda dumb of me, now that I think about it. I can go.”

A laugh bubbled up on Laurel’s lips and she shook her head, “You’re fine. What are you doing here?”

Standing on her balcony, seeing her family happily being a family behind her, Jason blushed. He must have been on some kind of post-sex high when this seemed like a good idea. “I just…the other night I was kind of a jerk and I wanted to apologize.”
Confusion crossed her face before she remembered and she lit up with recognition. “Oh! Right, that,” she replied, her cheeks turning pink. “It’s fine. I didn’t think you were a jerk. Actually, I thought I was kind of a jerk…”

“No, not at all,” Jason cut her off, stepping closer and shaking his head. He stopped, placed his hands on his lips and sputtered an embarrassed chuckle. “We are way too old to be this pathetic.”

Laurel joined him and brought a hand up to cover her laugh. “Way, way too old.”

Jason took a step back and pointed toward the fire escape with his thumb. “I should get going, let you get back to your family.”

Before he could step back again, Laurel reached out and took his hand, for just a second before letting him go as her hands fluttered back to her sides. “Why don’t you stay?”

“What?” Jason was genuinely taken aback by the question.

Laurel gestured lamely behind her toward the brightly lit room. “We have take-out from literally every single one of Sara’s favorite places. It’s so much food; please stay.”

Jason’s eyes moved between Laurel’s hopeful face and the gathering in her living room. “It’s, you know, I don’t want to intrude on a family thing.”

“You’re not intruding,” Laurel spoke firmly, but then chewed her bottom lip before asking again. “You helped me decide to do this. Please stay,” she spoke quietly, holding out a hand.

He couldn’t leave her hanging, hand offered to him, her big green eyes betraying every ounce of doubt and hope she had in that moment. He took her hand and nodded, “Okay, but your dad is probably not my biggest fan.”

She huffed out a laugh, “Oh, tonight is your night. He’s even being nice to Nyssa.”

He chuckled and followed her into the decidedly unfamiliar setting - a happy family. Fortunately, it was the right crowd.

Not one of them was surprised he came up the fire escape.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still on the hunt for beta readers/editors. I have dyslexia like no one's business and no amount of my own editing can catch all the errors. I'm also always interested in discourse with other writers on how I can keep improving. Please comment or message me at redcanary-renegades.tumblr.com if you have any interest!

Made some minor adjustments to this episode and episode 3 after I caught a GAPING plot hole. Oops.
Episode 5

Chapter Summary

A prison break. How original.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thea meandered to the frosted glass door of Oliver’s campaign office. Her hand paused on the handle and she bit her lip. She dropped her hand and turned to walk away, then stopped and sighed in the middle of the sidewalk.

This was ridiculous. She wasn’t 17, returning home at the crack of dawn to face her mother and Walter. *He just wants to talk*, she reminded herself. *He should have talked to me before he skipped town*, a venomous voice struck from the darker corners of her mind. Thea closed her eyes and forced the anger back, coiling it tighter and tighter until it no longer burned through her mind, giving life to those other impulses to hurt and maim and kill.

She turned back and marched to the door, this time pulling it open and entering the quiet office. Oliver still hadn’t actually hired a campaign staff. Details. Her eyes drifted over the long-abandoned desks and furniture. Thea frowned. She could be privately angry with her brother, but she still felt compelled to hire a cleaning crew for him.

“Speedy!” Oliver’s cheerful voice called from his office, breaking her reverie. He trotted out to greet her, in pressed khakis and a button-down, looking every inch the part of the young politician with his sleeves rolled up. “Thanks for coming!” He pulled her into a warm hug misinterpreting Thea’s tension for surprise. He gestured for her to sit on one of the dusty couches while he pulled a desk chair to sit across from her.

“What did you want to talk about?” Thea kept her hands folded in her lap. She could still feel the energy tingling through her arms down to her hands, begging for action.

Oliver leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, his face alight with nervous hope. “I need a campaign manager.”

Thea shot a side-eyed glance around the office and replied, “Yeah, that’s true.”
Oliver rolled his eyes but smiled at his sister anyway. “Thea, I want to hire you as my campaign manager.”

“What?” Thea sputtered between a laugh and a snort. “I don’t know anything about running a campaign.”

Frustrated, Oliver rose and took a seat next to Thea on the couch. “But you are a great manager. You did great with Verdant, and you had never run anything in your life before you took that over.”

Thea shifted to look at her brother, and give herself a little more space away from him. “That was a nightclub. I’d been clubbing since I was 15,” Thea paused to let Oliver’s look of constipation pass. “I don’t know anything about politics.”

Oliver took his sister’s hand. “You don’t have to, that’s my job. I know you know how to manage a staff, advertise, raise money, plan events.” Oliver let the forced optimism leave his face. “Thea, you know me, and you know this city. Please help me.”

For a moment, Thea forgot she was mad at him. Oliver watched her eyes soften and he almost jumped up to start planning what they needed to do next, but her face hardened again into the now familiar stony mask.

Instead, Thea rose from couch, tossing her short hair as she shook her head and crossed her arms. “No, sorry Oliver. I don’t think I’m the right person for this.”

His heart fell, but he set his jaw and argued anyway. “Why not?” The frustration was evident in his voice.

Thea’s eyes flared and she pointed a finger at him. “Because I don’t want to!” Her voice rose and wavered. “Because you knew I was going to be sick and you left without telling me or anyone.”

Oliver sat back and buried his face in his hands. He brought his eyes back up to his sister, but she had turned away from him, her entire body trembling. “I didn’t know you would be sick like this, Thea. I thought - I wanted to believe - that once the immediate effects had worn off that you were fine. I’m so sorry.”
He watched her carefully. Her trembling didn’t stop, but some of the air deflated from her frame as she slowly turned back to him. “Ra’s told you.”

Oliver’s lips formed a tight, closed and sad smile. He shrugged helplessly. “I didn’t listen. I heard what I wanted to hear.”

Thea didn’t respond. Instead, she slowly began to pace the office. The desire thrumming through her veins to do physical damage abated and she was no longer shaking.

“I guess I did a lot of that this past year,” Oliver spoke quietly.

“But more,” Thea replied, finally turning back to her brother with a playful smirk. He had pulled out his wallet and was fiddling with a small ring, glittering against the sunlight filtered through the office windows.

Thea moved back to the couch, her face furrowed in confusion. “Is that Mom’s ring?” Oliver looked up to her from under his lashes and only nodded with grim amusement. She settled back next to him on the couch. “Why are you carrying it around?”

“I’m not sure anymore,” Oliver said. Thea took the ring from him, examining it closer. Warm memories of her mother’s hands filled her chest like a fresh breeze. “I was going to propose to Felicity, but then this Red Hood guy showed up and we came back. I keep waiting for the right moment and it keeps feeling farther away.”

Thea’s eyes flitted up to Oliver and color flooded her cheeks. “You were going to propose to Felicity with this ring?” Oliver nodded. Thea’s hands flew up to cover her mouth as she erupted into laughter. Oliver leaned away from his sister, blinking confusion.

“What is so funny?” He reached to take the ring back, but she shot her arm out over her head and just out of his reach. “Why is me proposing to Felicity so damn funny to you?”

At his hurt expression, Thea forced herself to stop laughing, but she couldn’t force a more serious expression on her face. “You really were out of it the past year.” He continued to stare at her in utter betrayal, his mouth agape. Thea relented. “Ollie, you know about Mom and Felicity.”

Oliver closed his mouth and considered what he knew of their relationship, before silently shaking
his head and shrugging his shoulders, still hurt and confused.

Thea tilted her head in pity. “It’s just, you know, they hated each other.”

Oliver reeled back. “What?” He shook his head and squinted, certain Thea was wrong.

Thea winced at Oliver’s reaction. She knew he was clueless, but it hadn’t occurred to her just how clueless. “Ollie...Mom talked about it whenever Felicity was around or came up. She thought it was really suspicious that a random IT girl was suddenly your assistant and always around. And Felicity...”

“Felicity what?” Oliver braced himself. When he saw Thea waffling, unwilling to tell him he shook his head and said, “No, no. I want to know.”

“I didn’t actually hear her say it, but I heard some of the other guests talking about it at Mom’s wake,” Thea began, speaking slowly with an exaggerated grimace, suddenly aware that she might be outing someone she considered a friend for bad behavior. “Some people said she was saying some stuff about Mom at her funeral.”

Oliver’s head dropped, but he pursed his lips and nodded. “What did she say?”

“Does it matter? It wasn’t good.”

Oliver leaned back into the couch, rubbing a hand down his face. This conversation had not gone at all the way he’d hoped.

Thea mimicked his posture next to him, and he felt the couch begin to tremble again. He turned to see Thea covering her face and silently laughing. He couldn’t fight his own smile in response. “What is so damn funny?”

“I’ve been so mad at you,” she said when she finally caught her breath. “But man, you were so out of it you were going to pop the question to Felicity with Mom’s ring.” She burst into giggles again.

It only took a second for Oliver’s shoulders to begin to shake with laughter along with Thea’s.
A few hours later, Oliver stood with his hands on his hips, looking around his empty office, chest swelled with hope. Thea had grudgingly accepted his request, on the condition that her first order of business was to hire a professional campaign consultant.

He was about to return to his office to continue filling out the official city paperwork for a few of the events he and Thea agreed on when the front door opened. It took every ounce of restraint he possessed to maintain his composure when he recognized the face of the icy blonde man who had nearly killed him during the rescue of Madison Danforth.

For his part, the other man smiled brightly in greeting. He didn’t recognize Oliver. He stuck out his hand, which Oliver shook after a moment-too-long hesitation. “You must be Oliver Queen,” the man continued smiling in a way that never reached his eyes as he spoke. “I’m Damien Darhk. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you.”

Oliver nodded and worked to keep his face cool and collected. Damien Darhk was a name he recognized from his time with Ra’s al Ghul. He knew the man was associated with HIVE, but thus far he and the team hadn’t found any evidence of his involvement. Or even seen the man.

And now he was standing in Oliver’s campaign office, peering around with the curiosity of a cat that’s caught an interesting bug. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Darhk. I have to apologize, I can’t say I’m familiar with you.”

Damien waved a hand in friendly dismissal. “No apology necessary. I’m fairly new in town.” He began a stroll around the office, dragging a finger across one of the dust-covered desks.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Darhk?” Oliver’s pulse began to thump in his chest.

“Call me Damien, please,” he replied. “I’m more interested in what I can do for you. Looks like you could use some funding.”

In an effort to appear nonchalant, Oliver slid his hands in his pockets, but he could feel the sweat beading on the back of his neck. “I did only make the announcement last week. We’ll be starting fundraising soon, once we get fully staffed.”

“I know I’m new in town and the Queen family is, or was, old money,” Darhk’s tone took on a more serious note, “but I have deep pockets and you could say I’m already quite influential where
it matters here. With my support, you and I could do great things for Star City.”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed. He wondered if Damien had given Jessica this talk before moving against her. He licked his lips. He had to tread carefully. This was not the moment for the Green Arrow. “I appreciate that, Damien, but I’m not sure I want my campaign to be beholden to any particular special interest groups.”

Damien’s chin rose a fraction. This time when the smile pulled on his lips, his face took on a predatory gleam. “This city underestimates you, doesn’t it? Trust me, Mr. Queen, I am someone you want in your corner.”

Oliver squared off with Damien, but kept his expression pleasant. “Well, we will have our donation guidelines ready in time for our first event. If you would like to donate and it meets our guidelines, we’d love to have your support.” Oliver stuck out his hand. Damien took it, cocking his head and nodding in defeat.

“You know, you’re in politics now. You should be a little more concerned with meeting the needs of a special interest group like myself,” Damien punctuated his words with a wink and a playful slap on Oliver’s shoulder.

He turned and swept out of the office without waiting for a reply.

Oliver let out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. Time to call the team.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” Sara said between controlled breaths and strikes. “Felicity always had a crush on him.”

Laurel swung her tonfas, but each strike was met by her sister’s lightning fast bo staff. Locked together, they grinned at each other before twirling into another series of strikes and blocks. Laurel was nearly bursting with pride that she had landed almost as many hits on Sara as Sara had on her. Eat your heart out, League of Assassins.
“Sara, you’re holding back,” Nyssa’s firm voice interrupted their sparring chatter. “Laurel, she’s holding back because you’re still telegraphing every time you strike from the left.”

The pair paused to reset and Nyssa continued. “Honestly, this is a waste of time if you’re both just going to gossip,” she scowled at them with her hands on her hips.

Sara pouted at Nyssa and Laurel threw an arm around her sister. “C’mon Nyssa, we have so much to catch up on. We can do both,” Laurel replied, matching Sara’s exaggerated pout.

Sara snaked her arms around Laurel’s waist and tucked her head on her shoulder. “Besides, I never thought I’d be able to spar and gossip with my sister at the same time.”

Nyssa rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Honestly, if I had found you both together, I would have let you drown.”

Laurel’s smile widened. “We all know that’s not true.”

“Nope, you love us,” Sara grinned.

A teasing glint lit across Nyssa’s face, but before she could respond, the main computer in Felicity’s bay dinged an alarm. It continued beeping until Laurel entered the appropriate password and saw that a video call was coming.

“Uh, I think someone from STAR labs is trying to FaceTime with us right now,” she turned back to the other two women who only shrugged. Unsure, she frowned and accepted the call. The screen filled with Iris West’s face, and Cisco sitting in the background, head bent, working on something.

Iris’s face brightened with happy surprise when she saw Laurel. “Hey, Laurel! You are just who I was looking for.”

“Really?” Laurel responded. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry, I didn’t get your cell last time you were in town,” Iris chuckled with embarrassment. “This is probably a little weird.”
“No,” Laurel waved a dismissive hand, “I just figured you would be looking for Oliver or Felicity.”

“I didn’t get your number either, Laurel,” Cisco piped up from the back. Iris turned and threw what looked like a balled up piece of paper at him before turning back to the camera with a bemused eyeroll.

“Anyway,” Iris gave Cisco one last pointed look, “I think you’re the best person to ask about this. It’s about Helena Bertinelli.”

At the name, Sara immediately lost interest in the quiet conversation she’d been having with Nyssa. She rushed to Laurel’s side, concern coloring her features. “What about Helena?” she interjected.

Iris opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again in befuddlement at Sara’s presence.

“Oh, this is Sara,” Laurel patted her sister’s shoulder. “The first Canary.”

Cisco nearly leapt out of his chair and shoved Iris out of the way, his face filling the screen next to hers. “Woah,” was all he managed to get out before Iris pushed him back.

“Oh, congratulations?” Iris winced. “Is that what you say here?”

“We can go over the Miss Manners for dead people stuff later,” Sara shook her head. “What about Helena? Did she escape?”

“No, nothing like that,” Iris tried to reign the conversation back. “Well, at least not yet. I think something is going to happen at Iron Heights, but I don’t know what.”

“What do you mean, ‘not yet’?” Laurel asked before Sara could continue her aggressive questioning.
“I’ve been interviewing her for a series on Iron Heights prisoners,” Iris started. Sara’s eye twitched and she had to step away from the camera. “It was going really well, until last week. She got mean and uncooperative and told me not to come back. She was weirdly specific about not coming back, that’s why I think something might be going down at Iron Heights.”

“Does she know that Helena is weird and mean about everything?” Sara spoke as if Iris couldn’t hear her. Laurel silenced her sister with a look.

“Have you asked your dad or Barry to help with this? I’ve only met her a few times. I didn’t even work on her case,” Laurel looked down at her hands, still unsure why Iris wouldn’t rather talk to Oliver or even Sara, who had actually fought Helena, about this.

“My dad and Barry have their own big time stuff to worry about,” Iris replied. “I’m not sure this is anything other than Helena just deciding she doesn’t want to be interviewed anymore. I just have a really bad feeling and I could use some back up, especially from someone who knows her.”

Laurel looked to Sara, who was still shaking her head with a firm frown, and Nyssa, who idly ran her fingers down Sara’s back, though the gesture did little to settle the woman.

Laurel turned back to the camera and plastered a smile. “I think I can swing a trip to Central City this week. There are a few prisoners in Iron Heights our office needs to follow up with anyway.”

They exchanged information and ended the call, despite Sara’s increasingly agitated pacing and murmuring to Nyssa that one or both of them needed to stop Laurel.

Sara strode back on the platform to stop Laurel as she was making her way back to the lockers to gather her things. “Laurel, no, this is a bad idea. Helena is…”

“I know what Helena is,” Laurel spoke calmly. Sara’s emotions since her restoration had been a bit extreme, but the entire situation was extreme. Nyssa and Laurel could only be there to help Sara ease back if necessary. “Helena also helped Oliver rescue Felicity and even turned herself back into Iron Heights. Iris wouldn’t ask for no reason. I think this is worth looking into.” Laurel moved past her sister before she could respond. “I need to get going so I can make travel arrangements with the D.A.’s office and get all the case files I’ll need if I’m going to invent a reason to be in Central City.”

Undeterred, Sara followed. “Then, I’m going with you. I haven’t seen Mom yet, and I don’t like
“That would be good, the seeing Mom part,” Laurel affirmed her sister. She cocked an eyebrow at Nyssa.

“I’ll be joining you,” Nyssa spoke in a flat voice. Laurel winked at her sister, slung her bag over her shoulder and led the way out of the bunker.

When Sara and Nyssa found each other, Sara asked quietly, “Are you sure you have time?”

Nyssa stopped to press a kiss to Sara’s forehead. “Right now, you are my time. Until they find Talia, my time is yours to do with as you wish.”

The worry and anger over Helena’s sudden return to Sara’s life left her eyes. Staring up at Nyssa, she lost herself in the sea of light freckles across the other woman’s cheeks, and molten brown eyes, warm and inviting only for a select few. She leaned up and kissed Nyssa, reveling in the immediate response, the way her hands tightened on her body and she pulled Sara closer, her own breath caught in her throat. The woman was practically the leader of the world’s oldest international cult of assassins, but Sara could make her weak in the knees and she loved every second of it.

This was one thing certainly worth coming back from the dead for.

Laurel looked at her watch and shuffled her completed case files back into her briefcase. Iris should be arriving any minute to meet with Helena, and then she could head back to her mother’s house and crash.

In less than 24 hours, she had managed to convince her immediate supervisors that she had a perfectly valid reason to personally visit the prisoners appealing their cases, hop on a red eye with Sara and Nyssa, have an extremely uncomfortable reunion with her mother, then set to her actual day job.

It felt good, though. Some of these inmates deserved a second chance and she would do her best to help them and their legal teams navigate the broken Star City justice system. Sometimes she got so wrapped up in her “night job” and downtrodden by the endless bureaucracy of the prosecutor’s
office, she forgot how good it felt to help people through normal legal channels.

Ever since her first outing as Black Canary, exacting violent immediate justice on criminals who had manipulated the law, Laurel’s frustration with her chosen profession festered. Maybe not exclusively in her jurisdiction, but every day real criminals used the law to walk away scot free. Spouse and child abusers, drug makers, gun runners, the people orchestrating crime seemed to always know exactly what to say and when to stop and what they could use to negotiate legal freedom. Meanwhile, petty criminals, people struggling to survive, seemed to end up behind bars.

It grated on her. It made her wonder if her chosen profession was the right way to help people, especially when the Black Canary had such a tangible impact. Black Canary had an immediate impact. There was no red tape to cut through to get the job done when she wore a mask.

Lost in thought, she jumped a little in her seat when a guard pulled the door open to escort Iris in. The women embraced in a quick hug before taking their seats again. Iris pulled out a notepad, pen and voice recorder, not unlike the note taking setup Laurel used for her own work.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Iris spoke, vibrating with a nervous energy. “I’m not sure what to expect. It’s probably nothing, but things were going so well, and she just snapped.”

“It’s nothing,” Laurel reassured her. They had only met in passing a few times, but Laurel understood the bundle of nerves to her left. It must have felt like a leap to ask for help at all. “I got a lot done today no matter what. And I got to see my mom.”

“Right,” Iris nodded. “Your mom is Dr. Dinah Drake, right?” When Laurel nodded, Iris continued. “I took one of her 100-level Classics courses my freshman year. I didn’t know you then, or I would have said something.”

Laurel chuckled nervously. “No, Mom likes to keep work and life separate. It’s better you didn’t.”

Iris watched Laurel’s forced-pleasant, tight expression, conspicuously shuffling her papers to no apparent end. Her satin brown eyes crinkled in sympathy. “Oh, I shouldn’t have brought it up. I know how hard the weird mom relationship can be.”

Laurel stopped shuffling the case files and looked to Iris. In her warm face, Laurel saw genuine understanding. She opened her mouth to respond - whether to deny that there was anything wrong with her relationship with Dinah or to thank Iris, she didn’t actually know. Before she could chose,
Helena’s eyes lit with blue fire when she saw that her legal counsel visit was actually Iris West. When she recognized Laurel, she visibly recoiled. “Laurel Lance? What are you doing here?” She jerked her head back toward Iris and pointed aggressively with her chained hands. “I told you not to come back!”

Unimpressed, Iris leaned back in her seat with her arms crossed. “And in the time that you’ve known me, what would give you the impression I’d give up that easy?”

“Can we have some privacy, please?” Laurel spoke to the guard, who deliberated a moment before leaving the way she came in. “We just want to talk,” Laurel said gently to Helena, now seething.


Laurel’s gaze narrowed. “What are you afraid of, Helena?”

Helena’s attention shot to Laurel and in that fraction of a second before she resumed her menacing snarl, Helena’s face was white with fear. “Iris apparently thinks we’re friends and you can get me to talk to her again. Tell her she’s wrong, Laurel. Tell her about how we had one very awkward double date when I was doing your ex, and then I took you hostage. And then get the hell out, and don’t come back.”

There was a time, not very long ago, when this display might have intimidated Laurel. Helena had, in fact, successfully intimidated the hell out of Laurel not so long ago. But not today. Laurel leaned forward, face inches away from Helena, her eyes bright with challenge. “Tell us what you’re scared of, and we’ll leave.”

Helena studied the woman across from her with surprise. She didn’t retreat, but she let the sneer fall from her face. “It’s going to be bad. I don’t know when. You both have to leave. Now.” She turned to Iris, pleading with only her eyes. “Please go.”

Laurel backed off and Iris dropped her facade of willful obstinacy. “C’mon Helena, you have to give us something more than that,” Iris tested the waters.

“That’s all I got,” Helena said softly. “If you don’t leave now, I’ll make you leave.” Her face and
body held the assurance that her words were not a bluff.

“We can help you, if you just tell us what you know,” Laurel pressed her luck.

Helena closed her eyes, cursed under her breath and said, “You can’t do shit.” She was on her feet and her cuffed hands shot out to Laurel’s collar before either woman knew what was happening. She yanked the Laurel nearly over the table and hissed, “Don’t you dare bring her back here.” Laurel brought her hands up and broke Helena’s hold as guards flooded into the tiny room.

Laurel caught Helena’s look of shock at Laurel’s ability to break a simple collar-grab before the guards hauled her away.

Iris put a hand on Laurel’s back, both women panting from the sudden explosion of activity. “So, Plan B.”

“I’m gonna kick her ass. Again.”

“Easy, Sara, she was just trying to get us to leave,” Laurel murmured into her throat mic. “Iris, are our video feeds coming in?”

“Crystal clear,” Iris answered from STAR Labs. “We’re not seeing anything on IR except animals.” She took a scoop of popcorn from Cisco’s bowl. He playfully swatted at her hand, which she answered by shoving the whole handful in her mouth. “I still don’t see why I couldn’t be doing this out there with you guys, too,” she managed to speak after she got all the popcorn down.

Laurel sniggered over the radio, “Helena might actually kick my ass if she finds out I put you in danger, and then Sara is gonna kick her ass, and somehow Nyssa is going to get involved and it’s going to get really ugly.”

“I’d prefer to remain independent of your quarrel with this woman,” Nyssa’s voice replied.

The trio had fanned out in different directions around Iron Heights, looking for any signs of tampering or, well, anything at all that might indicate that something big was about to go down.
The ground at Laurel’s feet was beaten down and the trees and bushes featured broken branches and torn leaves. Her path had come from a well-maintained fire access road and led toward a broad clearing that surrounded the western side of Iron Heights.

“I think someone’s been coming this way,” Laurel said.

Iris moved closer to the split-screen monitors showing each video feed, focusing on Laurel’s. “Cisco, think you can make hers bigger?”

Still chewing, he made a few keystrokes and Laurel’s video feed took over one of the monitors. Iris and Cisco got a better view of what Laurel couldn’t see without infrared of her very own. “Woah, freeze Laurel,” Cisco practically threw his popcorn bowl out of the way. “There are three dudes about 50 feet in front of you.”

“Nyssa, Sara, did you get that? You need to get to Laurel’s position,” Iris couldn’t take her eyes off Laurel’s screen. She had dutifully frozen in place, but there was no telling whose heat signatures they were seeing and what would happen if they caught her.

“Oh the way,” and “Moving” came simultaneous, breathy replies.

Laurel inched forward in the darkness until she could see the three men. They were definitely Ghosts. That did not bode well in conjunction with Helena’s outburst. One shorter Ghost caught her attention. It could be Andy, she thought, then dismissed the thought. There’s no way she’d be that lucky.

Speaking of luck.

She leaned forward an inch too far and her boot crunched on a fallen branch. Three masked heads whipped in her direction.

“Oh, guys, might want to hurry,” Iris whispered over the radio.

Laurel retreated and backed up until her back was to the largest tree in the immediate area. She pulled out her tonfas. There was no way she was going to out run them. She held her breath and waited. Just a little closer….
“Iris, on the count of three, mute the radios,” Laurel whispered. “1...2...3…”

Iris slammed the volume control just in time for Laurel to open her mouth and unleash her sonic scream, knocking all three Ghosts back and off their feet.

Cisco looked at the video feed in askance. “Wait wait wait, that is not the sonic device I made for her…”

“Not now,” Iris waved him away and turned the volume back up. “Where are you guys?”

“Almost there,” Sara panted.

“Just wait,” Nyssa spoke evenly.

Laurel rushed forward, kicking the first Ghost she came across in the head and swinging a tonfa at the next one, trying to maintain the upper hand her sonic scream had given her. An arrow sailed into the shoulder of the third Ghost. Laurel didn’t have to turn to know that Nyssa was already behind her, manhandling the semi-unconscious Ghost on the ground.

After trading a few blows, Laurel realized she was engaged with the shorter Ghost. She parried thrusts from his large knife, concentrating too hard on how she might get the balaclava off his face and get a solid ID on the person. In her distraction, he got a clean slice across her arm and landed a solid elbow strike to her face.

Bringing his elbow to her face brought his entire body close to hers, though, and she returned the favor with a knee to his gut and brought the butt of a tonfa down on the back of his head. Sara burst through the clearing, bo staff at the ready, and moved to strike down Laurel’s opponent but Laurel stopped her with a raised hand. “He’s out.”

Nyssa stood over a pair of unconscious Ghosts, sheathing her sword with a pleased smirk. Laurel jerked her opponent’s balaclava off his face and her breath caught in her throat: it was Andy Diggle.

“We have to bring him back to STAR Labs,” Laurel said, sitting back on her haunches.
“What?” Sara grimaced, toeing the man with her boot.

“I’ll explain on the way,” Laurel sighed.

Diggle tore himself away from the blue padded cell in STAR Labs. Andy wouldn’t look at him or respond to questions, but he still couldn’t stop staring at his brother. Andy was right there, alive. Breathing and whole.

He wasn’t surprised to see Laurel leaning against the wall, watching him. He reached out and brought her in for a long hug.

“So what,” he spoke, mostly into her hair, “you got your sister back and decided to become the sibling fairy?”

Laurel’s shoulders shook with laughter against Diggle’s massive frame. He pressed a kiss into the crown of her head, carefully avoiding her bruised nose, and swung an arm around her to lead her out of the pipeline. “I thought I’d share the wealth.”

“He still won’t look at me,” Diggle added.

“He will,” Laurel gave him a meaningful look before they entered the main lab. With both teams, it was a flurry of activity.

When Oliver saw the pair, he broke off from his conversation with Barry. “Anything yet?”

Diggle only shook his head, much to Oliver’s frustration. “Maybe I should talk to him,” Oliver suggested. Diggle and Laurel exchanged a look without replying. Understanding crossed Oliver’s features and he actually appeared insulted. “What? I’m not going to torture him. It’s just, maybe…”
“Maybe he won’t talk to his brother, but he will talk to someone else,” Jason offered from his seat, idly turning over a small device in his hands. Harrison’s nostrils flared when he saw the device Jason was fiddling with. He snatched it out of the larger man’s hands with a harumph and secured it in a cabinet. Jason didn’t fight for it, instead he stared from his empty hands to Harrison’s turned back, blinking dumbly and opening and closing his mouth a few times but not speaking before giving up entirely.

“We need to know what he knows,” Sara got right to the point.

Iris looked between Barry and Diggle, sighing and set her shoulders. “She’s right. Helena said something big is going down. And if there are Ghosts here, working around Iron Heights, we should be worried.”

Barry took on a hurt puppy look and turned to Caitlin and Cisco. “Isn’t there something you guys can give him to get him to talk to us? We’re not interrogators and I don’t like where this is going.”

Caitlin waffled before responding. “Well, there’s sodium thiopental, but I’ve been looking over the screening on the cyanide capsule we pulled off his tooth and I’m not sure it will work. He’s been pumped so full of different chemicals, I don’t think his body will even register it.”

“Cisco?” Barry tried again.

“I could try to vibe off him, but there’s no guaranteeing I’ll see anything even relevant to their plans.”

All eyes turned to Diggle. Oliver spoke, “John, I think it’s your call.”

Diggle closed his eyes, taking three slow, deep breaths. He opened them again and saw Laurel standing front and center with the rest of the group behind her. It only took an almost imperceptible nod from her. “Oliver, do you think you and Jason could talk to him? Apply pressure, but don’t…”

Oliver stepped forward and put a firm hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We’ll take care of it.” Oliver looked back to Jason and gave a quick head tilt in the direction of the pipeline. When Jason passed Diggle, John stopped him with a hand on his chest and a firm stare. Jason nodded his understanding before Diggle released him.
The day went by slowly as an hour of awkward silence passed with Iris, Cisco, Caitlin and Laurel chatting while Diggle brooded and watched the door to the pipeline every ten seconds. Barry, Sara and Nyssa poured over the stats on the current Iron Heights prisoners before they all came to a grinding halt as the door slid open and Oliver and Jason returned. Jason was wiping something off his hands and tucking the rag into his back pocket.

“Okay.” Oliver clapped his hands together, “tomorrow night, they have a team orchestrating a mass breakout at Iron Heights.”

Barry was on his feet. “So we need to call Joe and Captain Singh. He can get them to bump up their security, get riot police there-”

“It’s not going to be that simple,” Oliver cut him off and Barry deflated. “We can tip them off, but we don’t even know what direction to send them. He wouldn’t give us anything more without, well, anyway. He said you and most of Central City’s first responders are going to be too busy tomorrow night.”

“What does that mean?” Barry was getting frustrated.

“If it were me,” Jason cleared his throat, “I’d have shit sparking chaos all over the city. Gas leaks, blown out bridges, anything to keep you and the cops occupied long enough for me to get what I want and leave.”

“And you didn’t get any more information?” Iris asked.

Oliver only shook his head. Diggle abruptly stood and marched toward the pipeline, but Oliver stayed him with a raised hand to his friend’s shoulder and a quiet word. “Don’t. We got everything we could without actually hurting him.”

“Does anyone else think that was a little too easy?” Cisco asked to no one in particular. The group exchanged a few worried looks, but no one spoke up.

“We need to game plan based on what we have,” Iris refocused the group.
They spent the better part of the day hashing out ideas, knocking down bad ideas and continuously moving forward. Caitlin pressed on with her tests on Andy’s blood, convinced there was more to the cocktail of chemicals than what she was seeing on the surface. Cisco, Harrison and Felicity went over the specs on the LIGHT guns and possible countermeasures, as they knew the Ghosts would most likely be employing their new toys.

Nyssa, Iris, Laurel and Jason made a surprisingly good team strategizing the most likely entry points Ghosts would use to gain access to Iron Heights and where they would need to assemble themselves, and guide law enforcement, rather than scrambling to react to the situation. They studied the schematics of the prison, mapping out possible weaknesses, routes in and out, and identifying key security checkpoints throughout the facility.

Laurel caught herself smiling at the sight of Oliver and Thea’s heads close together, next to Diggle and Barry, working together on identifying the meta prisoners and which human prisoners they’d need to look out for. Barry had captured all of these metas, but not all at once and not without help.

Jay Garrick watched over the program Felicity set up, combing the city for any indication that explosives had been planted, gas lines tampered with, anything suspicious. Cisco periodically leaned over Jay’s shoulder, narrowed his eyes and hummed in the back of his throat before setting back to work on reverse-engineering the LIGHT technology.

“Ugh,” Cisco threw down his tools. “Six hours and all I’ve got are the protective lenses. New plan, try not to get hit with the blasts from these guns. You may not be blinded, but you will still get knocked down really, really hard.”

Cisco pushed away from the table and surveyed the room. Everyone exhibited varying degrees of an exhaustion that could only be called “fried.” He strode purposefully to where Laurel sat and stood over her with his hands on his hips. “Laurel, we need a break, and you promised me.”

Laurel blinked in confusion, and then started to say “no” but Cisco beat her to the punch. “Uh, no, lady. You said next time you came to Central City, you and me were going for a night on the town.”

The bemused faces around the table were no help. Laurel sighed. “Yes and that was before I knew we’d be planning to stop HIVE from orchestrating a prison break. Also before I got cut and my face hit by an intentional elbow.”

“That’s all tomorrow night,” Cisco winked and began to sway his shoulders to music only he could hear. “Please,” he whined, “when are we all going to be in the same place again? I know you
people don’t sleep anyway.”

She looked to Caitlin who only shook her head and said, “He hasn’t shut up about it. I think you’re going to have to go.”

“We,” Cisco corrected her with a devilish grin.

And so nearly the entire pack - Diggle, Oliver, Felicity and Harrison politely declined - found themselves at Cisco’s favorite night spot.

Laurel fiddled with her usual ginger ale. She and Iris caught sight of Cisco and Caitlin dancing awkwardly. They exchanged a look and burst into giggles. When Barry walked in with a pretty blonde, Iris’s face fell, then immediately brightened again as she greeted the pair.

Iris introduced Patty as a CCPD officer who most definitely did not know about their extracurriculars, but was smitten with Barry. The feeling looked mutual. Barry shook his head and mouthed “No way” across the dance floor to Cisco’s broad gestures of invitation and Patty laughed, looping an arm through his and resting her head on his shoulder.

Laurel recognized the faraway look in Iris’s eyes. She nudged her new friend in the shoulder and nodded toward the dancefloor with a suggestive eyebrow waggle that got Iris covering her open-mouthed laugh.

“The music is a little different,” Jay Garrick’s large frame sidled alongside Laurel, “but even in this universe, this scene is exactly the same.”

He was watching Caitlin and Cisco, but mainly Caitlin, with warmth and longing, but then he directed the look right down to Laurel. There was something a little unsettling about him, but she placed it on the fact that he came from a parallel freaking dimension.

“That whole other-universes-thing is still on the weird side to me,” Laurel said, taking a small sip of her drink.
“I guess it would be strange to see right in front of you, but the idea is so simple it’s almost painful,” he spoke with affability, maintaining piercing blue eye contact a split second too long, and clinked his glass off of hers.

At the next table over, the hair on the back of Jason’s next rose. He didn’t care for this Jay Garrick character, with his fancy Earth-2 story and superpowers and Bruce-esque brooding and being just an inch or so taller than himself. His table had started out full, but Thea had quickly wandered off to snare a victim for the evening, and Sara had dragged an extremely reluctant Nyssa out onto a darker corner of the dancefloor.

He set his drink down and almost as quickly Sara reappeared, she scooped it up and inspected it in the dim club lights. “What are you drinking?” Her face and neck glistened with sweat.

Jason scowled at her. “Excuse you? We met, what, two times in Nanda Parbat and we’re bros now?”

Sara smiled coyly and raised a challenging brow at him. She took a sip, never breaking eye contact until the liquid hit her lips. She grimaced and stuck her tongue out, slamming the glass back down. “Yuck, what is that?”

“Roy Rogers. Did you know alcohol is bad for you?”

Sara’s mouth fell open, ready with a smart remark, then she turned to follow his line of sight and saw her sister engaged in a close conversation with Jay. Nyssa took note of the conversation, then sat herself in Jason’s way.

Sara tossed a leg over the barstool nearest to Jason. “If you hurt my sister, I will make you regret it.”

Jason appraised the small blonde next to him and gave her a solemn expression. “I’ve seen you in action, and you know what, I believe you.”

“Laurel needs someone who is going to stick around.” Sara straightened so that she was now side by side with him. “People like us don’t stick around.”
“Laurel is a grown ass woman,” Jason countered. “What makes you think I’m not going to stay?”

“Seriously?” Nyssa finally spoke, raising an incredulous brow.

“Or maybe,” Jason raised his glass and gestured between the sisters, “maybe she doesn’t want to stay. You have a lot more in common than you realize.”

Sara snorted. “You think my sister is going to throw everything away and ride off into the sunset with you? Live like we do, in the shadows? She’s so much better than that.”

“That she is.” Jason huffed and took a long pull from his glass, finishing it. “But she’s restless. They’re never going to give her a real place on their little team, and she knows it.”

Sara wanted to argue. She shot a look to Nyssa, but her lover’s grim expression confirmed that she agreed with Jason’s assessment. “When I took you in and trained you, we did not stay in Nanda Parbat, did we?” Nyssa asked. Sara shook her head, her lips pulled in a tight frown. “A warrior is like a flower. It cannot blossom in darkness, and not all flowers bloom in the same conditions. We find that travel and exploration are critical to the development of our soldiers.”

“Laurel’s not a soldier,” Sara countered, but even to her own ears the argument felt flat.

Nyssa’s expression took on a teasing glint. “She is certainly no one’s foot soldier. In the right conditions, she could be a general. In Star City, she will always be torn between her old life and the new. She will always put herself second to others.”

Jason slid off his bar stool, gave the pair a polite nod and wandered away toward the bar. Nyssa tossed a look back to Laurel, and then back to Sara, who seemed to bear the weight of the world. “I would advise her to expand her horizons, perhaps not with Mr. Todd…”

“I didn’t want this for her,” Sara interrupted. “I didn’t want her to even know about this life.”

Nyssa took Sara’s hand. “I know that. But you have to believe me when I say I trained the woman and I know she would have found this life one way or another. This is not your fault.”
“Have I thanked you yet,” Sara stretched her body across the table, dangerously close to Nyssa, “for training her when Oliver was being a stubborn asshole?”

Nyssa cocked her head and pretended to think. “Perhaps, perhaps not. You can thank me later tonight, if you don’t completely wear yourself out dancing.”

After Jason got a fresh Roy Rogers, he made his way to Laurel’s table, only to stop short when he saw she and Jay were no longer there. Iris, Barry and that blonde cop were chattering happily. The cop, naturally, saw him stop short of their table. Her eyes narrowed and she assessed him critically.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” she asked, causing Barry and Iris to turn in his direction. They exchanged a quick private look of panic, but Jason only shrugged.

“Just have one of those faces,” he replied, setting his drink on the table and scanning the crowd. The little group on the dance floor was easy to spot, especially with a behemoth like Jay Garrick at the center, alternating between spinning Caitlin and Laurel in swing style.

“Guess they don’t have hip hop on Earth-2,” Jason grumbled.

Iris had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop from laughing. She looked between Jason and the display on the dance floor. She rolled her dark eyes and tossed her head back in an exaggerated groan. “Ugh, Cisco is right. Just kiss already.”

Jason turned sharply to Iris, narrowed his eyes, then sucked on the tiny straw in his cherry soda. “You tell that to Sara I’ll-Gut-You-Like-A-Fish Lance over there.”

“Psh,” Iris waved a hand in Sara’s direction, “I’ll worry about Sara. Go get her, big guy,” she cheered him on with a quick slap on his butt and a thumbs up. Jason gaped at her for a moment before grinning, winking and heading toward the dance floor.

He made it just in time to catch Laurel as Jay spun her away and moved on to more swing moves with Caitlin. Not expecting him, Laurel collided with his chest, eliciting an “oof” and nearly spilling his drink.

“Are you always this graceful?” His eyes took on that familiar mischievous twinkle.
“Are you always around when I’m dancing with tall blonde men?”

Jason barked a laugh. “You got me there.” He offered a sip of his drink to her. At her little head shake, he persisted. “Trust me,” he said, bringing the glass closer to her.

They were standing so close, their hips and legs were brushing against each other. One of her hands rested on his side where she’d caught herself. Towering over her, his eyes still had a boyish gleam, but no malice. She took the glass and brought it to her mouth, first smelling it, then slowly tipping it back until the drink passed her lips and reached her tongue. The pleasant taste of cherry and cola was all there was too it.

“This is a cherry Coke,” she said, blinking up at him in confusion from under her long lashes.

“The proper name is a Roy Rogers,” he replied, taking the drink back.

Laurel’s mouth fell open and she rolled her eyes. “The proper name is a Roy Rogers”? Who even are you?”

“You know who I am,” he grinned down at her, one of his hands finding its way around the small of her back.

Her hand drifted up, tracing the silvery, faded J underneath the stubble on his cheek. Jason’s smile vanished. The hand on her back tightened and she saw something in his eyes she hadn’t seen yet, something between fear and need.

The gesture caught him off guard. He started to tuck his head away from her touch, but changed his mind, closing his eyes and letting her trace her fingers over the scar.

“He really did a number on you,” she spoke just loud enough for him to hear. When he opened his eyes, she dropped her hand and flushed. “I’m sorry, that was so inappropriate.”

Jason wanted to stop her retreat, but the glass in his hand got in the way. “No, I, um,” he started and stopped before deciding on the right phrasing. “No one ever even talks about it except me. Most people pretend like they don’t notice.”
“That’s kind of the worst, isn’t it,” she sighed and leaned a little closer into him, “when everyone sees it but they all keep pretending like you’re fine?”

“To be fair,” Jason smirked, hoping to lighten the mood, “I gave them pretty good reason to be afraid of bringing it up around me.”

Laurel studied him critically. He didn’t wither or shrink or cast his eyes away from hers. He met her stare head on, the way he confronted the dodgy awkwardness of his friends and family with blunt sarcasm, the way he dove into a fight by running dead center into the melee. When others were blocking out the memory of his funeral, Jason joked about the time Joker spent torturing him. When his mentor wouldn’t pursue any kind of lasting solution for Jason’s killer, he took justice into his own hands. It was a familiar feeling, as was the sting of rejection for it.

Looking down at her, Jason didn’t see pity. The few occasions when his Gotham family had acknowledged what happened to him were possibly worse than pretending there was nothing wrong with him - or that he was inherently bad. Watching their faces crumple sent his heart racing and his eyes tunneling into red. They put on quite the show of emotion for people who had let the Joker walk free and continue hurting people. No, they pitied him. They pitied that he didn’t have their self-control. It was his wild streak that sent him after Joker on his own in the first place, and he had always been too rough to be a Robin in the first place, right? Coming back as a killer was just the natural path for him, regardless of what happened.

No, Laurel did not pity him. She knew that feeling too well and would never willingly subject anyone else to it.

“You two,” Cisco’s voice interjected into their quiet moment, “having been hanging out with Oliver way too much and need to work on that whole ‘fun’ thing.”

Cisco held out a hand to Laurel and pouted. “You promised,” he grinned. Laurel gave Jason a sly smile, pulled his drink hand to her mouth to steal a sip before taking Cisco’s hand and letting him spin her away.

Jason looked down at his drink, muttering, “What is it with those two?”
Oliver held the new mask up to his eyes and frowned appreciatively. The protective lenses didn’t hinder his vision at all. “This is good work, Cisco.”

“Hey, I helped,” Felicity piped up, putting the finishing touches on Thea’s mask. Everyone now had spare masks with Cisco’s new lenses installed to combat the effects of the LIGHT guns. They still wouldn’t help the actual impact of the weapons, but the vision issues would at least be mitigated.

Caitlin made a pained noise from her work desk. Jay rubbed a comforting hand on her shoulders and offered quiet assurances that she would find the answer. At Harrison’s expectant look, Caitlin vented her previous frustration. “There’s a cocktail of chemicals in Andy’s blood sample, but I can’t see what it’s actually doing to him. It looks like nothing, but they wouldn’t be feeding him drugs for no reason.”

“Maybe it’s magic,” Mari McCabe suggested. She and Diggle returned from the pipeline after another fruitless attempt to talk to Andy.

“His behavior is unusual, even for him,” Diggle admitted. “Andy was always a loud mouth.”

“And Oliver,” Mari nodded in his direction, “your text said Damien Darhk is in on this and using magic.”

“The Ghosts are unusually strong and loyal,” Thea added.

“So…we’re going with magic potion?” Caitlin’s voice rose with skepticism.

“I have a magic necklace that lets me channel the essence of any animal,” Mari dead panned in response.

“Right,” Caitlin relented.
“Barry said Joe got the city moving on a credible but ill-defined threat,” Oliver attempted to draw the group’s focus. “We won’t be alone tonight, but we will definitely need your help. Thanks for coming, Vixen.”

Mari shrugged, “Hey, some jerk wants to use magic to let the worst of the worst loose near my backyard, it’s kind of my business.”

“Have any of you considered that Andy, and for that matter none of them, are being mind-controlled?” Harrison sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Blind loyalty to a charismatic despot is…”

“Very likely,” Jason finished his sentence with a firm voice. “But, I’ve dealt with human traffickers in our world,” Jason’s eyes swept to Diggle’s for a brief moment; “conditioning and suggestion are just as likely.”

Felicity returned to the computer where she had set up her monitoring application and ran a quick refresh on the state of Central City’s utilities, traffic patterns and any unusual electrical or gas emissions around the city. “Uh, Cisco, remember when you said that getting info out of Andy was a little too easy?” Cisco’s head popped up from his workstation and all conversation ceased. “Guys, I think we have a problem.”

“Thanks for coming with me again, Laur,” Iris pressed her damp palms against her jeans. “I really don’t think she’d take my visit…”

“Hey,” Laurel stopped her with a gentle hand over hers. “She would never want to hear it, but I care about her, too. It can’t hurt to give her a heads up.”

From the look on Helena’s face when the guard escorted her into the interview room, it might actually hurt. A lot. This time her hands were manacled to her feet and the guard refused to leave the room at Laurel’s request, leaving the trio stewing in an awkward silence for a few moments while Laurel and Iris mentally scrambled for some kind of code they could talk in.
Helena broke the silence for them. “Dammit Laurel, I told you not to bring her back,” she spat. The words were practically ground out from her clenched jaw, but her eyes betrayed a wild fear. Her body was so tense, her shackles trembled. She turned her nose up at Laurel. “What the hell happened to your face?”

“We just came,” Iris began carefully, “because tonight-“

“Today,” Helena cut her off, no longer interested in Laurel’s blackened eyes. She shot her stricken eyes to Laurel. “Get her out of here now.”

Gooseflesh prickled across Laurel’s arms. Iris sat up straighter, wrinkling her brow and still trying to process. “Today, you mean like…?”

Before she could finish the question, a perfectly-on-cue boom resonated from somewhere in the distance, shortly followed by the wail of sirens inside the prison. The guard cursed and hauled Helena up by her cuffed hands. “Move it, Bertinelli, back to quarters. You two,” she nodded at Laurel and Iris, “stay here until a guard comes to get you.”

The guard had to use most of her maneuvering skills to shove Helena, dragging her feet and still yelling at Laurel to leave, out the door. Once it shut, Laurel rushed to the main door. She swore when the handle stuck.

“They’re all going to be locked from inside and outside,” Iris commented. She was on her feet, pacing nervously. There wasn’t anywhere for them to go. She pulled out her cell phone, but it read “No Service.” Naturally.

“Maybe if we just sit tight, this room is secure,” Iris said, mostly to herself. Laurel’s expression was taut. She had been unarmed to enter the prison and now she cursed herself for not even trying to sneak something in her briefcase or her boot or her jacket.

A closer explosion rattled the doors, table and chairs, even the floor shook and the fluorescent lights flickered ominously. “Or not,” Laurel replied. “We have to assume everyone is going to be too busy to worry about us. Do you have any hair pins?”

Iris gave her a funny look, but fished a few strays out of her bag. Laurel nipped the plastic tips off and set to work on the main door, which lead out to the visitor lobby.
“You know how to pick locks?” Iris asked, leaning in to get a closer look.

“Eh,” Laurel grimaced, “not exactly. Sara used to brag about it, so I tried to learn. Never quite got the hang of it,” she trailed off, giving Iris a hopeless look.

Iris patted her on the shoulders. “Today is a good day to try again.”

Laurel was struggling. Her palms were sweating and they kept slipping and dropping the hair pin. Iris tried to keep an upbeat voice, but the sounds of all-out riot were getting louder, from both doors. The Ghosts had opened all the cells.

Both women popped to their feet and whipped around when the inner door leading deeper into the prison burst open, only to reveal an unencumbered Helena Bertinelli, panting and armed with a taser, baton, key ring and guard’s badge.

“Where’s the guard?” Laurel’s mind swirled on any number of awful scenarios.

“Nice to see you, too,” Helena snarked. “She’s safe and sound and sleeping it off in my cell. Shall we?” She stepped into the room and prepared to unlock the other door when it flung open. The Ghost invading their interview room knocked Helena back and over the interview table. Iris stumbled to the corner, cowering under the man’s attention. He leveled the LIGHT gun at her, but dropped first to his knees, and then onto his face when Laurel bashed him across the back of his head and neck with the metal chair.

“About my face?” Laurel dropped the chair. “You should see the other guy.”

Iris quickly shoved the door back closed. “Okay, not that way.”

“They will have dropped the security gates by now anyway.” Laurel scooped the gun up and handed it to Iris. “How are you with guns?”

“Have you met my dad?” Iris held the rifle-like weapon as easily as a soldier.

“Good point,” Laurel nodded and continued checking the Ghost for weapons. She came up with
another taser and one collapsible baton. It would have to do.

Helena pulled the inner door closed, but not enough that she couldn’t peak an eye out on the rapidly dissolving situation outside. “Now what?”

“Is there any way we can make it to the breach in the fence?” Laurel asked.

Helena gave a grim head shake. “The extra guards they brought in are already scattered. Those guns,” she nodded at the weapon in Iris’s hands, “are doing some serious damage. They’re handing them out to prisoners.”

“What about the prison’s quick response team?” Iris asked.

“They got hit first. It looked like a few Ghosts were planted in the team. They can’t stay organized long enough to do anything about this,” Helena answered.

“Okay,” Laurel nodded. “Plan B was to move toward the roof if we ended up inside the prison. We just need to get to D Block.”

“Oh, just D Block,” Helena rolled her eyes. “You do know what D Block is, right?”

“Are you up for it?” Laurel gave Helena a challenging smile.

Helena positioned herself by the door, ready to come out swinging. She returned Laurel’s smile. “Princess, I own D Block.”

Captain Singh ran a hand down his face, taking a film of sweat with it. Being a newlywed in Central City was just not what it used to be, especially not for a police captain. He cleared his
throat and rattled off another series of instructions for his lieutenants.

Get the gate situation under control, then get the troops inside to put a stop to the rioting. It seemed simple enough, but these bastards were organized. The officers had already stopped even attempting to move on their position after nearly an entire platoon got hit with that damn light.

Now the metas were pouring out, mixing with the general pop of the prison, and turning the prison fence line into a pitched battle.

As if his thoughts were being broadcast, a familiar red blur zoomed up to him. He breathed a sigh of relief, then cringed. The Flash was not looking too hot.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Flash spoke through his speed-modulated voice. “I can’t stay; there are still people in the city who need me.” Barry juggled speaking over listening to the rapid-fire instructions he was getting from Felicity and Jay in his ear piece. A bridge packed with rush-hour traffic was on the verge of collapsing.

“I know, I know,” Singh nodded solemnly. He was getting regular radio updates about the all-out chaos in Central City, mitigated almost exclusively by the hero standing before him and the city’s fire and EMT crews.

“Listen,” Flash continued, “I have friends coming to help you. They’re with the Green Arrow.”

Singh’s lip curled, but he relented. “We’re not big fans of that guy, but a friend of the Flash is a friend of ours. I’ll tell my guys to let them through.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Barry gave him a small salute with his forefingers.

Before Singh could thank him in return or wish him luck, the Flash was off in a whir of wind and red lightning.

Joe West read over the visitor sign-in sheet and compared it to the guard’s accountability check of all the civilians safely evacuated from the prison as soon as the alarms sounded.
Normal visitation hours had come and gone, so very few people were left in the guest lobby. Only two names on the sign-in sheet were currently unaccounted for. He crumpled the paper, nearly tore it to pieces, but checked himself. He smoothed it out as best he could before handing it back to the emergency response coordinator currently in charge of corralling all civilians and prison staff who had successfully evacuated onto a pair of government buses.

Most of the prison staff, except the corrections officers and quick response team, had made it out. The emergency response leaders were calling it a miracle. Joe knew it was only because HIVE wanted them out of the way.

Joe made his way, grumbling and heart pounding, a migraine threatening to take over his vision, to where Captain Singh stood, coordinating a response with the Green Arrow, of all people. The sight of Oliver Queen did not help Joe’s mood, despite Barry’s pleading assurances that the man was here to help. He caused more trouble than he ever solved. Hell, HIVE was his problem in Star City in the first place.

He stood by, not one to interrupt his boss, but impatient to talk to anyone about getting inside Iron Heights to find his daughter. Green Arrow rattled off the various points of attack his team could hit from their concealed positions. Singh didn’t like it, but the police department was not trained or prepared for the dug-in battle they found themselves in, and certainly not once the metas started getting out. The local Army unit was several hours out still and an air strike was out of the question.

The basics of the plan seemed to consist of breaking off the contact between the Ghosts manning trucks and supplies on their escape route, pushing the prisoners back and shoring up the fence line until the Army arrived to restore order inside the prison.

“Wait, what about the people still inside?” Joe’s voice wavered, drawing the attention of both men.

Singh’s face was a brick wall. “We don’t have the manpower. The best thing we can do for them and for the rest of Central City is keep as many of these prisoners from escaping as possible.”

“My daughter is in there!” Joe lost his composure. He directed his words to Oliver. “And so is Laurel Lance. Just send me, and a small task force. We can’t just leave them,” Joe turned his attention back to Singh, his eyes pleading.

“I’m sorry, detective,” Singh’s hard look faltered for a breath, “but we need you out here. I’m sure
your daughter and Ms. Lance took shelter in a secured room and will be fine. You need to go back
to the barrier on the north end and make sure the officers understand their orders. They need to see
you.”

Joe felt like he’d been hit in the chest. Singh had already moved on to listening to reports from
other response coordinators and officers. Joe could vaguely hear that the situation was not good.
They were outnumbered and out-gunned. The Ghosts had a clean path in and out of the prison,
funneling weapons in and select prisoners out to waiting exit vehicles. Anything they could have
used to block the roadways was in use in Central City on the myriad disasters already taking place.
The city’s emergency response was stretched to its breaking point.

“Detective,” Oliver’s modulated voice called. Joe snapped out of his daze. Green Arrow had begun
moving toward the tree line where his own team of vigilantes was setting up. He motioned with his
head for Joe to follow.

“Detective!” a bright voice called from the other direction. Patty Spivot jogged up to him, decked
out in riot response gear, packing a B.O.O.T. rifle and a sling of extra collars. “I’ve been looking
all over for you.”

Joe’s entire body lit up. He grabbed Patty by her shoulders, undeterred by her shocked expression.
“Spivot, yes, great! You trust the Flash, right?” She nodded. “And you trust me?” She nodded
again. “Good. I’m gonna need you to do something for me that you’re not going to like or
understand, but you just have to trust me.”

Green Arrow led the pair to the larger group. Spartan was laying out the basics of their plan. They
needed to stay focused on stopping the Ghosts from escaping. Disabling vehicles and killing as
many Ghosts as possible was the standing order of the day. If the metas got out, they would deal
with that as the situations arose. Jay Garrick was standing by with doses of Velocity 9 to at least
temporarily get some speed, while Caitlin, Cisco and Harrison went over their weapons array
they’d previously used on the imprisoned superhumans.

Patty skidded to a halt when she saw them, her brow furrowing and her entire body screaming
“NO.” “These are the people Flash told us to work with? That’s the Red Hood,” she pointed at
Jason, who gave her a small but friendly wave in return. “That was you last night,” she gasped,
eyes narrowing dangerously and pointing an accusatory finger at Jason who shrugged nonchalantly
and returned to packing rounds into magazines.

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Joe spoke quickly, trying to mollify her. “But Patty, Iris is in there.” His
voice cracked.
The rejection left Patty’s face. She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, unsure how to respond.

“Iris and Laurel are trapped inside,” Green Arrow announced.

“What,” Sara practically growled, decked out as the Canary for the first time since her resurrection.

Oliver held up a hand to stop her and any other commentary on the issue. “Canary, you and Red Hood need to go in and get them. You had a game plan for escape, so you know how to get in and out, right?”

“Prison is sort of my bag,” Jason responded, checking his handguns and re-holstering them.

Oliver pulled Sara aside and asked her quietly, “Are you good for this?”

She stared up at him with an icy gaze from behind her dark mask, “That is my sister. Of course I am.”

“Spivot is going with you,” Joe announced.

Jason snorted. “No offense, Daisy Do-Right, but Canary and I can handle a little snatch-and-grab without you slowing us down.”

Patty’s eyes narrowed at him. “None taken, Red Hood. But I happen to know Iron Heights like the back of my hand. I have studied the case files on every prisoner in there, and not only have I helped the Flash take down metas, I’ve actually caught the Flash all on my own. If Detective West wants me to go find Iris, I’m going in there with or without your help.”

Jason stared at her, a blank red helmet unmoving. He was impressed. Canary rolled her eyes and could have growled, again. “She has a point and a cool gun. We’re wasting time. Let’s go.”
“I knew it!” Helena shouted over the din and chaos, twirling the broken-off broom handle as a makeshift bo staff and cleanly knocking out a prisoner who tried to bum rush her. “I saw the Black Canary on the news and I knew it had to be Oliver’s old girlfriend. Are you guys back together? Is he not with Felicity anymore?”

Laurel, now wielding both batons, sidestepped a wild swing from a large prisoner and brought one of the batons down hard between his shoulders, dropping him like a sack of potatoes. “Is this really the time?” Laurel asked, huffing for breath and dodging another prisoner just trying to run for cover. Iris stayed in-between the two women. The LIGHT gun turned out to have a fatal flaw: the damn thing needed to charge between shots. When it was working though, Iris could clear their way for at least a few minutes.

Helena shrugged. “We got a long way to D Block.” She shot the stick out and tripped another prisoner who was beating on someone much smaller than he was. “May as well catch up, right?” She grinned.

“Down!” Iris commanded, stepping out from her shelter between Laurel and Helena. She shouldered the weapon and fired down the pathway. When the pulse of white light faded, their path was littered with unconscious or felled and moaning prisoners. “Why the hell didn’t you ever talk to me like this?” Iris asked Helena.

“You were interviewing me,” Helena smiled and slung her staff over her shoulders. “Now we’re just hanging out.”

“This is hanging out to you?” Iris smirked, incredulous.

“I’m having a great time.” Helena started a stroll back in the direction of D Block. “C’mom Laurel. Tell me the gossip.”

Laurel groaned and rolled her eyes. “No, we’re not together, and for the record, ew. He’s very happy with Felicity and I am very happy for him. It is not like that between us.”

“Oh yeah, right.” Helena playfully twirled the broom handle. “That man has one flavor and only one flavor: bad bitches in masks who can keep up with him. Felicity is his beard.”

Laurel’s mouth hung open, aghast. Before she could respond, they rounded a corner and heard the
sounds of another pack of prisoners beating on someone. Helena squinted at the group, then, without a word, broke off in a sprint toward the melee.

“Woah, woah,” was all Iris got out before she and Laurel dashed to follow.

Helena leapt onto the back of the nearest inmate, using the broom handle to put him into a choke hold and then spin him to the floor. She stood over him, panting, as her compatriots caught up and the pack of inmates broke apart to let their leader through.

When the group split, Laurel and Iris finally saw what had gotten Helena’s attention. A badly beaten corrections officer lay on the floor in the fetal position. The group’s leader leered at the trio of women, rubbing his belly and licking his lips. “Bertinelli,” he breathed, “this doesn’t concern you. But, uh, you leave those two, and we’ll let you be on your way.”

Laurel put her batons up in a fighting stance, much to the amusement of the mixed pack of male and female inmates. Some of them had improvised weapons, but most were unarmed. Iris swallowed hard. Her gun hadn’t fully reset itself yet and she hadn’t quite figured out what the timing was on the damn thing.

Helena smirked. “I’ve kicked your ass enough times. What’s one more for old time’s sake?”

“I don’t know if you’re having trouble counting,” the prisoner’s voice rose with rage, “but there’s about 15 of us, and three of you.”

“Don’t worry,” Laurel matched Helena’s cocky smirk, “we’ll be gentle.”

The man bellowed and dove for Laurel, only to catch Helena’s improvised bo staff with his face, leaving him bleeding and cursing. The more daring and aggressive of his group rushed toward the women. In the extremely short amount of time they’d fought together, Laurel and Helena adopted an easy back-to-back posture, which had the double benefit of 360-degrees of fight coverage and relative cover for Iris, who had almost no hand-to-hand training.

Despite her time behind bars, Helena didn’t seem the least bit rusty on her technique. She swung the staff and blocked hits, periodically dropping one with a kick or using the stick to break an arm with a complicated bar maneuver. Laurel was a bit rusty on escrima sticks, but they were close enough to her tonfas. She struck with them like natural extensions of her arms. She swung at one opponent, then pulled her arm back to hit another with her elbow, before shifting her weight and
hitting a third in the gut with her knee and following on his temple with her other baton.

A particularly scrappy inmate managed to get past both Helena and Laurel and darted up to Iris. She raised the LIGHT gun, cursing all technology. When the inmate darted forward again, capitalizing on her hesitation, Iris swung the gun onto his temple like a bat. Helena paused her own onslaught to give her friend an impressed harrumph.

In Helena’s distraction, she didn’t notice that the group’s leader had composed himself and stood up behind her. He shot his hands out, grabbing her neck and hips, and threw her against the cement wall, knocking the wind out of her. He was on her instantly, bearing down with both hands on her throat. She scrambled to bring her feet up, but he stilled her with a single leg pressing her against the wall. Her vision began to swim and darken around the edges, when his grip slackened, his head jerked to the side, and he slumped to the damp floor in a heap.

Laurel stood over him, blood dripping off one of her batons and a new bruise already blossoming on her cheek. Helena gasped as air returned to her lungs, but she managed to stay standing. Laurel held a hand out to help and offered Helena a wry smile. “So, are we girlfriends yet?”

Helena took her hand and stepped over the prisoner. “I’ve been doing hard time,” Helena replied flatly. “We’re going to have to get a lot closer for that.”

“Let’s move,” Iris was huffing and panting.

Helena looked her up and down critically. “What did you just do?”

“Well, I beat up two more guys with this thing,” she gestured with the LIGHT gun, “and then I dragged the guard into a cell and locked him in. Seemed like the safest thing to do.”

Laurel and Helena exchanged proud sturgeon faces. “She’s handy,” Laurel stated.

“If we live through this,” Helena said, “we might have to make this a regular thing.”
Oliver jumped clean over the barricade in his way, launching two arrows that found their targets in two Ghosts as he went. Nyssa was not far behind him, alternating between her bow and sword for closer enemies.

Spartan and Speedy had opted for the other direction, but were pinned down under a volley of blasts from those damn LIGHT guns. Even with the protective lenses in the extra mask Cisco had given him, it still burned his retinas and nothing but taking cover could alleviate the whumping blows of the weapons.

One of the Ghosts hit with his arrow bounced back up, to Oliver’s growling frustration. He swung his bow across the man’s head, but, for a person with an arrow sticking out of his chest, he nimbly dodged the swing and came back with his fists. They exchanged blows, Oliver growing more concerned by his opponent’s endurance and strength. It wouldn’t be normal for someone like him, let alone seriously wounded. He brought his head back and then smashed it into the Ghost’s face, sending him stumbling backwards. Before he could charge back again, an arrow burst through his throat. He finally dropped to his knees and then into the dirt.

Nyssa stood behind him looking vaguely annoyed. “Are you quite finished?”

“They’re getting stronger,” Oliver snarled back, gauging their situation again. They hadn’t made much headway. The Ghosts still had multiple clean pathways in and out of the prison, and into the woods leading to a maze of roads in all directions.

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” Nyssa replied, slinging her bow across her back.

Green Arrow and Nyssa continued their steady trot into the enemy’s lines, and came up short when they found a group of Ghosts intermingled with vehicles and prisoners. Empty crates that once held LIGHT guns were scattered and several prisoners were already impatiently waiting in the small all-terrain vehicles.

Oliver tapped his throat mic. “Uh, team, they’ve broken into the maximum security wing.”

Chien Na Wei ticked her head to the side and a predatory gleam slid onto her face. Joey Monteleone formed a ball of flaming tar in both hands, quaking with rage at having been denied the use of his abilities for so long.
Oliver and Nyssa nocked arrows, but remained where they stood, neither entirely sure how to react to the man with flaming balls of asphalt in his hands and appearing to leak tar from every exposed orifice.

“Overwatch,” Green Arrow began carefully, “how exactly did the Flash imprison the flaming tar person?”

Before Felicity could respond, Chien Na Wei launched herself screaming at Green Arrow. He reacted quickly, but she was faster and his arrow narrowly missed her. She hit him with her full weight and sent both of them rolling to the dirt. She popped up first, whipping out her curved knives and grinning wickedly at Oliver.

“Still alive, Arrow?”

“You’re not leaving Iron Heights, China White,” Oliver nocked another arrow as smoothly as he rolled back to standing.

Her eyes narrowed to slits and she charged at him again, easily ducking his arrow and slicing at him with her karambit knives. “My name,” she roared, punctuating each word with a slice, “is Chien. Na. Wei.”

She drew blood and he brought his bow up to strike the underside of her chin. They were rudely interrupted when Nyssa tackled Oliver just in time to miss a flaming ball of tar thrown by Monteleone.

“I shot him,” she panted behind the thin fabric of her mask, “My arrows melted.”

“You need a nitrous bomb,” Caitlin’s voice came over their radios. “Or something really, really cold.”

“Yeah because I carry nitrous on me, Overwatch,” Oliver snapped back. The pair ran and dove behind one of the vehicles, narrowly missing another tar bomb.

Chien Na Wei hissed at the man, “Stop it! Those are our way out.” She twirled her knives in her hands and led the small troop of Ghosts to encircle the disabled vehicle.
Oliver would never, ever admit it to the man, but all he could think about was how badly this situation called for Barry Allen. He even regretted sending Jason, of all people, away.

A rumbling of engines sounded from not far away. Oliver closed his eyes and counted to three. As if this situation could get worse, the Ghosts had back up.

“Hold it down for just a few more seconds, guys,” Felicity’s breathless voice finally responded. “Cisco says he is bringing the cavalry.”

Oliver and Nyssa exchanged a blank look between their matching silvery lenses. They jumped up to square off with Chien and the Ghosts.

“Good,” she drawled. “I didn’t want to kill you like a dog.”

Green Arrow juked left and launched an arrow into the throat of the Ghost closest to his right. It had been effective enough for Nyssa. Chien was on him in an instant in a whirl of razor-sharp blades. He blocked with his bow, but wasn’t as quick and got more shallow cuts.

Nyssa held her own against three Ghosts. Oliver was almost loath to miss the sight of the true Heir to the Demon in action against opponents worthy of her. One went down, then she brought down another with her sword. But Monteleone was there, his hands alight with burning tar again.

Chien saw Monteleone hesitating over killing Ghosts along with Nyssa, and roared at him, “They are disposable, we are not! Kill her!”

At her command, Monteleone wound up to throw a tar bomb at the pair of Nyssa and the Ghost she was currently grappling with. A blast of icy blue air hit his flaming hand and he fell to the ground screaming, his hand a now useless block of ice.

Oliver, Nyssa and Chien whipped their heads to see a pair of ATV’s carrying Leonard Snart and Mick Rory, jackets covering their prison khakis. Leonard held his cold gun out at Monteleone and smirked. “He doesn’t look so tough to me.”

Cisco hopped off the back of Leonard’s ATV. Lisa Snart and Mick dismounted their ATV, their
own specially-made guns drawn down on Chien and the remaining Ghosts. When Chien moved as if she was going to attack, Lisa fired her gold gun at the Ghost nearest to her, instantly encasing him in liquid metal. “You sure you want to make this a party, blondie?” Mick asked with a little too much relish.

“Now now, Mick, I told Cisco he gets one favor,” Leonard clucked his tongue. “Killing all of them seems like more than one favor to me, and I don’t think he wants to owe us, do you Cisco?”

Cisco rolled his eyes and sighed, crossing his arms and shaking his head silently.

Leonard smiled coyly and then gestured between Chien, the Ghosts and their vehicles. “Go on, get out of here, ya scamps, before Mr. Rory gets trigger happy.”

The two groups watched each other like packs of wolves in a standoff. Chien took a cautious step backward. She jerked her head toward Monteleone and two of the Ghosts scooped him off the ground. They piled into one of the remaining functional vehicles and drove away, to the astonishment of Oliver and Nyssa who had stood by with their bows drawn during the entire exchange.

Leonard remounted his ATV. “C’mon Mick, Lisa. Cisco, you tell Barry we’re even.”

Mick sat on his ATV and revved the engine without any acknowledgement of the other vigilantes present. Lisa turned to Cisco with a pleased smile. “It was nice seeing you again, cutie,” she bit her lip before impulsively kissing him on the cheek. She hopped on her brother’s ATV and pulled a helmet over her head.

“Nice seeing you, too, Golden Glider,” Cisco responded, blush tinting his ears. He gave them a half-hearted wave as Mick lead the way out.

“A prison break,” Leonard shook his head and started the engine of his ATV. “How original.” He followed Mick’s path out into the woods.

Green Arrow finally lowered his bow. He turned to Cisco, astonished. “You do realize we just let one of the most dangerous members of the Triad free, along with a meta that creates fireballs and a team of -”
“You’re welcome,” Cisco cut him off. “We’ll worry about Tar Pit and them?” He waved a
dismissive hand in the direction the Snarts and Mick had driven in. “They mostly just rob stuff.
Harmless.”

“She’s right, you know.” Nyssa removed her goggles and took stock of the situation. They had
secured one entry and exit point, at least. They would need to get the construction team here fast to
shore up the fence before the Ghosts or other prisoners started making use of it again.

“What are you talking about?” Oliver slung his bow and hissed at the cuts on his arms. Perhaps a
short sleeve uniform was a bad idea.

“Chien. You call her China White, but you know her name, do you not?”

“What is your point?” Oliver sighed.

“You speak Mandarin and Cantonese,” Nyssa pulled her mask down. “I would try to kill you if you
called me some racist nickname.”

Oliver’s jaw hung open. Nyssa slung her own bow and moved purposefully back down the path to
retrieve the people to secure the fence. Cisco hurried to catch up with her, his eyes glowing with
wonder. She caught him staring and he grinned and held up a fist. “You pound it,” he suggested.
She narrowed her eyes, then relented and returned the gesture, tapping her fist against his. “Yes,
drag him,” Cisco beamed at her.

“Guys, while you’re making fun of me,” Oliver called ahead, “is that what I think it is?”

The skies darkened with ominous clouds and the wind steadily rose. Nyssa and Cisco stopped on
the trail and looked up. Now it was Nyssa’s turn to stare slack-jawed.

“Oh shit,” Cisco whispered. The clouds concentrated over the largest breach in the prison’s fence
and began to swirl and coalesce into a whirling finger reaching down from the sky. “The Weather
Wizard is out.”
Laurel had not felt exhaustion this deep in her bones since her days training with Nyssa, or maybe even during the fallout of Oliver’s absconding with Sara and their apparent deaths. Each hit - given and received - reverberated through her entire body. The pain and tiredness seemed to simply pile on itself. Every glance at Helena and Iris confirmed they felt the same. But the women kept moving. They kept their weapons up and fought past each obstacle, a slow, grinding process wearing all of them into dust.

Their slow progress to D Block had earned them a small cohort of followers, some more helpful than others, mostly Helena’s students and a few of the more reasonable guards who had managed to survive the initial outbreak. Dampness had turned to puddles splattered along the cement passageways. Damaged pipes alternately dripped, sprayed and dumped foul-smelling water, actually managing to make their journey even less pleasant.

They were so close to the D Block chow hall, Helena could taste it. She gagged a little when she remembered the taste of the so-called “nutrition loaf” the rowdy D Block crowd was fed. Her knuckles bled, mixing with the sweat on her palms and making her grip on her broomstick-bo staff tenuous at best. Her arms felt like jelly from the nearly nonstop fighting. In an ironic twist, prison made her soft. She’d have to remember to laugh about it later. At the moment, a pack of needy eyes were watching her every move, openly praying that she’d be the one to deliver them from this hell.

Strangely, she didn’t sense that need from Iris or Laurel, Laurel whom she’d once taken hostage as easily as a child. Apparently some things had changed for Laurel Lance since they last saw each other.

In their time together, Iris had never let on she was this much of a badass. Sure, she had attitude for days and never balked at Helena’s patented intimidation tactics, but taking the rear guard with a high-tech gun while they moved on foot through a totally unguarded Iron Heights was a different flavor of tough. She was even nonplussed by the fact that Laurel was apparently moonlighting as a masked vigilante. Helena bookmarked that as another conversation for later.

“I don’t understand why we’re heading into D Block,” one of the guards said between labored breaths. “Isn’t that the worst place we could be going?”

“There’s a design flaw in the kitchen’s ventilation system,” Laurel responded without turning around to acknowledge the smaller man or slowing her stride. “If they stick to the plan, by the time we get there, someone on the outside will have disabled and removed the A/C unit on the roof and we’ll all be able to get out through the vent.”
“How could we have a weakness that big and not know about it?” The guard was growing agitated.

“It requires someone on the outside to remove an industrial A/C unit the size of car, genius,” Helena snapped. The guard stopped asking questions.

When they reached the large, heavy doors to the chow hall, the group split to the sides to remain out of sight of the narrow tempered windows. Helena and Laurel each sneaked a look, each hoping that the area would be impossibly cleared out already given its proximity to the largest fence breach.

That was hoping far too much. Both women ducked away from the windows almost as quickly as they’d approached, Helena shooting a worried look to Laurel. If the journey here had been tough, getting through the next crucible would an obstacle course through hell.

Danny Brickwell stood on a table near the front and center of the large room, giving his brand of an inspiration speech while Ghosts and a few prisoners distributed weapons and inspected each volunteer.

“You’ve seen it,” Brick roared to his eager audience, “these men have more power than any of you have ever known. Now it’s your turn! You join with HIVE, you’ll be like gods in the new world!”

Select prisoners were being ushered out by Ghosts. When one was kicked back and knocked to the deck, Brick buckled with laughter and his audience followed. “Not everyone has what it takes,” he spoke through chuckles, wiping away tears of laughter.

Iris scooted closer to Helena and whispered, “There’s no other way to the kitchen?” Helena shot a grim look to the two guards and smattering of other prisoners with them. The guards both shook their heads in silent defeat.

“Okay, okay,” Helena nodded resolutely and took another peek through the window. “There’s about seventy five of them, and,” she did a quick count, “ten of us. Laurel and I can take at least three each, and Iris, if you use that stupid thing right you can knock down at least half of those assholes…”

“You haven’t fought a Ghost yet,” Laurel interrupted Helena’s train. “Brick’s right. They’re stronger and faster than normal humans, and they don’t go down easy. And we have one LIGHT gun, but I count at least ten floating around that room.”
Helena and Iris simultaneously opened their mouths to argue, but were cut off when the chow hall doors swung open. The group froze for a split second, gaping at the pair of Ghosts and pack of prisoners staring openly at them. Brick barked a laugh and ordered the men to bring them in. A few of the prisoners who’d followed Helena broke off in a wild sprint back the way they’d come. The Ghosts weren’t interested in pursuing. The quarry right in front of them was plenty.

The three women in charge exchanged wary glances until Helena sighed with disgust and threw down her weapon. Laurel, Iris and the others followed suit and the Ghosts ushered them in without force. The prisoners erupted into catcalls, derisive shouts, even spitting and throwing sundry food and flotsam at the beleaguered team. More than a few called for Helena’s head, probably still sore from past fights. A handful seemed to recognize Laurel as a county lawyer responsible for imprisoning people like themselves. They were especially angry.

Brick recognized her immediately. “You’re a little outside your jurisdiction, Miss Lance,” he shouted over the din, quieting the prisoners.

Iris and Helena scanned the large cafeteria. Most of the tables had been overturned or pushed aside. A handful of Ghosts had been screening and ushering prisoners through an open gate in the back, undoubtedly leading toward more open gates and the opened fence. Behind them was a plexiglas-walled guard room and pair of spiral metal staircases leading up to twin catwalks overhead. On one side was another row of cells, the other was gated off and appeared to lead to an upper floor of the large kitchen underneath. Iris squinted when she thought she saw movement behind the doors, but reverted her attention to the prisoners and Ghosts closer to her. On the miracle chance that Green Arrow and the others had stuck to the plan, there was no sense in drawing any attention to that area.

“I wanted to see for myself if the rumors were true, Brick,” Laurel smirked and jutted her chin out.

“And what rumors would those be?” Brick chuckled. Lance had a reputation for being a cocky little shit in trial and he could see why. Even here she bowed up to him.

“I heard you got caught because you got beat up by a little girl.” You could have heard a pin drop. Iris’s eyes bugged nearly out of her head and Helena audibly choked. “I heard it was a little blonde girl in a mask who didn’t even know what she was doing. Or was it one of the Robin Hood wannabes?” Laurel started to pace in a leisurely circle. “You know how lowlifes are; none of them can keep their stories straight. So is it true?”

Brick took slow, decisive steps down off the table until he loomed over Laurel. They hadn’t been this close since she’d last faced him early in her Black Canary days. Last time she’d had an exit
strategy. At the moment, all she had was a Hail Mary.

“Look around, Lance,” his voice rumbled low in his throat. “You’re not in the courtroom. There’s no bailiff here to protect you when you run your mouth.”

Laurel didn’t flinch away from him, but her hitched breathing betrayed her. He laughed in her face. It started as a low chuckle, then his shoulders started to shake and it became roaring hilarity. The prisoners, hesitant at first, joined with gusto. “Kill Bertinelli,” Brick commanded without taking his eyes off Laurel. “I don’t care what you do with the others.

At the flurry of movement, Laurel’s pulse quickened. Her eyes flew around the room, between the snarling Helena, kicking and flailing against the sea of prisoners descending on her, and the shrieking Iris displaying an impressive array of kicking, biting and scratching at anyone unfortunate enough to get too close to her.

“Stop,” another force barked. One of the few remaining Ghosts stepped forward, silencing the chow hall once more. Brick balked, nostrils flaring in indignation. “HIVE has an offer for you, Helena Bertinelli.”

The inmates holding her arms hesitantly released her. Helena stepped forward, shooting a cautious glance toward Laurel and Iris behind her, and then sizing up the Ghost. “What do you have for me?”

“Join HIVE,” the Ghost responded, his hands firmly on the LIGHT gun. “If you do, you’ll have a place in the new world.”

The pair continued a slow, predatory circle around each other until Helena saw what she was looking for. She smirked. “Sorry, I’ve heard better offers.” She lunged for the gun, but the Ghost was faster. In a flash of blinding light, Helena was sent flying backwards and unconscious to the ground. Iris covered her strangled scream with her hands when the bright white concussion of light faded.

The Ghosts resumed their work, talking to each other and ignoring Brick entirely, something the inmates were starting to notice. It was certainly something Laurel noticed. Brick was doing himself no favors, sweating profusely and his neck turning a shade of red matching his namesake.

“Looks like you’re not as in charge as you thought you were,” Laurel challenged him. In the back
of her mind, she knew this was a bad idea. She knew it would never work, but they were hopelessly outnumbered and with Helena down, they stood even less of a chance making it past this mass of people and to the safety of their team.

It felt like an especially bad idea when the back of Brick’s hand connected with her cheek, sending her stumbling almost to her knees, but not quite.

She wiped the blood away from her lips and forced herself to laugh. “Is that all you got?” She stood to her full height. Laurel’s fists balled at her sides, she dropped her weight and launched upward again through her hips, putting everything she had into a right hook across Brick’s jaw. Her hand exploded with pain but she kept her guard up. His head barely moved and he appeared actually stunned. The inmates stopped, progressively shushing each other and drawing the entire group in to watch the fight. “Prove it, Brick. Prove it to everyone here that you didn’t get beat up by a little blonde girl.”

Laurel took a deep breath and squared off with one especially enraged Danny Brickwell.

Sara, Patty and Jason pushed out of the second floor doors of the kitchen storage area. No one noticed because they were entirely too distracted by the fight going on in the center of the chow hall.

The three leaned over the railing. Patty was aghast. “What is she doing?”

“I think she has a thing for bareknuckle-boxing dudes three times her size,” Jason sighed.

Sara’s chest swelled with pride and an unfettered smile broke out onto her lips. “That is my sister.”

She tossed a leg over the catwalk but Jason stopped her with a firm grip on her arm. Sara snarled at him, “I have to help her!”

“You are not going to do her or anyone else down there any good if you don’t think,” Jason nearly growled back at her from behind his helmet. He pointed to the array of LIGHT guns and other improvised weapons that had been distributed. “We are outmanned and out-gunned in a big way.”
“I’ve fought my way out of worse,” Sara responded, shaking her shoulder free of his hand.

“Maybe on your own,” Jason evened his voice in an attempt to calm her down. “But we both know Laurel is not leaving this place without taking every injured stray she’s picked up on the way.”

The prisoners below erupted into cheers and jeers at the fight. Laurel landed a mean series of hits, but it only took one from Brick to knock her down. Rage and fear fought for equal measure across Sara’s masked face and her shoulders shook from the effort to not throw herself into the fray.

“He’s right,” Patty said quietly. “We have to get Iris and those guards, and as many of the injured inmates as we can.”

“Let’s not get greedy,” Jason tipped his head sardonically in her direction.

Sara steadied herself, and then pulled her leg back over the railing. “What are you thinking?”

“We have to thin the herd,” Jason rubbed his hands together. “Laurel’s got them riled up. They’re already distracted and not too impressed by Brick anymore. Siegfried,” he nodded at Sara, “Roy,” he nodded at Patty, “you split up and wait for my signal.”

Sara cocked her eyebrow but nodded and started a light jog the opposite direction down the catwalk. Patty remained where she stood, utterly flummoxed. “Huh?”

Jason sighed and shook his head. “I am so unappreciated in my time. You a good shot with that thing?” He pointed at the B.O.O.T. gun and she gave a firm nod. “Good, set up on the catwalk or on the ground level if you think you can get down there without being seen. Start shooting when it seems like the right thing to do.”

Patty squinted skeptically at him while she adjusted her hold on her weapon. “You’re really the criminal mastermind who took over Gotham?”

Jason held his arms out and shrugged, “Never meet your idols, kid.” Patty left to take up her position, rolling her eyes so hard something in her jaw popped. Under his red helmet, Jason grinned.
Helena hissed and groaned as consciousness slowly returned. A pair of small hands nervously fluttered around her face and shoulders but she waved them away. An outburst of cheering, clapping, whistling and foot-stamping made her grimace harder. Some feet and legs kicked past her, but Iris was pulling her out of the way.

Some commotion Helena couldn’t see from her fine vantage point on the damp ground had blessedly drawn the attention of the inmates. What remained of their sad little troupe was no longer of interest. Good, that would make escape easier.

Iris’s face filled her vision, relief washing over her features. “Oh thank God, I didn’t know if you were gonna wake up.”

Helena blinked against the pounding in her head and nausea tossing in her stomach. “I’ve been hit harder,” she shook her head and then winced. That was a mistake. “Okay, maybe not harder. I’ll be fine. Where’s Laurel?”

Iris’s face fell and the two guards crouched with them both turned their heads toward the pack of inmates cheering on a fight. Helena tried to push herself off the ground, then grudgingly accepted a hand from Iris. “What the hell is she doing?”

“I don’t know,” Iris replied, trying to get a better look. “She just started egging him on. She’s good but…”

“She’s holding her own,” one of the guards muttered.

“Not on her own against Brick,” Helena snapped. She eyeballed him until she saw what she was looking for and snatched his taser off his belt. He started to protest but a steely look from Helena cowed him into submission.

She ignored Iris’s protests and zapped one of the smaller inmates at the rear of the pack. As she anticipated, none of the others noticed their compatriot go down, despite her scream and writhing
fall. Helena snatched the baton out of her hands and tossed the taser back to Iris. If Laurel thought
she was going to create a distraction and get herself killed while Helena herded Iris and the others
out, Laurel had another think coming.

Distracted men and women were surprisingly easy to move. Helena pushed and shoved and threw
them to the side until she broke into the center of the mass. The sight that greeted her drew her up
short. Laurel had been taking her vigilante lessons seriously.

Both opponents were bloody, bruised and tired, but Laurel was still standing. Well, not just
standing. At the moment Helena broke through the crowd. Laurel launched herself at Brick, using
his own leg to boost herself onto his shoulders, locking her legs around his neck and using the
proximity to repeatedly bash him in the face. He roared under the onslaught, his hands flailing
blindly until he caught a hunk of her hair and yanked downward, but she stayed locked around his
neck, sinking her nails into his face and throat.

In a last ditch effort to free himself, he threw himself and Laurel to the cement floor of the chow
hall. Laurel’s back hit the ground hard, knocking the wind out of her. She reflexively released and
Brick reeled away, coughing and spitting and cursing her. He shook the attack off and strode over
her, still wheezing on the ground and struggling to maintain consciousness. He pulled a leg back to
kick her, but was unceremoniously cracked across the skull by a guard’s baton. Brick probably
would have seen Bertinelli coming if he hadn’t allowed himself to get so enraged by Laurel. He
stumbled, then righted himself and set his sights on Helena.

“Oh good, I was hoping I’d get to finish you off.” He spat out a bloody tooth. “What is with you
broads, anyway? Whatever happened to just being lawyers and daddy’s girls?”

Helena smiled and twirled the baton. “Maybe it’s you, Brick. Something about you makes us just
want to beat your face in.”

“Feeling’s mutual, sweetheart,” Brick smiled mockingly back at her and started to step in her
direction, but stopped when the entire pack of prisoners went silent.

Whispers murmured throughout the group of “It’s him,” and “He came back,” and “Oh shit.” The
few Ghosts were exchanging confused looks and whispering back and forth.

Laurel took the distraction as an opportunity to return to her feet with a little help from Helena.
They both turned to see what was so important to the prisoners. Laurel’s eyes widened. She knew
they’d send someone per the discussed exit plan, but this looked a little off the book.
Red Hood stood front and center of the chow hall on the upper catwalk with an M4 braced on his hip and something in a bag at his feet.

Brick’s eyes narrowed up at the other man. “Look who showed up. You here to join us?” He opened his arms out toward the prisoners and handful of Ghosts still present. Red Hood didn’t reply. Peeved at the lack of response, Brick continued. “Well on with it then, don’t you have some threat for me? You throw a bag of heads at me and then tell me what you want and wait for me to piss myself for you?”

Brick’s nostrils flared when that faceless helmet only cocked in the other direction without replying again. Finally, Jason spoke. “Heads? You’re only worth one, Brick. Even HIVE doesn’t want you that badly.”

Brick recoiled and snorted. “They’re here for me, little man. HIVE wants the man who ran Star City…”

“They’re here for the metas,” Red Hood cut him off, “which they already got. Look around, Brick. There are even less Ghosts in here now than when I walked out here. They aren’t even interested in stopping me. They’re down to two vehicles outside. You really think they care about collecting some cut-rate crime boss?”

Red Hood watched his words sink in. Brick was seething. The wheels in the other prisoners’ minds started turning and they began to whisper amongst themselves.

“Listen up,” Red Hood barked. “Some of you have worked for me and you know how this is going to go. For everyone else, you are not leaving Iron Heights today.” As they took in his words, many faces turned from incredulity to outright anger and disbelief. Brick and the Ghosts had promised them an exit if they made the cut. “Look around,” Red Hood called their attention back. “There are only four Ghosts left in this room. They have two trucks outside, if the vigilantes and police haven’t already shut them down, too. The Army is in the process of kicking down the front door. If HIVE wanted you, they would have taken you already. This is the mop up crew.”

Dissent spread like a virus. Muttering turned to shouting matches turned to shoving. Laurel and Helena snaked back through to crowd to Iris and the guards and handful of weaker prisoners who just wanted protection. Brick snarled and jumped with both feet onto a table with a boom. “Shut it!” In a slow wave, the inmates acquiesced. “I’m offering you freedom and power! You’ve seen what the Ghosts can do! You’ve seen them taking your brothers and sisters out of here! Red Hood is lying to you! He’s been working with the vigilantes and he just wants you fighting each other. He’s got nothing for you but a cell!”
“Nothing?” Red Hood called down. His stomach flipped. He hated what he was about to do. He hated what Laurel was about to see him do. No amount of explaining that this guy was already dead when he found him would ever get this image out of her head. “I’m offering every person here the chance to finish your prison sentence alive. You go back to your cells and stay put, and I let you live. If you don’t,” he bent down and gripped the severed head by its hair and stood back up, displaying it with flourish, “I will hunt you down and add you to Red Hood’s exclusive Duffle Bag Club.”

Jason tossed the head to Brick’s feet. The other man’s nose wrinkled in disgust. The prisoners were all silent.

Iris kept her head turned away from the sight, feeling like she was going to be sick. Laurel and Helena kept their heads on a swivel, both had seen Sara and Patty moving into position. They instinctively put Iris between themselves. D Block was about to blow up.

Red Hood threw his legs over the railing and jumped down from the catwalk, landing with a thud on one of the dining tables. He stood back up in a smooth motion as if the landing hadn’t rattled every bone in his body. The four Ghosts finally rushed him from both sides of the chow hall.

Laurel had seen him fight. She had even seen him fighting in the footage from his time as the Arkham Knight. She knew what he was capable of, but somehow she forgot that every time they went out together he was holding back. Almost faster than her eyes could register, he had his rifle up and shot two of the Ghosts in the head with just two shots, as easy as that, before they could even shoulder their LIGHT guns. He dropped the rifle so it slung against his back and he had red batarangs in his hands and then flying at the other Ghosts before she could put together what he was doing. One batarang landed cleanly in a Ghost’s throat, but the other missed. The remaining Ghost was still rushing toward him. He shot with the LIGHT gun but Red Hood dove and rolled under the blast and came up right under the Ghost. The man was so surprised he didn’t even react when Red Hood slipped behind him, wrapped an arm around his neck and cracked it.

Every eye in the chow hall was on Jason as he slowly turned toward the mass of inmates and Brick. “What were you saying, Brick?”

At that, nearly half of the inmates broke off and fled out the front and back exits of the chow hall. Jason let out a breath under his helmet. It had worked. Now for the really fun parts.

Brick was white, or maybe a little green. His Ghosts were dead. His promise of HIVE and a triumphant return to Star City lay at Red Hood’s feet. He turned to Red Hood, eyes blazing with rage, and before he could take another step, a collar flew from across the room and latched onto his
neck, bolting him with electricity. Brick fell to his knees, sputtering and pulling at the collar with both hands to no avail.

Patty emerged from the shadows while loading another collar into her gun and eyeing another target. When Brick’s knees hit the deck, the rest of the inmates broke into chaos. Helena and Laurel were already on the defensive, fists and feet flying. Canary dropped in from the upper catwalk on a grappling rope next to her sister. They exchanged a quick smile before Canary deployed her telescoping bo staff and completing the defensive circle around Iris.

“Laurel!” Red Hood called, pulling two cross-shaped objects from his jacket pockets. He tossed them to her and she was pleased to discover telescoping tonfas, slightly smaller than what she normally fought with, but just as effective. With her sister and Helena at her sides, she felt invincible, even in the face of exhaustion and the injuries she’d already incurred.

Helena knocked down and disarmed a prisoner who had her hands on a LIGHT gun, which Iris dove for, then popped back up with a cocky grin. Brick, in spite of the initial shocks from the collar, had his attention back on Laurel, the source of most of his problems as far as he was concerned. Armed with tonfas, he couldn’t get close to her again. Sara easily hit a series of inmates back from their little circle and then turned her attention to Brick. She had never known it, and had certain terrible decisions not been made, she would have never found out, but Sara was born for this. Her body sang like her namesake as she swung her staff down on the huge man and followed with a jumping round kick down onto his temple.

Laurel chuckled next to her. “Remember that episode of Buffy when Kendra showed up?” She spun her tonfas into the man who apparently didn’t register pain like a normal human, shock collar firmly around his neck and all.

Canary knocked him under his chin with her bo staff. “Two slayers,” she grinned with a singsong voice.

“No waiting,” Laurel finished the joke, finally dropping the man with a spinning kick to his head. Brick was down for the count.

Jason and Patty were on the far end of the room. Patty watched his back as Jason punched his fist into the wall, then pulled back to reveal an electrical panel. Overwatch sent him instructions as fast as she could decipher them to his helmet and he followed, cutting and splicing wires until the door locks finally slid into place.

“Alright, let’s move,” Jason brushed his hands off, but Patty stopped him.
Her jaw was set and eyes cold. “That stunt, with that man’s head. The Flash said we should work with you, and I will. But when we get out of here, you have ten minutes to get out of my jurisdiction. After that, I’m coming for you.”

Jason stared down at her. He was honestly surprised she hadn’t B.O.O.T.-ed him the moment he pulled the head out of the bag. It wasn’t exactly his ideal attention-getter, either, but when he came across the body, it was too easy. He was in for a nasty shower with steel wool later, if they got out of this damn place. “I’ll be gone in five.”

The girls had done a neat job scattering the rest of the inmates, but it wouldn’t last once the Army broke through the front doors and started bashing skulls in. They were in for a second wave, worse than this one, of panicked people just trying to get out of the way. “Let’s move,” he ordered, harsher than he really intended, and lead the way back up the spiral staircase. They were running out of time. Overwatch was sending him a live feed of the Army’s efforts and selections from the remaining security cameras in the prison. They were very much out of time.

He got to the kitchen supply closet doors and startled hustling everyone except the prisoners in. Those who had followed Helena would have to stay. When Helena got to him, Laurel came back to the door. “She’s coming with us.”

“Huh?” Helena and Jason grunted at the same time.

“I’m guessing from your shoving that we don’t have time to argue,” Laurel gave Red Hood a pointed look. “Helena, please come with us.” She held out a hand to the taller woman, lips pressed together, impatient for a response.

Helena’s brow crinkled in confusion and doubt. “Look,” Laurel took a deep breath to try again, “I know you’re doing well in here. You don’t have to come with us. But we could use your help. You have a place with me if you want it, and you know you have a place with Iris.”

Iris joined Laurel’s side and held her hand out, too. “You’re so much more than this place, Helena.”

Helena could doubt Laurel all long, but not Iris. She put up a mean front with Iris, but it was just that: a front. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. When she reopened them she took Iris’s hand. “This is crazy,” she said, crossing the threshold and taking her first steps toward a real escape.
“Good, we’re all done with Feeling Time?” Jason didn’t wait for a response and started to slide the door closed from the outside.

Laurel grabbed the door to stop him. “What are you doing?” Frightened confusion made her voice rise.

Jason looked back in the direction of the main chow hall door. “Every loose prisoner is about to bum rush this place trying to get away from the soldiers. I need to lock the door or they’re going to follow you out the extremely convenient exit we made for them.”

“Can’t you lock it from the inside?”

Jason’s mouth ticked up under his helmet. “You worried about me, Blondie? After what you just saw?” He felt along the wall until he felt the paneling. He ripped the facade away and searched for the wires that matched what he had found on the other door. “This is the only direct wiring to the automatic locks.”

Laurel didn’t know how to respond, except that on a basic level she couldn’t leave him behind. “How...how are you supposed to get out?”

“Get away from the door,” he ignored her question and stood in front of her, pressing her back with his larger frame. Sara’s hand pulled at her arm, urging her back toward the air vent, but she didn’t move. “I’ll see you on the other side,” Jason said before pulling the door closed and completed the circuit with the wires he had exposed, locking the door.

“C’mon,” Sara spoke, pulling at her sister. “He’ll be fine.”

A knot formed in Laurel’s throat. Leaving a team member behind, no matter what she’d seen him do, drove against every instinct in her body. Without any other choices, she was forced to follow the rest of the group. The fresh air on the roof, followed by a breezy improvised zipline over the fence and into the woods, was more than welcome, even with the smoke and sirens still blaring from across the city. After breathing in the acrid, wet air of Iron Heights for the past several hours, almost anything with a breeze felt refreshing.

As they regrouped with the rest of the vigilantes, Flash and Green Arrow were deep in argument. It seemed that once Barry had done all he could with the structural disasters in the city, no one had
told him that she and Iris were trapped inside Iron Heights to keep his focus on the escaping prisoners and ultra-powerful metahumans. Barry was furious.

Joe kept his arms tight around his daughter, despite her gentle smiles and reassurances that she was safe the entire time. Her disheveled appearance and minor abrasions suggested otherwise. Patty gave him a dark look over Iris’s shoulder and Joe murmured that they would have a serious talk later.

“You owe me that much,” she muttered darkly, casting a harsh look at the vigilantes. Barry owed her a big, big talk.

Thea ran to Laurel like an excited child, energy rolling off her in waves, dragging Mari in tow. “Laurel!” She grabbed her best friend’s hand almost uncomfortably tight. “Did you know she can fly? You should have seen it!”

Vixen shrugged helplessly. “It didn’t do me much good against a dude who makes tornadoes. Why didn’t anyone tell me there would be a dude who makes tornadoes?”

Thea groaned in frustration. “Are you kidding? I got swept up by all that wind and then, woosh, you made that bird noise—”

“Hawk,” Vixen corrected.

“Hawk, and you caught me. We had to be 100 feet up. Laurel, it was amazing. We have to do this again.”

Laurel and Vixen exchanged a knowing, tired smile. “She has a twisted idea of fun, doesn’t she?” Laurel tried to chuckle, but she was too tired, and they were still missing a team member. She could feel the hits in every inch of her body, from her bruised cheeks to her aching heart.

Patty blanched at the mention of tornadoes. “The Weather Wizard got out? Someone please tell me I heard that wrong.”

“Caitlin and Cisco rounded him up,” Spartan replied. He kept his helmet on around Patty, still unsure about revealing himself. “But Joe and Captain Singh are working on the full list of every prisoner that did get out. We won’t know until the Army wraps up in there.”
Spartan looked around, assessing his team critically before turning back to Laurel. “No Red Hood?”

She shook her head and hugged her arms around herself. “He had to secure the exit so more prisoners didn’t follow us out.” Laurel caught sight of Helena standing awkwardly by herself, carefully avoiding Oliver’s attention, still in her prison khakis. “Hey Spartan, my go-bag is still in the van, right?” Diggle nodded. Laurel called to Helena and motioned for her to follow.

At the back of the van, Laurel pulled a spare set of clothes and boots from her bag and held them out wordlessly to Helena, who looked at them like they might bite her before hesitantly taking them. After she merely stood there, holding the clothes and not making an attempt to change, Laurel made an attempt. “I guessed your size. I know you’re taller than me, but the leggings should fit…”

“They’ll be fine,” Helena said quickly.

“Look,” Laurel spoke slowly; casting her eyes down then back up, “I meant what I said. You don’t have to come with us. If you feel more comfortable, you can head back in. There’s going to be so much confusion, they’re never going to know you were out. If you want to stay out and stay here in Central City, or go wherever you want, that’s fine, too. It’s your choice.”

Helena smirked. “Oliver said it was my choice to turn myself back in, you know, when I helped him with Felicity last year. But it wasn’t really. He doesn’t trust me; he just needed me. And I wasn’t ready.”

Helena trailed off, inspecting the clothes in her hands a little too closely.

“It’s your choice now,” Laurel covered one of Helena’s hands with her own. “And if Oliver tries to butt his head in, we can both literally beat him into submission.”

A genuine smile broken unbidden onto Helena’s face. “Fair enough,” she laughed.

Laurel held up a set of motorcycle keys. “I got this out of the impound lot when I got to town and had Felicity clear up the DMV records online. This is a nice bike.”
Huntress snatched the keys out of Laurel’s hands. “Are you serious? I thought for sure they would have auctioned it off by now.”

“Meh, the government works slow,” Laurel shrugged. “It’s parked outside STAR Labs.” Laurel pushed away from the van, mollified that at least one thing seemed to be going right today. “I’m staying in town for a few more days with my mom and my sister. We could really use your help back in Star City, but I understand if you want to stay away. You know where to find me.”

Helena nodded, “Thanks.”

That was all Laurel needed. She accepted the nod, turned away and went back to the group, leaving Helena alone to change and make her decision.

Chapter End Notes

A HUGE thank you to my new beta readers!

I really wanted to include the Vixen/Thea vs. Mark Mardon fight, but it was just too much and didn't add anything that wasn't already established elsewhere. I might bang that out as a one-shot on Tumblr if I have time.
Episode 6

Chapter Summary

An argument with Oliver's new campaign consultant sets off some unexpected side effects of Thea's bloodlust. Constantine may have a solution, but it's not any more appealing than Malcolm's.

Andy is coming around, but not before Diggle crosses a line.

Speaking of lines, professional line-crosser Helena makes her debut on Team Arrow.

And just where the hell is Jason?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Laurel frowned at her small suitcase set on the nondescript comforter in her mother’s guest bedroom. She had to be forgetting something.

Oh, right, a teammate, she inhaled sharply and checked her phone again, then tossed it back on the bed. It’s not like the guy was texting her regularly before they came to Central City. Why the hell would he start now, if he was even alive?

She sucked her teeth and pushed the thought away. Joe had come back to them with a list of all the confirmed dead and missing from Iron Heights. There were no unidentified bodies among them, or John Does in any of the county hospitals. Joe had also mentioned that Detective Spivot was none too pleased with his little power display in D Block and had made it clear he wasn’t welcome in her city. She hadn’t looked happy with Laurel’s association with a bunch of vigilantes, or Laurel’s vigilante-esque fighting skills, either. That, however, was a problem Joe and Iris assured her they would handle in Central City.

Jason was probably halfway back to Star City by now, Laurel told herself, refolding her clothes for the third time. Assuming he’d gotten out of Iron Heights. Assuming he’d even want to go back to Star City. And why would he? He wasn’t beholden to any of them. She reached for her phone again, hissed at the blank screen and set to checking the nightstand and dresser one more time for any items she may have left behind.

A gentle tap at the door interrupted her vigorous packing efforts, followed by Sara’s head poking into the room. Laurel immediately relaxed at the sight of her sister’s warm face. “How was it?”
Sara crossed the room and plopped cross legged on the bed. “Not as bad as I thought it would be, but I’m still gonna miss her.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go with her?” Laurel asked, finally zipping her suitcase shut and moving to the floor so she could sit next to her sister.

“Nyssa said this is going to be a big, drawn out family thing with her sister and the League,” Sara sighed and leaned her head on Laurel’s shoulder. “And honestly, I don’t think I want to bury myself in more darkness and secret wars. Nyssa said she didn’t want me to, either.”

“I had a feeling she’d say that,” Laurel smiled into Sara’s flaxen hair. “I’m glad she did.”

Sara leaned away and sat up straighter to look Laurel in the eye. “Why?”

Laurel turned, pulling her long legs up onto the bed and mimicking Sara’s posture and taking both of her hands in her own. “You finally have the chance at a fresh start. You’re not tied to the League. You’re not wrapped up in all our crap in Star City anymore. You can just be Sara.”

Sara smirked and leaned back against the headboard. “Maybe, but it felt really good to be fighting again, especially next to you. What if I can’t stop being the Canary? Laurel, you didn’t know me then. The Canary was a killer,” Sara’s voice broke and she cast her eyes to her lap.

“I did know you,” Laurel countered. “I remember every time you tried to reach out to me, even when I didn’t know it was you. Even then you couldn’t stop trying to do good.”

“You’re the one that can’t stop being good,” Sara teased, perking up again. “I don’t know how you did it, but you took the Canary and made it something good. I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do with myself, but I don’t think I can put that mask on again. I think I might stay here, with Mom, at least until I figure out what to do next.”

Laurel’s eyes lit up and she bit her lip. Sara’s nose wrinkled in confusion, but she waited without asking while Laurel leapt off the bed and fetched a box from the dresser. Laurel set the box between them when she returned to the bed, then pushed it expectantly toward her sister. “I didn’t think you’d want to keep being the Canary. It was the name the League gave you, and then I kind of stole it, and you did literally just get reborn, so…” Laurel trailed off, raising her eyebrows meaningfully, waiting for Sara to open the box.
Sara pulled the top of the box off and her breath caught in surprise at the folded white supple leather and woven kevlar fabric folded within. Her fingers carefully picked through the box, finding a jacket, top and pants, but no mask. She looked back up to her sister, unsure where to start. “It’s white,” was all she could say.

Laurel smiled gently back at her. “It’s for a fresh start. Cisco was very excited to cook this up for you.”

Warmth flooded through Sara’s cheeks and her chest. She swallowed a lump in her throat that felt suspiciously like tears. “There’s no mask,” was what she got out next.

“I don’t think you’re going to need it,” Laurel replied. “This life? It doesn’t all have to be darkness and pain all the time. You deserve this. You can be the White Canary, in Central City.”

Sara wiped the traitorous glassiness away from her eyes. “Thank you, Laurel. For everything.”

Laurel squeezed Sara’s knee. “You would have done the same for me.”

Sara snorted a laugh. “No, I would have dived head first into the problem and tried to beat a solution out of it and probably gotten myself killed in the process.”

“Well, then we’d still be together,” Laurel replied cheerily, and then both girls erupted into giggles.

“By the way,” Sara said between giggles, “you should thank Jason. I know his little show was ugly and not your cup of tea, but he cleared out half of the prisoners. He stopped me from executing my plan, which was to fight them one by one with a stick.”

Laurel’s face fell. “I actually haven’t heard from him since we got out of Iron Heights. I don’t even know if he made it out.”

Sara sat up, suddenly serious. “He did.” At Laurel’s doubtful expression, Sara grew stern. “He did. I’ve seen him in action. You’ve seen him in action. I know how he was trained. Patty was pretty threatening, and given the puppy dog eyes he was giving you every time he saw you before the thing in the prison, he probably doesn’t want to face you right now.”
“I...don’t even know what part of that to respond to,” Laurel’s brow crinkled. “Killing the Ghosts was one thing, but whoever he killed and beheaded…”

“Oh, that guy was already dead,” Sara said confidently. At Laurel’s staggered expression, Sara held up a plaintive hand. “League of Assassins for years, remember? Long story short, that’s not what a head looks like when it’s alive when you cut it off.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” Laurel closed her eyes. “He desecrated a corpse, got it.”

“Yes, he desecrated a corpse to be convincingly scary to a large pack of scary criminals after giving you mooneyes for forty-eight hours straight,” Sara finished. “I can tell you from personal experience, it’s hard having warm fuzzies for someone and impressing them with your murder skills.”

Laurel sighed and collapsed back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “I don’t like any part of what he did, but I was so relieved to see him,” she leaned up on her elbows. “And I really don’t like getting torn to shreds by an angry mob. I don’t know if I would have gone that far to get out of there, but then I also might have gotten all of us killed because of it.”

“Being a good guy sucks, doesn’t it?” Sara lamented. “You should take your own advice.” Laurel arched a questioning brow at her sister. “This doesn’t have to be all darkness and pain all the time. If the guy makes you happy, maybe you should just be happy with him.”

Laurel rolled to her stomach, her entire face furrowed with doubt and rejection. “No, Sara, no. He’s...he’s the Red Hood!” She tossed a hand out and raised her brows as if that was all the explanation needed. “He’s a killer. He’s okay with killing. And maiming, and corpse desecration, apparently…”

Laurel trailed off at Sara’s pointed expression. “So am I. And so is Oliver, and Nyssa, and Helena. And you guys still work together, right?” Laurel nodded, pursing her lips and already sucking her teeth again. “So you already have a middle ground. I’ve seen you around him like, twice, and I know you have a thing for him. And he’s in love with you.” Sara stopped Laurel’s interruption with a raised hand. “What we do isn’t black and white, even when we think we’re playing by the rules. You deserve a little happiness, too, Laurel. If you’re happy with him, what is the point in putting up all these reasons to say no?”

Laurel chewed her lip and stewed. After a moment, she replied, “It can’t ever go anywhere.”
“So?” Sara shrugged. “Not every relationship has to be ‘the one’. Laurel, he climbed your damn balcony. I thought Nyssa was going to have a coronary when she saw him out there.”

Laurel let out a disappointed sigh. “C’mon, Sara, you know I’m not like that. I can’t just bounce from guy to guy.”

Sara laughed, “I didn’t say sleep with him and don’t call. Just, enjoy it for what it is. Let yourself have a little moment of happiness.”

Laurel flipped to her back again and squinted up at the ceiling, deep in thought, before a mischievous grin overtook her. Her eyes slid to her sister, who was watching her with playful suspicion. “He is a really good kisser,” she choked out.

Sara’s eyes widened and she barked a triumphant laugh, “Ha! I knew it!” The pair collapsed in a fit of giggles. Sara huffed for breath between laughs, “I won the pot.”

“Wha-?” Laurel was still struggling to contain her laughter.

Sara flopped on her back next to Laurel and out the corner of her eye gouged her sister’s reaction with a wide grin as she admitted, “We all had a pot going, me, Thea, Felicity, Diggle, Cisco, Caitlin. We even got Iris to place a bet.”

Laurel lifted herself up on her elbows. “A bet on what?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. Her sister was way too amused by this.

Sara bit her lip, bright red from holding back laughter. “Well, it started as when you and Jason were gonna, you know, but they had to back it down to just kissing because you two suck at this game. But I got you, D. I bet that you had already kissed him.”

Laurel’s mouth dropped open and she lunged at her sister, fingers flying to where she knew Sara was most ticklish. “Oh, you are so dead!” Sara squealed and the girls tumbled into a wrestling and tickling match.

From her room, Dinah Drake sipped her tea, listening to her daughters giggling and playing like they had when they were kids. She smiled into her mug.
Diggle adjusted his grip on the practice staff in his hands and parried a series of lightning fast strikes from Laurel. He came back at her hard. Neither of them held back in this sparring session, despite Laurel’s lingering bruising.

Their terse conversation before silently agreeing to spar had been more than enough. Lyla confirmed that if ARGUS had picked up Jason, Waller was playing it close to the vest. A quick, small head shake from Laurel confirmed what Diggle already knew: it was best to avoid Andy’s small jail cell they’d improvised in the bunker. He was too angry and they both knew he could cross a line from which there was no coming back.

They’d stood in silence before Laurel walked to the training mat and picked up her practice tonfas and waited for John to join her.

When they’d first started training together, Diggle had to pull his hits with her. He was simply too big and too strong. Even when she successfully blocked his strikes, they packed so much force they often sent her tumbling to the ground. Now though, she moved with the momentum like a wave, instead of fighting it. She even knew how to turn it against him, dropping out of his way and letting him trip himself on his own weight, or using the hit to spin into him and get closer with the tonfas.

She did it again. She dropped under a heavy swing from his staff, looped the handled end of her tonfa over his arm, and whipped her hip into him, simultaneously using his own forward momentum from the swing and trapped arm to flip him clean over her hip and onto his back.

He smiled up at her and accepted her hand and assistance back to standing. “Wanna go again?” Laurel asked, a sheen of sweat glistening off her skin, smiling back at him.

“Again?” Diggle chuckled. “You eat your Wheaties this morning?”

“C’mon,” she playfully whined, hopping from foot to foot.
Laurel and Diggle both jerked and turned toward the alley door as it burst open, kicked by Jason’s booted foot.

“You guys might want to call the team and take a look at this,” he spoke from behind his infuriating expressionless helmet, gesturing to the bedraggled unconscious teenage boy slung over his shoulder.

Half an hour later, the team buzzed around the prone form of the unidentified teenager, heavily sedated and cuffed to the medical table. Jason wove a tale as he secured the boy and removed his own gear - first his helmet, revealing stupid, messy, sweaty hair, then stiffly peeling off his jacket and gloves - he had taken a beating from a 90-pound kid.

Reaffirming his story, it took Diggle and Oliver to hold the boy down while Felicity sedated him not once but three separate times before he finally lost consciousness again.

“I think Vixen is right,” he said in a gruff voice, never returning Laurel’s icy glare, “these guys are getting juiced and not with HGH.”

“I’ll call Constantine, if he’s still in town,” Oliver concurred.

“He is,” Jason added, a touch too quickly, earning a quizzical look from Oliver. He could feel Laurel’s steady, steely gaze, but he kept his face turned away. It was about damn time she saw him for what he was.

By the time Constantine arrived, Laurel had made her way up the salmon ladder at least five times and, unbeknownst to her, earned herself a small audience of Thea, Felicity, Diggle and Jason. Felicity and Thea shared a small bag of popcorn, making low comments between themselves. Felicity lamented Sara’s decision to stay in Central City, but was thoroughly impressed with Laurel’s progress. Thea agreed, muttering, “I know, right? She’s so ripped now.”

Constantine joined the audience and let out an appreciative hum, shrugging off his trench coat and putting a cigarette under his tongue. “What’s all this about?” He kept his voice respectfully low.

“Oh, it’s Jason’s fault,” Felicity responded without taking her eyes off Laurel’s steady ascent back up the ladder.
“Hey, I didn’t…” Jason struggled to defend himself, but Constantine’s hand hit his chest. He looked down to see the proffered cigarette John held out, eyes firmly glued on Laurel and a smile teasing at his lips.

“Good show, mate,” Constantine muttered.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jason huffed, snatching the cigarette and putting it between his lips. Constantine followed wordlessly with a lighter.

When Oliver came back down the elevator and saw the scene, he exhaled a long-suffering sigh and set his hands on his hips. He cleared his throat loudly, eliciting a startled jump from Felicity enough to spill some popcorn. “If you all are done ogling Laurel, can we please get to work?”

Laurel jumped off the last bar and toweled the sweat off her face, still too angry and distracted to be fully aware of her audience. The rest scattered, mumbling excuses and turning various shades of pink. Except Constantine, who puffed his cigarette and flicked it between his tongue, waggling his eyebrows suggestively at Oliver. “Quite the bird,” he winked at his friend as he moved toward the unconscious youth he’d come to inspect.

Oliver narrowed his eyes at Diggle as the other man made himself busy organizing gear that didn’t need to be organized. “Seriously? Even you?”

Diggle couldn’t hide the blush creeping on his ears. “What? Look at how strong she’s gotten, man. It’s impressive. She threw me on my ass earlier.”

Oliver opened his mouth to respond, but Constantine was already looking over Jason’s captive and the lab results Caitlin had pulled from Andy. “I don’t know much about biology,” he said, pulling the cigarette out of his mouth and putting it out on his shoe, flicking the butt into the nearest trashcan, “but Mari McCabe is right, this looks like magic.”

“The Ghosts we’ve fought have all been stronger than normal people, and they bounce back from wounds like nothing I’ve ever seen,” Diggle said.

“What about this one?” Constantine nodded at the boy.

Jason stepped up to the platform. “I ran across him while I was doing a sweep of my neighborhood.
“It was like trying to take down a gorilla.”

“And they’ve been snatching kids all over the city,” Oliver added.

“In the prison,” Laurel quietly entered the conversation, still patting a towel against her damp neck, “Brick and the Ghosts were talking about joining HIVE to be more than a normal person. We thought they were just trafficking people, but maybe they’re building an army, placing these people all over the world. Jason said he’s dealt with a trafficker who specialized in that, right?”

Jason finally met Laurel’s eyes across the platform with a quick nod.

Constantine clasped his hands together. “Right then. We’ve got Darhk, who is a baddie if there ever was one, and a bunch of magically juiced up Rogers. I’ll see what I can do.” He set to digging through his leather case, pulling out sundry items that had meaning only to him.

“What exactly are you going to do this kid?” Laurel stepped forward, standing protectively over the boy.

Constantine shrugged. “A bit of this, a bit of that. Gonna poke around until I release whatever spell’s been worked on him.”

“That’s it? You’re going to throw magic at him until something sticks? What if he gets hurt?”

The magician sighed and leaned over the table. “Love, we’ve been over this. It’s magic, not science. I don’t even know what’s been done to him, so I don’t know how to fix it.”

“If you fix him, you think you could fix my brother?” Diggle interjected.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Constantine shrugged again and returned to organizing his supplies. “Depends on the magic involved. Darhk is a master; he won’t have made this easy.”

Thea spun, childishly balanced in one of the chairs and held up a white business card. “It says you’re a master of the dark arts,” she smiled sardonically at him from her perch.
“I’ve been meaning to change that,” Constantine pointed a finger at her. “Petty. Dabbler.”

“You gave her your card?” Jason arched a brow at the other man.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Constantine smiled, dripping with sarcasm while he rolled up his white sleeves, “Did you want to be exclusive?”

Shut down, Jason pressed his mouth shut and turned to walk off the platform. The rest of the group disbursed not long after as Constantine set to work. There wasn’t much for them to do, after all.

As Jason threw his helmet and jacket into a backpack and prepared to leave, still in a wordless standoff with Laurel, he noticed Oliver smirking at him. “What?” he snapped.

Oliver broke into an open grin. “Now who’s having a bad day?”

Thea smiled fondly at the sight of her brother and Felicity scooping trash into bags while an impatient semi-circle of reporters pushed for questions and a better shot of the mayoral candidate at his first public event.

The park clean-up had been the new consultant’s idea; something to set Oliver apart from his predecessors as a man of action and a person in touch with the immediate needs of the community. Thus far, for an introduction as Candidate Oliver Queen, it was a rousing success. Even the autumn chill seemed like a chipper welcome for everyone. The park was full of volunteer groups from schools around the city, with a few adult philanthropy groups as well as partisan donor hopefuls intermingled, picking up trash, sorting recycling and distributing information about how citizens could start recycling at home.

The campaign consultant, Alex, hadn’t been quite what Thea or Oliver expected, but he fit the needs of Oliver’s campaign perfectly: he was young, still optimistic about Star City’s future and had experience on several successful state congressional campaigns.
Thea stabbed a long discarded cup with her stick with probably a shade too much gusto and shook the trash off into her bag, her lips turning up reflexively at her secret act of violence against the offending garbage.

“You did a really good job with this,” Alex appeared at her side, a cup of steaming coffee in each hand. Thea was mostly surprised that someone like him had been able to sneak up on her, but she quickly shook the feeling off and took the offered cup.

“Well, it was your idea,” she demurred. The coffee was pleasing, made exactly the way she always mixed it. Alex paid close attention to details.

“Naw,” he waved a dismissive hand, “I’m just the idea man. You got all the permits, organized the volunteers. You even got the press here. Oliver said you were a good manager, and he was right.”

Thea blushed into her cup. He was kind of cute, for a civilian. He probably wouldn’t still be flirting with her if he knew she’d ever lit a person on fire. Or been almost dead and resurrected.

But none of that meant she couldn’t enjoy basking in attention from an attractive, successful man, at least for a little while, until whatever nefarious plots he was undoubtedly working reared their ugly heads.

“So will that be okay?” Alex asked hopefully.

“Huh?” Thea had been so lost in her own musings, she hadn’t realized the poor man was still talking to her.

“After this, you, me and your brother, the sit down?” Alex reminded her with a teasing glint in his eye. “I was just listening to some of the media questions and I think it’s best we start game planning now how to tackle these issues.”

“Right, yeah, of course,” Thea nodded as if she’d heard the whole conversation.

Hours later, Oliver finally joined the pair in his quiet office. He tugged at his tie and loosened his sleeves, uncomfortably aware of how much he’d gotten used to not wearing a real suit every day.
“So?” Oliver looked between Thea and Alex. “What’s the verdict?”

Thea deferred to Alex, who leaned forward in his seat and began to lay out the good, bad and the ugly. “This was a great start. The event was small, simple but left everyone with a good impression of you. But,” Alex paused, but Oliver nodded for him to continue, ready to hear the negative, “you still have an uphill battle.”

“I know his campaign is really new, but if we get the word out and keep doing events like these,” Thea started but Alex shook his head.

“It’s not that,” Alex countered. “It’s your reputation from before. It’s what you’re still known for and what we have to get people to move past.”

Oliver pursed his lips and nodded. He’d expected as much. “How do we do that?”

Alex sucked in a breath. This would be the hard part of the conversation. “You’re going to have to make some tough calls, at least through the election. We have to distance you from your old image as much as possible. This means cutting off old relationships, and doing something to really solidify that you are a grown man now, not a trust fund kid.”

Oliver’s face crinkled. “What you mean old relationships?” Almost everyone he knew from his old life was dead or otherwise gone from his social circles. That only left…

“You continued association with Laurel Lance while you’re dating the CEO of the company you lost is still a popular subject for city gossip,” Alex let the words tumble out. In his experience, no matter how much a client insisted he or she wanted to hear the truth, they rarely took it well. He studied the other man’s face, noting the way the muscles in his jaw twitched and his eyes took on a hardened sheen, but he didn’t argue. “The media doesn’t believe your relationship with Ms. Smoak is serious, and keeping Laurel in your immediate circle confirms that for them. As long as the media doesn’t believe you’ve matured, the voting base won’t either.”

Oliver sat back in his chair, biting hard on his tongue. In his periphery, he could see Thea’s stricken expression, jaw hanging open, shifting between her brother and Alex, unsure where to start. He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully, “Should I really be concerned with what the media thinks? I am the only candidate in this race.”

“For now,” Alex countered. “There is still time for other candidates to enter the race. And even if
no one does, you need *some* votes in order to secure the office. The city council won’t confirm your nomination as mayor if they feel there’s good reason you aren’t fit to serve.”

“So what?” Oliver shrugged in frustration. “I just pretend like Laurel hasn’t been one of my closest friends my entire life for the next few months and hope voters forget about the time I cheated on her with her sister and then got her sister killed in the South China Sea?”

“No,” Alex leaned forward with a hand on his knee, digging into the fight, “it’s going to take more than that.” He let Oliver react to the statement. “Voters need to know you’re serious. A bachelor with a girlfriend isn’t serious.”

Thea audibly choked. Oliver’s brows rose to new heights. “You want me to propose to Felicity to get votes?” The words came out dangerously low.

Alex held up a plaintive hand, asking him to consider. “I’ve worked with clients who entered into more serious contractual relationships for elections. If that’s not something you want with her, consider talking to her about it as a business arrangement. You can enjoy a public engagement and then, after the election, you both go your separate ways and that’s that.”

Oliver opened his mouth to respond, but Thea was already on her feet, trembling and red with rage. “That’s that? I can’t believe I hired you,” she spat at Alex. She whirled on her brother. “Why are we even listening to this? Laurel is practically family, and Felicity, God, that you would even consider…” She trailed off, fists clenched at her sides. Oliver rose from his seat and moved around the desk, putting his hands gently on his sister’s shoulders. Her fingers were digging into her palms so hard he thought she might draw blood.

“It’s not real, Thea,” he spoke softly, trying to ease her back from the rage already boiling over. “It’ll just be a public front for the election. Laurel and Felicity will both understand—”

Thea jerked out of his grasp, a snarl curling out of her lips. A red haze bled across her vision. Her heart raced and her hands itched to take hold of something, to smash, to stab, to tear. She caught sight of Alex, watching the exchange from his seat with a wide, confused gaze, totally unaware of how easily it would be for her to snatch him by his throat and rip it away, silencing that voice telling her and her brother such awful things.

“Speedy,” her brother’s soft voice called her back. Some higher functioning part of her brain railed against the white hot violence pulsing through Thea’s veins.
Oliver saw a flash of fear cross Thea’s face. She remained frozen in place, terrified that any movement might unleash the monster that had been born when she was healed by the Pit. “Ollie,” her voice came out soft, broken. She tried to continue speaking, but was overtaken by a small cough that turned into a series of deep, wracking coughs. Oliver took her by her shoulders when she doubled over and tried to maneuver her to the couch, but her feet slipped out from under her as pain sliced across her lungs.

Alex jumped from his chair in horror at the sight of blood bubbling up from Thea’s coughs and staining Oliver’s shirt as he bent over her prone form. “Call 911!” Oliver barked, taking his eyes off Thea for only a moment.

Oliver was dimly aware of Alex pacing in the corner of the room on his cell phone. His panic grew when Thea’s coughing stopped and her eyes rolled back into her head, slipping into unconsciousness. His heart felt like it might explode out of his chest, but all he could do was cradle her head and shoulders in his arms and beg her not to leave him.

Diggle ground his teeth in the dimly lit hospital room, arms crossed tight across his chest. His face was drawn and his eyes were on the scene before him, but he had stopped seeing beyond his own thoughts hours ago.

Oliver clutched Thea’s hand as she smiled up at him and the rest of the group, giving hoarse reassurances that she was fine. Oliver smiled and nodded, agreeing with her with everything but his eyes.

The doctors had yet to make heads or tails of Thea’s attack. They ran a battery of tests for everything from pneumonia to late stage lung cancer. They were even suggesting that Thea may have done long-term damage to her heart and lungs during her party days. Everyone had accepted the suggestions quietly, but they all knew Thea’s sickness was something no tissue biopsy would reveal.

Sitting in the bunker were no less than three men who might have the answer, one of whom they had left nearly alone, unquestioned and untested, because of his name. Not only had he nearly gotten Laurel and Iris killed, now Thea was suffering.
Diggle felt the calm of his decision wash over him. It was long past time to press Andy for answers. The man in the cell may have his brother’s name and face, but Diggle had mourned Andy’s loss years ago. This person was not his brother.

He slowly became aware that Oliver had left Thea’s side and was whispering rapid fire thoughts and suggestions to him. Diggle focused on the last statement Oliver made: “I think we should call Malcolm.”

“Malcolm?” Diggle turned his nose up. “No, man, no. She’s had enough, she doesn’t need that guy showing up. And you know he doesn’t work for free.”

“He’s her father,” Oliver’s voice rose, then he quickly reined it back. “He controls the League. He knows more about the Pits than anyone else…”

“Guys,” Thea’s voice cracked with the effort to get their attention. “Don’t call him. He told me everything he knows when I went with Laurel.”

Oliver was back at her side in a few smooth steps, taking her hand and smiling gently down at her. “I know, Speedy, but I want to make sure we’re covering all of our bases here.”

Felicity and Laurel exchanged a dark look. Felicity’s face wrinkled in frustration and she nearly stamped her foot. She burst, “What is the point of having Constantine working on that kid if we’re just going to go running back to Malcolm, who, by the way, will want something in return? John is right, he doesn’t work for free.”

“She is his daughter,” Oliver motioned to Thea over her bed aggressively.

Thea frowned and swatted his hand away. “Hey, I’m right here. And I don’t want you to call him. His solution is not a solution.”

“There you have it,” Laurel breathed. “If Thea doesn’t want to call him, we’re not calling him.”

Outnumbered and unanimously denied, Oliver relented. He gave a quick nod and dropped the subject.
“On that note,” Diggle cleared his throat, “there’s more than one test subject down there for Constantine. Andy and I need to have a word about that Iron Heights stunt, anyway.”

Laurel straightened and concern furrowed her brow. “John, don’t…”

Diggle held a hand up. “He’s my brother, it’s my call.” He stepped forward to give Thea a quick kiss on the forehead. “Call me if anything changes,” he spoke to the entire group.

Laurel watched him leave, an uncomfortable tension settling in the pit of her stomach. She didn’t know what Diggle had in mind for his brother, but she had felt the anger radiating off him since they returned from Central City. He simmered like a kettle on the stove, and without anyone in the bunker other than Constantine to pump the brakes, Laurel wasn’t sure if Diggle would have restraint this time.

She quietly asked Felicity to help her hunt down some fresh warm blankets for Thea. When they found a warming rack, Laurel paused Felicity’s blanket collecting. “Could you go to the bunker and keep an eye on John?”

Felicity appeared surprised for only a moment before sighing in resignation. “He did have his murder face, didn’t he?”

Laurel responded with a grim nod. “He’s angry now and scared for Thea, but if he hurts his brother, I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive himself.”

Felicity passed the small stack of warmed sheets to Laurel. “Wouldn’t this be a better job for you, or, I don’t know, anyone who can do more than five crunches at a time?”

Laurel took the sheets under one arm and slung the other around Felicity’s shoulders. “No. Diggle thinks you’re an angel. All you have to do is be there.”

“You got it,” Felicity nodded resolutely. “Are you guys going to be okay here?”

“They’re keeping her overnight,” Laurel replied. “We’ll call if anything changes. And call me if you need help with…anything.”
Felicity gave a two-finger salute and left to catch up with Diggle at the bunker. By the time she got there, Constantine was smoking heavily and doing his best to continue his spell work over the still unknown boy despite the arguing coming from makeshift jail cell.

Constantine raised his eyes to Felicity but continued chanting over the young man, then groaned, cursed, and let his hands fall to his sides. “I’m close, but I’m never going to release the magic on this kid while those two are carrying on.”

To punctuate Constantine’s ire, Diggle shoved Andy into the cell bars with a resounding bang that sent Felicity jumping.

Andy wheezed from the impact, then blinked up under his dark lashes, smiling coyly. “There’s big brother John I remember.”

Diggle paced back and forth, his jaw twitching and hands flexed into fists. He stopped and snapped and pointed at the smaller man, “You are not my brother. He died in Afghanistan.”

Andy slid to the floor with his back pressed against the wall. He sniffed blood away from his nose and chuckled. “We both know that’s not true. I’m right here, John.”

Diggle strode forward and gripped Andy by the front of his shirt, forcing him to stand. “You could have gotten my friends killed,” Diggle growled, slamming his brother’s head against the back wall of the cell. “Tell me what Darhk did to you.”

His head spinning, Andy still managed a smug smile. “You finally jealous of me for once?” He choked out a strangled laugh against John’s hands pressing tighter against his throat and chest. “Say the word, I’ll sign you up. It’d be so easy to fake your death; you’re halfway gone anyway.”

John reeled back and punched Andy across the mouth, dropping him to the floor, coughing, spitting and still chuckling. “Was it worth it?” Diggle kicked his brother in the stomach. “What about Carly and AJ, huh?” He kicked Andy again. “Did you even think about them, or were you too worried about yourself?”

Andy grunted and rolled onto his back. “She never wanted me anyway.” He wiped blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand. “I did her a favor. She got my life insurance and didn’t have to keep pretending I wasn’t her second choice.”
Diggle snatched Andy up by the front of his shirt collar again, only to punch him back into the floor. “AJ is your son! You abandoned him for what? So you could be a little stronger than me? So you could be some gangster’s bitch?”

Andy’s eyes flickered to the other end of the bunker, where Constantine had stopped his work to watch the “interrogation.” “Your boy’s not gonna crack shit. Darhk’s power is everywhere. We’re a hive. You might get a few of us, but you’re never going to take down the whole organization.”

John’s fists flew, bashing his brother’s face again and again. All the grief and anger flowed from his hands to Andy’s face. He couldn’t see or feel anything except his brother’s face as it turned to a mess of blood and broken bones under his fists.

“John!” Felicity’s high voice called him back. He stopped mid-punch, gathering his senses and taking in the full reality of Andy’s battered condition beneath him. He turned to see her standing just outside the cage, her own face crumpled with panic and tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. When had she gotten here?

Diggle dropped his brother and staggered away, removing himself from the small cell and brushing past Felicity, then Constantine without acknowledging either of them. Feeling Felicity’s shocked and hurt eyes following him was enough to stay with him for days.

As the alley door shut, Constantine narrowed his eyes at Andy’s cell. He stepped forward and removed a handkerchief from his pocket - Felicity, still reeling from the sight of Diggle completely out of control, vaguely wondered what kind of person carried a handkerchief. He reached through the bars and gently patted some blood away from Andy’s nose and eyes.

“I think he needs more first aid than that,” Felicity breathed, sniffling and fighting her trembling jaw.

Constantine pulled the bloodied cloth for closer inspection, humming with satisfaction. “I’m not interested in fixing him.” Back on the platform, he tossed the rag in a stone bowl, followed by a series of plants, rocks and other objects that set Felicity’s face wrinkling in confusion and disgust. He held the bowl over the boy, chanting in Latin before dropping a lit candle into the mix. It burst into a conflagration of blue and orange and purple flame before quickly dying and sputtering out.

For the first time since Jason brought him in, the boy opened his eyes and gasped for breath. Constantine set the bowl aside and nodded with a wry smile. “Looks like something stuck.”
“What does this mean for Thea?” Oliver pressed right to the point, ignoring the now belligerently silent teenager wolfing the Big Belly Burger meal Laurel had brought when Felicity called.

Constantine ran a hand down his scruffy and worn face, sighing hard. “I can reverse engineer this spell one at a time. It’s blood magic, seems to be not that dissimilar from the Pit magic. It still needs blood to work, though. Or soul energy, probably.”

Oliver winced, remembering a conversation with Ra’s. “When I was with the League, Ra’s said Damien took some of the Pit waters with him when he was excommunicated.”

“You’d be unpleasantly surprised to learn how much magic is just made up,” Constantine cracked.

Oliver rolled his eyes. “In the time I’ve spent with you, I really wouldn’t.”

“Look,” Constantine patted Oliver on the shoulder, “bring little sister here, and I’ll work on it. It’s just life force. I know what the pieces are now and how to break it. I can try to redirect the energy to her, might even break the hold the Pit has on her altogether. Might need more supplies. Breaking a spell’s hold is one thing, redirecting magic is something else.”

“What about Andy? And the rest of them?”

Constantine shrugged. “I wouldn’t fuss with Andy until his face knits back together. At any rate, the man’s not brainwashed, just ridiculously strong. As for the Ghosts and anyone else like that kid,” John nodded toward the teen, “for Damien to be channeling life force magic on this scale, he needs help. He’ll have totems or idols all over the city to boost the signal, as it were. Hard to say exactly how he’s doing it without a closer look.”

“We need a better look at Darhk’s operation anyway,” Laurel finally tore her attention away from the boy. “He says his entire family signed up for some medical testing over the past year, and they’ve all disappeared. He doesn’t remember where he was before Jason found him.”

“Medical testing?” Felicity pushed herself away from her computer. “Well, that at least gives me a place to start looking. A pretty icky place. His whole family?”

Laurel frowned and crossed her arms. “I can get with my dad, have him look into whole family disappearances. It’s something else that would probably go under the radar since people are
abandoning the city every day anyway.”

A small throat-clearing cough interrupted the discussion. Oliver struggled to hide his shock, but Laurel openly smiled at the sight of Diggle, Jason and Helena standing at the elevator entrance. Jason ignored the group in his surprise at the awoken 90-pound gorilla. Diggle’s eyes were glued to the floor, even his shoulders had taken on a defeated slump.

Helena, however, peered around the bunker with a bemused perk to her lips and bright eyes. “I heard you could use a hand,” she said mostly to Laurel.

Laurel grinned in response, “We could. It’s good to see you.”

“This is quite the place you’ve got here,” Helena gave the expansive lair an impressed appraisal. She met Felicity halfway onto the platform. The smaller woman bit her bottom lip and waffled nervously before launching herself at Helena in a bone-crunching hug. “It’s nice seeing you again, too,” Helena coughed out.

“I have something for you!” Felicity nearly bubbled over with excitement, guiding Helena to the uniform lockers.

“Felicity…” Oliver’s voice came with warning and resignation. He already knew what she did. Diggle gave him a sympathetic slap on the back.

Helena stopped when she saw Constantine, the still hungry teenage boy, and Andy Diggle’s badly beaten figure in a jail cell. Felicity’s face formed an exaggerated wince, but Constantine beat her to any explanations.

“John Constantine,” he stuck a friendly hand out. “I’m here for the magicks.”

“Helena Bertinelli,” she returned the handshake with a quizzical look back toward Oliver. “I’m here for the felonies.”

“It’s kind of a long story,” Felicity interjected helplessly. “The latest big bad is into magic.”
“And you guys have a kid sidekick and decided to step up your vigilante justice system with your own correctional facility?” Helena raised a bemused brow.

“Oh the kid sidekick thing is mostly Batman’s thing,” Jason called from where he had busied himself setting out first aid supplies to tend to Andy. “Unless Oliver is really diving into this poor man’s-Batman thing.”

“I’ll be taking the kid to CPS,” Laurel corrected. “Actually, Diggle could you come with me? On the way back we can get Thea and bring her back here.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Diggle perked up, eager for any opportunity to leave the bunker. Felicity hadn’t made eye contact with him yet, and he couldn’t bring himself to get a closer look at the damage he’d done to Andy. At least his outburst had opened the door for a breakthrough on Constantine’s end.

“Wait wait wait,” Felicity waved her hands frantically. “Before you go,” she gestured meaningfully to a previously unused drawer in the gear locker, “I want to show you all this.” She pulled the drawer open and unfolded a long purple and black coat. “What do you think?” She grinned at Helena from behind the coat.

Helena took it and nodded appreciatively at the feel of the material in her hands. Light gray stitching down the front and across the shoulders gave it the faintest hint of a cross, making Helena wonder just how much Felicity knew about her strict Catholic upbringing. She brought her eyes back up to Felicity, fighting the smile on her lips. “You wouldn’t happen to have a mask to go with it, or am I going to have to bust that out of the SCPD evidence locker?”

“I’m a little insulted you would even ask that,” Felicity smirked, unveiling the matching mask. “I also got you some tactical crossbows and arrows. A full set to match Oliver’s, but you know, shorter.”

“Ah, speaking of,” Helena turned to Laurel and pulled a pair of silvery staffs out of her bag. “Your sister said I could have these. And the keys to one of her safe houses. As long as I watch your back. There were a lot of threats sprinkled in there, though,” she added for good measure.

Laurel took the matching sticks and put them together into a single bo staff. “You were pretty good with a staff.”
“I was, wasn’t I?” Helena looked up and off to the unseen sky, smiling and entirely too pleased with herself.

“How ‘bout you suit up with me?” Oliver’s voice broke their exchange. Laurel’s face fell when she saw his serious expression. Helena’s chin rose almost imperceptibly at the challenge. “We might be able to round up a few more citizens like this kid, and it’ll be good to see where you’re at after being in Iron Heights for so long.”

Felicity silently handed the coat and mask to Helena with a wink. “Go get ‘em, Huntress.”

“Are we sure about this?” Laurel asked to Felicity quietly after Oliver and Helena left. Their uniform changeover had been silent and tense. Everything, actually, had been silent and tense. Jason patched Andy up. Diggle wouldn’t so much as look in that direction, or in Felicity’s direction. Laurel’s estimation of his estimation of Felicity had been right on the money. Now she felt guilty for sending his own Achilles heel in human form after him.

Felicity went through a series of gummy facial expressions without turning away from her computer. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. They worked so well together the last time. Right?”

“Right,” Laurel breathed with confidence she didn’t feel. Right.

Helena and Oliver. It’d be fine. Right.

Huntress dove and rolled for cover behind the trash dumpster. Between the smells, the dampness permeating through her pretty purple jacket and pants, and general pain and suffering, it all felt as familiar as if she’d been doing this the entire time she was in Iron Heights.

Green Arrow followed seconds later, breathing hard and growling under his breath. He ripped a playing card out of the leather on his shoulder.
“He’s pulling those out of his tattoos, right?” Huntress’s brow crinkled behind her mask. “I’m not hallucinating that?”

He only nodded and dared another look from behind their cover, only to recoil when he was confronted with another series of playing cards and light blasts.

It had been quite a bit more than magically-juiced up teenagers on the streets of Star City tonight.

When he bent to look again, Huntress spun from the other side of the dumpster, launching arrows from a crossbow in each hand and capitalizing on their temporary green distraction. Her mouth curved into a leonine smile as at least two arrows found their targets in Ghosts who jerked and fell backwards, but she was forced to duck back behind the dumpster to avoid another light blast.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t call for backup?” she ground out.

 Oliver ignored the question, crouched, then kicked the dumpster forward, sending it flying toward their remaining opponents. He followed with a series of well-placed arrows, Helena not far behind him.

The only target they missed was Jeremy Tell, pulling those freaky razor-sharp cards out of his skin. As far as metahuman mutations went, his was particularly strange. It hadn’t made any difference to Mother or Darhk, who had responded to Jeremy’s display of talents with an impressed “Neat!” before sending him out on his first HIVE mission. It was his lucky day: he’d be able to report back that he’d killed the Green Arrow and...whoever this purple chick was.

Tell could fire cards faster than Green Arrow could nock and fire his arrows, but not faster than Huntress’s crossbows. He hissed and reeled back when a small bolt landed in his shoulder, followed by the butt of her crossbow pistol grip. His night got worse when Green Arrow’s rather large thigh and knee connected with his chin. In his concussive haze, he wondered how the man had managed to kick so high. Tell dropped to his knees. Huntress was behind him pulling his arm into a shockingly painful bar that culminated in a sickening crack.

“Huntress!” Green Arrow barked.

Helena brought her attention back to Oliver, still not satisfied that Jeremy Tell was sufficiently pacified. “What?” she barked right back.
“He’s already down! Why would break his arm?”

Huntress’s face scrunched into open hostility. “We’re like five blocks from a hospital. He’ll be fine. You are being awfully picky considering we definitely killed at least three Ghosts already tonight.”

Oliver slung his bow and bent to secure Tell, ignoring the man’s pained groaning. “The Ghosts are a different story. They’re too strong and they’ll die before surrendering. And as soon as we take him to a hospital, we lose him for interrogation.”

Huntress squatted to be face to face with Oliver, eyes narrowed and smirking a challenge at him. “Oh yeah, different story, right. It’s always a different story with you, isn’t it?”

Oliver felt his teeth grinding against his will. “Can we do this later?” He rolled Tell onto his back, eliciting a shout of pain. “Tell us what you know about Darhk.”

Tell only glared up at the masked pair, gritting his teeth against the strain of his at least dislocated, if not broken, shoulder tied behind his back.

Huntress pressed her fingers against the joint, eliciting more screaming and swearing. Green Arrow warred with himself over the brutality of the simple gesture, but he let her continue for a few seconds more. Just as he was opening his mouth to order her to stop, she removed her fingers and raised an expectant brow at him. “Tell us,” he growled again.

Tell leaned up, the strain pulling at the muscles in his throat and bringing a sheen of sweat that glinted off the street lamps. “What do you expect,” the man sputtered, “I’ve only known him since Iron Heights. His operation is huge.”

“Tell us what you saw,” Green Arrow gripped Tell’s shirt collar as if he could be more imposing than Huntress’s thumbs digging into his broken joint.

“Other metas,” Tell spat. “A lot of Ghosts. All kinds of people in cages. It sounded like they have facilities all over the city. And art. They’re both obsessed with art.”

Huntress and Green Arrow exchanged a bewildered look. “Art?” Huntress asked.
“Yeah, art,” Tell sneered back. “The gray lady, they called her Mother, she had freaky-ass paintings. And Darhk’s got statues everywhere. It’s creepy; I noticed it.”

Green Arrow stood and Huntress followed, a bit less sure but following his lead. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Tell.”

Jeremy’s eyes widened as he watched the vigilantes turn their backs to him and start a casual stroll back out of the alley. “Hey! You can’t just leave me here!”

“We’re not,” Oliver called over his shoulder.

“We’re not, though, right?” Huntress muttered.

“Overwatch,” Green Arrow tapped his mic, “Call the Flash. We got one of their metas.”

Laurel ran a hand through her hair and scowled at the documents scattered across her desk. All this hard work, even a full name, and it amounted to a whole lot of nothing. At least it was all nothing from a legal standpoint.

Damien Darhk did not exist in the eyes of the U.S. government. He had never been born, never registered to vote, never held a job, never applied for a passport or owned property.

_No wonder why he calls his people Ghosts_, she sneered at the mountain of work. Somehow he had made himself a non-entity and the Ghosts under him were just that: all legally dead people. At least Andy was. Felicity had run a few blood samples and came up with other dead people.

When the idea popped into her head to subpoena him, it had seemed so simple. That’s how they caught Al Capone, right? It wasn’t by catching him in the midst of his worst crimes but by
following his own paper trail and bringing him in on the first irregularity they found: tax evasion.

But it wouldn’t be so simple with Darhk because there was no Damien Darhk. He didn’t even match Felicity’s facial recognition software. All they knew about him was what they learned from Ra’s al Ghul by way of Oliver, which was next to nothing.

The “Mother” person Jeremy Tell identified was just as much of a mystery. Even Jason had tangled with her before and come up empty.

She chewed on a pencil and could have growled. It couldn’t be that easy for them. These people had homes - lavish homes, at that, and usually more than one - property, cars, weapons, employees. They ate food, bought clothing, electronics, art. They might even have kids and spouses. Kids had to go to school, or get private tutoring. Laurel refused to give into the idea that there existed a dark underbelly of the world with a network so well established that they could maintain an entire society under the radar of any of the major governments.

No, somewhere out there was a paper trail just waiting to be found.

“Sweetheart, I brought you those…” Quentin trailed off when he saw the disheveled mess scattered across his daughter’s desk. “You okay?”

Laurel dreamily turned her attention to her father, still half-reading the document in her hands. “Mm-hmm.”

Quentin set the pile of missing person’s reports on an empty chair rather than continue cluttering her desk. A deep frown creased his face. Laurel’s cheeks were still discolored from the beating she’d taken in Iron Heights, and the bags under her eyes indicated that she, as usual, hadn’t been sleeping since she got back. He slumped himself into the chair across from her desk and sighed. “What can I do to help you?”

She blinked up at him, finally fully registering that he was there. She took in his pained, set expression. She knew she must look terrible. “Um,” she slowly pushed the papers around in front of her, “I could use a fresh set of eyes?”

He leaned forward and scowled at the mess. “What are we looking for?”
“Any evidence that Damien Darhk is a real live human being.”

Quentin kept his face expressionless and his eyes down at the papers. “Damien Darhk huh? This our latest bad guy?”

“So it would seem,” Laurel shuffled another stack of papers into a neat pile. “But as far as I can tell, he doesn’t actually exist. There is no record of him, anywhere.”

Quentin thumbed the printed search document idly, pretending to read it. He wanted to tell her. Part of his brain was screaming at him to just unload the whole story. But no, that wouldn’t be right. It would put Laurel directly in Darhk’s crosshairs. And Laurel would go barrelling after the man headfirst if she got her hands on the amount of information Quentin had.

But she was already battered from putting herself in the midst of Darhk’s HIVE business. The sooner they took this guy down, the better. Maybe just a little information, something to keep her working on the outskirts of Darhk’s operation.

Quentin cleared his throat, “Eh, you know when I get stuck, I try looking at the evidence from a different perspective.”

“What do you mean?” Laurel looked up to him with a wrinkled brow.

“It looks like this guy has done a good job making this identity disappear. So, look for something else to tie everything together. Maybe someone or a shell company buying up property around the city, or pull banking records. Look for big deposits and transfers. Track the infrastructure.”

Laurel furrowed and scrambled for a few seemingly random pieces of paper. She smiled back up at Quentin after she looked them over. “This is good. Thank you.”

Quentin leaned back in his seat and folded his hands in his lap, shrugging in a manner he hoped was casual enough. “Well, I am a detective.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Laurel said with a rush of warm affection. She let the papers rest back on her desk, suddenly aware that the person in front of her was more important. “You know, it’s been a while. Do you want to maybe get dinner together tonight?”
Quentin felt his heart sink but kept smiling back at Laurel. He and a few of the council members had a meeting with Darhk in a few hours. “I’d love to, sweetheart, but I can’t tonight. How about we try later this week?”

Laurel tried not to show the sting of rejection on her face. “Sure, that sounds great.”

Quentin stood and bent to kiss her forehead. “I gotta get going. Let me know if you need anything.” Laurel only nodded with a tight smile and watched him go.

Outside the D.A.’s office, Quentin pulled his coat tight around himself. With the sun setting and autumn in full bloom, the northwestern coast took on a biting wet chill. He fished his keys out of his pocket and started to unlock his car when a familiar tall form leaned casually against the trunk.

“When you gonna tell her?” Jason asked in a flat voice. Quentin narrowed his eyes at the other man. Even in a hoodie with a baseball cap pulled low over his face, he was recognizable, imposing enough to draw side-eye glances from people passing by on the sidewalk.

“This is none of your damn business,” Quentin hissed under his breath, then returned to unlocking his door. He stopped and pointed a finger at Jason who had pushed himself from his casual stance against the car. “What are you doing hanging around here anyway? You want to add stalking to your charge sheet?”

Jason shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Just passing by. I’m wondering how long you and Diggle want to keep playing Hide the Damien from Laurel.”

“It is none-”

“None of my business, got it,” Jason stepped up to Quentin, looking down on the smaller man. “It felt strangely like my business when I was pulling your daughter out of Iron Heights because of the bad intel Andy Diggle gave us. Seems like that’s something we might have avoided if everyone was playing on the same sheet of music.”

Quentin glared up at Jason without surrendering any ground. “If he knows I’ve helped you people in any way, he’ll kill her.”
Jason was glaring down at Quentin so close he could see the wrinkles of exhaustion wearing around his eyes and the gray filling out his five o’clock shadow. “They’re going to face each other anyway. Cut the bullshit. I’m not going to keep playing this game for you people forever.”

“You gonna go threaten Diggle now?” Quentin asked petulantly

Jason’s lips pursed and turned up in amusement. “I don’t know, maybe. The night is young.”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” Quentin pushed away from the car to open the door and let himself in. Jason didn’t move from his place in the street at the detective drove off.

Quentin watched him in his rearview mirror until he turned a corner and was out of sight. He let out a breath and flexed his hands on the steering wheel.

The little asshole was right.

“So, good news and bad news, what d’you want first?” Constantine clasped his hands together.

Thea, wrapped in a blanket and still sickly pale, exchanged an arched look with her brother. Oliver responded, “Good news.”

Constantine nodded gamely. “Right, good news is I can make the little bird feel better for now.”

“For now?” Thea croaked. The doctors hadn’t been pleased to sign her release forms, but they also had no reason to keep her under observation. She had no actual wounds and no evidence of any illness, except that she was so weak. And periodically coughing up blood.

“Yeah, that’s the bad news,” Constantine huffed a long breath of air out. “Without whatever totems Darhk is using, I can’t make it stick.”
“But we know he’s using totems or whatever, right?” Felicity asked. “I mean, that’s what you got from Jeremy Tell?”

Constantine agreed, “That’s the only reason he’d have a collection of statues everywhere he went. It’s the only way he’d be able to channel the Pit’s magic on this scale.”

“Without a totem, what will you do now?” Oliver asked.

“I’ll be the totem,” Constantine replied, sliding a cigarette under his tongue. “And I’m going to drain the excess from Andy into Thea.”

Diggle cast a wary expression toward his brother’s cell. “That’s not going to hurt him, is it?”

Constantine responded with a quick head shake and a puff on his smoke. “Shouldn’t. Darhk pumped him full of extra soul energy to make him nice and strong. The Pit is taking back energy from Thea because the blood debt’s not being paid. This is just evening the playing field.”

Thea made a scrunched face and struggled to sit up higher to be properly heard. Oliver quickly put a hand to her back to help her. “Okay so that’s for now, but the permanent solution? It sounds like you’re saying…”

“I need to get my hands on one of his totems and another juiced-up Ghost. If I drain him completely through the totem into you, that should be the extra kick you need to break the hold this magic has on you.”

Thea frowned up at her brother and shook her head. “No, Ollie, I don’t want to do that. What about Sara? Why isn’t she sick?”

Constantine spoke before Oliver could answer. “We removed Sara’s soul from the Pit completely. She’s not tied to it. You are. I’m sorry, love, soul magic’s not pretty.”

“This is only slightly better than Malcolm’s solution for me to just keep murdering people,” Thea groaned.
Oliver pressed his lips to the crown of Thea’s head. “Let’s get you feeling better now, and we’ll talk about it again later, okay?”

When Oliver moved to Andy’s cell with the shackles ready, Andy looked up at him with a sneer. “You’re not even gonna ask me if this is something I want to do? First you send my brother to beat me up, now you’re gonna drain my soul. Buncha heroes.”

Oliver affixed the cuffs with more force than necessary. When he brought Andy to stand, he leaned low and spoke in a voice just loud enough for the other man to hear. “I would let Constantine sacrifice every Ghost I come across to Satan himself if it meant saving my sister. You are done jerking us around, Andy.”

Hours later, Diggle stood outside his brother’s cell with his arms crossed, frowning, deep in thought. Andy had been asleep since the spell. While Constantine assured everyone it was painless, losing all that extra energy while Andy was still hurt had sent the man almost instantly into unconsciousness.

He’d protested, loudly. He’d begged John not to let them do this to him. Between his pleas and Thea’s stricken face, her own eyes begging anyone in the bunker to put a stop to the proceedings, John was gutted. He felt worse than he had since he realized he had beaten Andy’s face into a bloody pulp.

Andy let out a soft groan and slowly shifted, opening his eyes and wincing at the harsh overhead lighting. He blinked up at John, confused, “What’s going on?”

Diggle’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. It was a trick. Constantine had said himself that Andy wasn’t brainwashed. “The spell worked. Thea’s back on her feet.” His voice remained cold and detached.

Andy gingerly pushed himself to sit up, resting against the cot. “Good, good,” he nodded as he spoke. “I feel weird, John. Like I’m waking up from a long dream.”

“Stop it, Andy, we know you Darhk didn’t put the whammy on you.”

Andy swallowed and looked down at his hands. “I know he didn’t. But all that extra power, man. It felt weird. I felt invincible.”
Diggle took a small step closer to the cage, raising his chin and looking down at his little brother. “You mean like when you were running drugs? Or when you abandoned your wife and son?”

Andy’s mouth formed a thin line and he nodded solemnly.

Diggle hadn’t expected this particular tactic from his brother, so he decided to go with it. He decided to pretend he heart wasn’t lifting with the hope that it wasn’t an act. “So what are you gonna do about it?”

Andy looked up to John with a determined set to his bruised jaw. “Does it matter? You’re just going to keep me locked up in a cage like a dog. Beat me up when I piss you off. Remind you of someone?”

John’s blood ran cold at the reminder of their stepfather. His heart tripped over itself and he hid his trembling hands under his arms. “No. That’s not going to happen again. I’m sorry, Andy.”

“So you’re not going to keep me locked in this cage?” Andy smiled wryly up at John.

John sighed and leaned his forehead against the bars for a moment before he responded. “We can’t trust you. Show me that we can trust you.”

Andy pushed himself up to sit on the cot instead of the cold cement floor. He thought carefully. “Mother’s gonna move another shipment of kids out of Star City tomorrow night.”

John snapped to attention. At his brother’s quizzical expression, Andy continued, “One of the top lieutenants, remember? They won’t have changed the move date on this one because they had to buy off a bunch of air traffic controllers to get the plane out of city air space. While you guys are trying to stop that, you might be able to snatch up one of those totems Constantine was talking about. He places them anywhere we’re working.”

“Where is this happening?” John was deadly serious.

Andy shook his head. “I don’t know. HIVE has private airfields all over the city and county. They even have connections at the airport and the Air National Guard base outside of town. They kept
details with different planners in case of this situation right here.”

“So,” Diggle dropped his arms and started to pace back and forth in front of the cage, “you expect us to go running after your half-clue and get ourselves in deep like we did last time?”

And threw his hands up then dropped them in his lap. “I don’t know, man. You want to know if you can trust me. I don’t know how else to prove it to you.”

“Why now?” Diggle stopped pacing to look squarely at his brother.

“I may not have been brainwashed, like you said, but I wasn’t right in the head, either,” Andy’s eyes fell to his hands. “I just feel different now.”

Diggle squinted and nodded. “Fine. You test me, Andy, just one time, and you’re going in a padded cell in Central City and never seeing the light of day.”

Diggle left the cage, and the bunker, repeatedly running a hand down his face. He had to call the team. He wanted to call Lyla and ask if he was being an idiot. He wanted to run back inside and shake his brother and force him to drop the act. But no, putting his hands on Andy wouldn’t do either of them any good.

There was only one way to find out if Andy was being honest.

Jason shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then settled on dropping to a knee from the low squat he’d maintained in the back of Diggle’s van. He could have sat up front, but something about restraining himself to a seat felt too claustrophobic. Everything about the mission felt claustrophobic.

Yet again they were chasing bread crumbs dropped by John’s brother. Jason had to hand it to the man; he knew exactly how much information to give to appear cooperative while still leaving everyone in enough darkness to be in danger.
Laurel had quickly amassed public property purchase records from the past year that could house an operation like HIVE’s and with Felicity’s hacking of security cameras and even an NSA satellite (Laurel made a show of pretending to not hear that one) they settled on one place just outside the city limits that fit Andy’s description. It seemed logical enough mainly because it was a private airfield that had a military-grade KC-130 parked outside the hangar for no apparent reason.

In the front seat, Constantine looked just as unsettled as Jason felt. His hair stuck up at odd angles and he’d sucked back an endless stream of cigarettes since begrudgingly admitting he needed to be with the team to get a better look at any magical nonsense Damien may have set up. If they were really lucky, he’d even find a permanent solution for Thea tonight.

But no one in this van was that lucky, certainly not the wide eyed brunette squatting across from him. In the headlights of passing vehicles, Jason could see that Thea’s pupils were still so dilated almost her entire iris looked black. She’d had that creepy look and jittery energy since Constantine did his work on her the night before. She had been more than happy to volunteer for this mission, come hell or high water. Laurel, Oliver and Diggle only agreed to bring her when Constantine mentioned that he might not be able to move whatever magical objects he might find.

Thea’s eyes tracked the lights and every movement from all the passengers in the van, but nothing seemed to register. Jason wondered if Andy wasn’t lying, if maybe the extra energy did affect their minds. Mental manipulation and breeding super-people was Mother’s favorite game, after all.

No, there was nothing fully right about this little adventure. He tried to focus his attention on the images Overwatch was sending to his helmet. Ghosts were loading a steady stream of small people into the back of the plane from somewhere beneath the hangar.

Stop the plane, clear the building. He’d thrown himself into worse situations with more complicated plans. They could do this. He gave gruff, clear instructions over the radios to ensure everyone was on the same page.

Oliver had some concerns about clearing the building first, to make sure they didn’t destroy it and any magical artifacts that could help Thea, when they realized their location had been compromised. So they would split. Helena, Jason and Diggle after the plane, the others clearing the building and giving Constantine cover to work.

Still simple enough, right?
At his age, he should have already been well aware that it was never that simple.

Trying to fight in the confined space of a C-130 was difficult enough, but even worse with two partners and trying to not do permanent damage to his opponents.

His back collided with something firm and solid. Helena shot him a lip-curling sneer over her shoulder before returning her attention to the mob of kids that had simultaneously unbuckled and Hulked out when they jumped on the back ramp of the plane.

“Huntress!” Diggle barked from the other side of the plane. Somehow in all the chaos, he still managed to have his eyes on Jason and Huntress, and judge their methods.

Helena dropped the large teen girl in her arms and finished her into unconsciousness with a knee to the chin before barking back, “What? Do you have a better idea?”

“I gotta agree with her,” Jason called, tossing a boy over his shoulders and bowling over a small group before they could rush him. “Playtime is over.”

“You’re hilarious,” Spartan deadpanned. “Green Arrow, Black Canary, what is going on in there?”

Laurel’s panting voice came back, “Uh, we have a little problem of our own. Can you get the kids off the plane?”

Red Hood popped another teen across the jaw, but the sprightly kid bounced back. What they lacked in skill, they made up for in durability, apparently. “Getting them off the plane is not the problem,” he growled, kicking the boy back with a booted foot to the chest.

The engines roared to life and the body of the plane started to rumble and shake. Spartan, Huntress and Red Hood exchanged a quick, panicked look. Red Hood jumped and used the cargo netting to swing clear over the wild, angry mob of kids. If he could get to the cockpit…

A heavy foot to hit helmeted face sent him flying backwards into the kids. The ones he didn’t land on swarmed him in a flurry of small, too-strong fists and gnashing teeth. He couldn’t see from his position, but over his radio a series of shouts and curses preceded Helena’s pronouncement that they’d thrown her off the back of the plane.
He palmed one of the kids away, shoving her face so hard she flew off her feet. A few more were pulled off him, followed by a welcoming hand from Spartan helping him back up. It didn’t last long. One of the bigger teens looped his arms around Spartan’s neck from behind, pulling him off balance. The swarm redirected their attention to their new victim, this one less willing to defend himself against their onslaught.

Palette’s hulking frame shouldered past them and with a single hand around Spartan’s beaten and exhausted throat, threw the smaller man off the back ramp.

Jason was already halfway up the steps to the cockpit when Palette’s hand closed on his shoulder and threw him back into the door. Winded, Red Hood didn’t get his hands up in time to block the series of punishing blows Palette rained repeatedly across his helmet, cracking the screen and ringing his bell even through the padding.

As Palette dragged Red Hood back through the belly of the plane toward the ramp, he laughed loudly over the droning engine noise. “Maybe I should hold onto you. Not drop you until we reach cruising altitude. What do you say to that, you little red shit?”

Jason struggled feebly to get his feet under back under him and snorted even through the pain slicing across his head. “Scarier men than you have killed me in more creative ways,” he heaved the words out. He slid a knife from his belt, waited until Palette held him at the edge of the ramp, and then sunk the blade into the man’s thigh.

Palette roared and tossed Red Hood onto the tarmac, sending him rolling as the plane slowly taxied away. As he rolled to a stop and struggled for his bearings, he was dimly aware of Diggle and Huntress helping him back to his feet. “That’s so embarrassing,” he slurried a little, then perked up when he saw he had landed just outside the hangar where the team had parked their vehicles.

And that damn plane was circling to the far end of the runway to take off back in their direction. He still had time.

Laurel, Oliver, Constantine and Thea jogged out of the hangar, each looking more battle weary than the last. Constantine held a small statue under one arm, arguing with Green Arrow about the merits of destroying it.

“I won’t be able to test it on Speedy if we destroy it now,” Constantine’s voice rose as if he was stating the most obvious truth in the world.
Oliver snarled in frustration and gestured angrily at the plane with his bow. “We are going to lose all of them if we don’t do something!”

“I can stop it,” Red Hood spoke flatly, then winced at the expressions ranging from pity to placating to outright doubt at the sight of him. He admitted inwardly that he probably didn’t look his best, especially with the cracked helmet and bloody, torn jacket and pants. “If there’s not 100 souped-up little rage monsters in there, I can stop it,” he clarified.

Speedy looked between him, the plane and Constantine before shaking her head, lunging forward and ripping the small statue from John’s arms. He could only watch in stunned bewilderment, struggling to form the word “No” as she threw it to the ground, then stomped on it repeatedly for good measure.

The entire group stared at her in silence, eyes wide and mouths open. She whipped her head to Constantine, “Did it work?”

His face crumpled and he looked ready to tear his hair out. “I don’t bloody know! Do you see any of those kids running around here we can ask?”

A whir, then roar and squealing tires drew their attention. Laurel’s mouth fell open possibly further as Red Hood, broken helmet and all, sped off toward the plane on Green Arrow’s bike.

“H-hey!” was all Oliver managed to croak out.

The plane was roaring past them, nearing takeoff speed, with a red and black and green-lit blur not far behind.

Laurel was on her bike, getting it into gear when Huntress stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and a headshake. “The plane is already off the ground,” she spoke firmly, the sight of Laurel’s determined jaw and panicked eyes more unsettling than she’d care to admit this early in their relationship.

In the blackness of the private airfield, they all lost sight of Red Hood and everything but the C-130’s wing lights in seconds. As the lights gained altitude, Black Canary felt her heart thundering in her chest. She looked around at their team, her mouth trembling. All of these people and they were all just standing here watching the plane fly away.
“Red Hood, are you there?” she called into the radio. Only silence answered. “Overwatch, can you, I don’t know, hack the plane? Take over the autopilot?”

“Uh,” Felicity’s voice responded coated with guilt, “it’s a C-130 from the 80’s. There’s nothing for me to hack. I can scan the radio frequencies to see if they’re making any radio transmissions.”

She looked back at the group, none of them but Huntress would look at her. She set her jaw and hopped back on her bike.

“What are you doing?” Spartan asked, taking a cautious step toward her.

“I have to see,” was all she said before taking off down the runway, scanning for any sign.

Green Arrow’s laid out bike was all she found. She pulled out a small flashlight and kept searching, scanning the overgrown fields around the runway. Nothing.

Huntress and Spartan caught up to her on Huntress’s motorcycle. “Anything?” Spartan asked, all business.

“No. We can’t…we cannot have just let him fly off to die…”

“Hey,” Huntress interrupted her, and then her face blanched over Laurel’s shoulder. “Hey .”

Black Canary and Spartan turned to see what she was looking and now pointing at and saw the plane circling overhead, like it was coming back.

“Thanks for the patch-through, Overwatch,” Red Hood’s voice crackled over their radios. “Do you guys mind clearing the runway? I’m tired and I’d like to land now.”

Laurel thought she was going to come out of her skin, jumping back on her bike next to Huntress and Spartan and racing back to the hangar. They waited until Jason landed and taxied back toward the hangar to call emergency services for the kids.
Green Arrow and Spartan beat her up the back ramp of the plane. They all spoke gentle, encouraging words to the kids who ranged from crying to silent shellshock. Speedy and Huntress wrangled them one by one into the now abandoned hangar.

Red Hood’s frame slipped awkwardly down the steps from the cockpit, only to be caught by Green Arrow and Spartan. He pulled his fully shattered helmet off his head, revealing a nice open cut near his eye and sheen of sweat.

“Did it have to be my bike?” Green Arrow slung one of Jason’s arms over his shoulder. He had a small bolt sticking out of the meat of his thigh. He clutched his left hand to his chest. Even in the dim red interior lighting of the aircraft and gloved, Laurel could see he had broken fingers.

“I’ll get you a new one,” Jason slurred a little, smirking at Oliver who tried to hide his own smile behind his hood.

When they got to where Laurel was crouched, helping a kid out of his seat, Jason reflexively smiled down at her. The smile dropped when she only stared back up at him, her own face a stony mask to hide the swirling storm of pain, fear and anger she had building under the surface.

“What happened to the big guy?” Huntress asked when they made it to the hangar.

Now Jason grinned, a bloody mess running down his nose to his chin. “Oh I sent him on a little skydiving trip.”

Oliver helped him into the back of the van, where he collapsed on his back in a beaten heap. Laurel tossed Oliver the keys to her bike. At his confused look, “I’m riding with them.”

She sat in the back of the van, her knees pulled up to her chest. She thought he was unaware of her presence until the fingers on his good hand found the toe of her boot and stayed there.

“How about next time you share some of that hero stuff with the rest of us, eh buddy?” Diggle called from the front seat as he started the van. The kids were settled and the sirens of first responders could already be heard. It was time to go.
Jason tried to laugh but it came out as a cough. Thea settled into a spot next to Laurel, looping one of her hands through Laurel’s and resting her head on her friend’s shoulder. “That was a little tense for a minute,” she whispered.

“A little,” Laurel replied quietly.

From the front seat, Constantine grumbled to Diggle about the loss of the totem. Thea hushed them, then made a “cut it” gesture across her throat at Constantine’s annoyed look thrown back at her.

Laurel pulled her phone from her jacket and punched in a quick text, which Diggle answered despite his driving. He harrumphed at his phone and changed the van’s course without asking.

Jason’s head hurt. Scratch that, his everything hurt. It was still dark in his room, but light enough to hurt his eyes even behind his eyelids. He ventured one eye open by a slit, then the other. He was definitely home, but the curtains he always pulled shut were open, letting in the hazy gray of the rain outside.

He pushed the covers back and frowned appreciatively. He’d been stripped to his skivvies, but the metal bolt had been removed from his leg and the hole stitched, and other wounds on his arms had been similarly bandaged and stitched if necessary. A careful finger to his eye found a small bandage there, too. Even his busted finger had been taped to the other finger and splinted with a popsicle stick. The remnants of bandages and ice packs littered his nightstand and the table near the window.

The smell of coffee and...were those cinnamon buns? Wafted to his nose and drew him to sit up and gingerly step out of bed. He’d had worse wakeups. Much worse. Being fully resurrected from the Lazarus Pit turned out to have a neat side effect of accelerating normal healing. Jason optimistically estimated that the hit-by-a-truck feeling would be gone by the afternoon.

He slowly made his way down the metal spiral stairs, dreamily following his nose and the sound of something sizzling on the stove. Jason came up short when he got to the large kitchen and drank in the sight of Laurel Lance idly pushing store-bought sticky buns around a greased pan on the stove, wearing one of his shirts and not much else.
“You’re not John,” he spoke in a low, husky tone. She squeaked and jumped, nearly knocking the pan off the stove. Jason rushed forward and their hands met on the pan’s handle. He cursed under his breath at the sudden wave of dizziness, and then again at suddenly being nearly on top of her wearing only boxers.

“You’re up,” she spoke quietly, blinking up at him over her shoulder. He backed away slowly, painfully aware of their mutual state of undress.

“Uh, yeah, I do that.”

She was frowning at him with a mix of concern and anger. She shut the stove off and set the pan aside and stepped closer to him to inspect the various bandages she’d placed the previous night.

Jason pulled away, wincing, and at her confused expression he plastered on a fake smile. “I’m fine, really. Thanks for, uh, this. How’d you even know where I live?”

Laurel’s eyes narrowed and her arms crossed. Why did he get the distinct impression he was still in trouble? “You think you’re the only vigilante in this town who knows how to find people?” He conceded the point with a flat mouth and not much else. “Why an abandoned fire station?” She cast a critical eye around her surroundings.

Jason pulled back defensively. For some reason, probably her long legs and his t-shirt, he couldn’t think of a good reason right now why he’d coopted an old fire station. It had something to do with the kitchen and showers, and maybe the pole. “I have...so much room for activities,” he breathed and gave up.

Her brow crinkled skeptically, then she returned to her scowl. “Well, you’re welcome. Someone had to make sure you didn’t slip into a coma and die overnight. But next time you decide to kill yourself, don’t do it in front of me.”

Jason recoiled. What? “What?”

Laurel shoved past him to get out of the kitchen and pace in the living room, what had been the rec room when firefighters still occupied this building. “If you want to be gone so badly, just go then.” She threw her clothes off the couch she’d slept on and started angrily folding the blanket she’d used. Jason didn’t know blanket folding could be angry. Alfred never folded blankets angry.
“What are you talking about?” Exasperation and tiredness wore at his voice. His headache was actually worse now. Warm cinnamon buns might never smell good to him again if this kept up.

Laurel pulled at the blanket in her hands. She wanted to shred it. She wanted to bury herself under it and hide until Jason went away and they could pretend this never happened. Angry tears stung at her eyes but she bit them back. She swallowed them into more anger. How could he stand there and act so dumb?

“The prison? You lock yourself into Iron Heights and then just disappear without a word, and then you run off and lock yourself into a flying tin can with Palette, of all people…” she trailed off. The anger was fading into more dangerous territory: fear. Jason’s expression no longer held the bewildered confusion it had moments ago, only apprehension. “Do you even care if you live or die?”

“Is that what this is about?” he asked gently, his expression softened. “Laurel, I am one of the world’s foremost experts on killing and being dead. If I wanted to be dead, I would be.”

When Laurel remained rooted in place, biting the insides of her cheeks, her fingers digging into that stupid blanket and staring at the floor, Jason moved around the couch to stand directly in front of her, forcing her to look up at him. “I jump without looking, which, by the way, you do too.” She opened her mouth to argue but quickly shut it and continued scowling at his pointed look. “Yes, you do. And you are right, I walk a fine line every time I jump. I have to believe I got brought back for something other than killing the man who raised me like I was his son. I owe him this much. After what I did, I owe everyone.”

Understanding and fresh hurt washed over Laurel. “You think that if you aren’t half dead every time you come home you haven’t done enough?”

Jason’s shoulders came up in a small shrug. “What’s the point of anything less?”

“You get to stay, Jason.”

“Where? I don’t belong anywhere. The best thing I’m ever going to do for this world is die for someone else.”

Laurel’s chest constricted. He wasn’t teasing her or putting up a cocky front like he did with the
others. He stood in front of her, green eyes shining in the dimly lit room, surrounded by rainfall outside, with all of his scars on display. The protective instinct in her mind screamed at her to run: he was already declaring he was going to leave, that he wanted to leave, in the permanent sense. In the worst sense. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but one day. But then Sara’s voice came, clear as a bell, whispering “Try.”

There was a question in his eyes, she could tell that much. She wondered how often in his life he’d admitted this to other people. She wondered how hard Palette hit him across the head.

“Stay with me,” she spoke barely above a whisper. The seconds before he responded stretched out before her. Every rejection in her life: Oliver, Sara, her mother, her father, even Tommy, they all played out in her mind’s eye. He wasn’t answering her. Laurel’s mouth went dry and her eyes drifted to stare at her hands. She should have expected this. It was the most logical reaction, after all…

He abruptly snatched the blanket out of her hands and crushed her to him with his good hand sunk into her hair behind her head and his broken hand trying feebly to cup her face. And he was kissing her, the electricity from his hands and his mouth seemed to crackle in the air around them and through her skin.

His teeth nipped at her lower lip and their tongues clashed. When she dug her hands into his hair and pulled their bodies closer, she heard a low groan from deep in his throat. Jason broke off the kiss, leaving his forehead resting against Laurel’s. He struggled to catch his breath and said thickly, “Say it again.”

Laurel blinked, her eyelashes brushing his cheeks. She was also panting for breath and between the blood rushing everywhere but her head and the feel of his muscular shoulders under where her hands had roamed, she struggled to understand the request. “Say it,” he murmured again.

“Stay,” she finally landed on it. “Stay with me.”

His eyes clouded, dark with desire. He’d imagined this scenario at least a thousand times since coming to Star City, but the reality of holding Laurel, her own face still storming between hurt, anger and now a hunger to match his own, was something else entirely. Their lips met again, slower this time, a more languid dance than the frenzied clashing just moments before. Jason’s damaged hand found its way to Laurel’s lower back, using mostly his wrist and palm to gently guide her as he maneuvered them without breaking contact until his calves hit the couch cushions.

Jason sat back slowly, pulling Laurel down with him, afraid that if they tumbled or if anything
broke what he had in his arms and on his lips right now, he might never get it back. As she slid into his lap, straddling him, he thought he’d start seeing stars. His shirt rode up higher on her hips, revealing a pair of needlessly small spandex shorts.

He broke off the kiss, leaving her puckered and very confused. “This,” he nodded down at her bare legs, “next time you want to yell at me, you wear pants.”

Laurel pouted at him with kiss-swollen lips then her eyes sparkled with a teasing gleam. “I might have wanted to torture you. A little.”

“Oh a little?” His hand drifted under the shirt she was wearing, tracing light patterns on her bare skin. The featherlight touch sent shivers through her body and Jason’s eyes nearly crossed when Laurel gasped and bit her lip, reflexively grinding her hips against him. He pushed himself up to pull Laurel back down to his mouth, only to drag his lips away, trailing a wet path of kisses and nips down her throat until he reached her collarbone. He tugged the offending shirt collar away to get easier access, reveling in the taste of her skin and the scent of her silky hair cascading down her shoulders. She must have showered while he was still asleep, but her hair still held the scent of whatever she used at home because it was most definitely not a scent he was accustomed to. It was something vanilla and spicy and so uniquely female.

She suddenly pulled back with a hand on his chest. “Hey, you’re not dressed, either.”

He held back a snort of laughter that tried to escape, but couldn’t hide the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, you undressed me.” Laurel’s skin was already flushed, but a pink blush still managed to creep into her cheeks. “I kinda wish I’d been awake for the Florence Nightingale routine.”

Laurel broke into a smile and leaned forward, resting her forehead against his and laughing in a throaty, husky way he hadn’t heard yet. “It wasn’t that cute. You’re pretty heavy.”

“With these guns?” he asked with mocking doubt, rubbing his hands up and down her firm arms. The sensation of his calloused hands on her bare skin, even just her arms, had more of an effect than she’d care to admit. Her body admitted it for her. Her hips rocked against him. His fingers sank hard into her arms and with so little clothing between them, she felt him actually get harder than he already was.

He started to pull at the hem of her shirt, his splinted fingers getting tangled in the material. “God...dang it…” his face furrowed in frustrated concentration until he felt Laurel giggling down at him.
At his pained, helpless look, Laurel relented and pulled the shirt over her head, tossing it to the floor. The movement was so quick, so casual, Jason stared up at her in thunderstruck wonder, completely unprepared. Laurel froze under his gaze, suddenly self-conscious. Her mouth went dry and her hands fluttered to cover herself, but Jason grabbed her hands with a quick, almost panicked head shake. He drew her in until she looped her arms around his neck and he enveloped her in his own arms, breathing in every part of her.

Laurel pressed their mouths together again, their tongues rolling over each other. The scruff of his beard burned against her soft skin; his hands splayed across her back, drawing her even closer. Their hips rocked together and a moan escaped her lips when Jason slid his good hand up her waist, cupping her breast and rubbing gentle circles over her pert nipple. Her head fell back at the intoxicating sensation, which Jason took full advantage of by leaving a trail of searing kisses down her neck.

His head ducked lower, biting, kissing and tasting everything he could the whole way down, until he took her other nipple into his mouth. He flicked his tongue over it, followed by a gentle bite, eliciting a ragged cry from Laurel. She dug her hands into his hair and ground her hips into him.

Jason snaked his broken hand around Laurel’s hips and lifted her smoothly, flipping her onto her back so that now she was under him. He continued along her ribs, pausing to bite and suck at her breasts, working his way back up her throat. Laurel writhed against him, and hooked a leg around his waist, her hands tugging and pulling at every part of him she could reach just to pull him closer.

Laurel whimpered when Jason pulled away, struggling for breath. He cupped her chin, trying desperately to ignore that stupid splint on his fingers. "Are you sure?"

Her fingers traced a pattern along the back of his neck and she smiled up at him. She didn’t often get to see him look unsure of himself.

Her quick “Yes” was all he needed to hear. He took her mouth again in a fierce, burning kiss. She almost didn’t let him go as he pulled back and tore himself away, her teeth dragging along his bottom lip. He darted quick, passing glances around the dwelling, before grimacing and groaning in frustration. “What?” Laurel asked, pushing herself up to nuzzle into his neck, doing things with her lips and teeth and tongue that made Jason feel like something short circuited in his brain.

“I...upstairs...I have to…” he couldn’t form a coherent sentence while she was doing that.
“Upstairs?” Laurel barely got the question out between biting and sucking on that place where his jaw met his throat. When it gradually dawned on her what he was so agitated about, she let herself fall back into the couch cushion under him. “I’m on birth control,” she struggled to keep her voice even despite her heavy breathing, “and clean.”

Relief and a smile lit from his eyes as he breathed, “Oh, good, same, well not the birth control but...” and dove back to her mouth in a crushing kiss, covering every inch of her body with his. Jason’s hands moved to her hips, his fingers digging into the firm muscle he found. He’d known since he first saw her fight that her narrow frame was deceptively small: she was muscular and strong and giving him a run for his money in ways that made his head spin.

Laurel smiled into the kiss at the surprised noise Jason made when her hands sank into his ass, pulling him even closer to her. They both began tugging at each other’s underwear. Laurel giggled into their kiss when they got increasingly entangled. A low growl rumbled from Jason. He tore himself away from the kiss and the warmth of Laurel’s skin against his to take decisive action. He sat up enough to pull his boxers down and kick them off his leg.

Laurel was pushing her own shorts down when she stilled, her eyes widening at the sight of him. “Holy shit,” he spoke barely above a whisper. His hands found hers, finishing the job she started and discarding the shorts mindlessly. His eyes darkened with hunger; he bent down to her but she met him halfway, their mouths clashing together.

Jason wrapped an arm around her hip and another across her back, cupping her head. He stopped kissing her long enough to look her in the eyes, their foreheads still touching. It was her whispered “Please” that did him in. While he generally prided himself in his foreplay skills, this was too much. He’d watched her from afar and then from her side like some kind of warrior angel he’d never be able to touch, physically or emotionally.

And now she was writhing underneath him, her legs wrapped around his waist, their sweat mixing together, saying “Please,” as if there was any reality in which he would deny her if she didn’t ask.

He slowly pushed into her, using every ounce of self control he had to gently let her body grow accustomed to him. The soft, mewling moans she was breathing onto his cheek, combined with the tight warmth enveloping him was a heady mixture. He held his breath until he was fully inside her, never breaking eye contact.

Laurel’s body sang. From the way he filled every part of her, reaching places she’d long since forgotten about, to the pad of his calloused thumb on her cheek while the rest of his hand stayed buried in her hair, gently tugging it in rhythm with the slowly building pace they were setting.
The heat and wetness between them made her grind her hips into his harder, pushing a faster pace as he breathed a steady stream of nearly incoherent curses mixed with her name across her ear, the lobe of which he periodically took between his teeth for good measure.

She put her hands on his chest and gently pushed until he rose, carrying her still around his waist, and leaned back against the arm of the couch. She resumed their pace, slowly at first then faster, the new friction rapidly building a fire pooling in her abdomen. She let herself go over the edge when one of his hands gripped her ass and the other snaked up to cup her breast, pulling and tugging at her nipple. She was dimly aware of calling his name as her body dissolved into shockwaves.

The feeling of her velvet heat clenching down on him was too much. He pulled her down until their faces were nearly touching and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her in tight as he slammed into her, riding her orgasm into his own.

“Oh god,” he growled, shattering into her. He held her in place even as the pulsing of his orgasm inside her sent her into aftershocks.

The waves slowly subdued and gradually, the pair got their breath back. Jason kept his arms around her, unwilling to separate their bodies just yet. Laurel brought their mouths together for a languid kiss.

Jason brought a hand back to her now disheveled hair, brushing it with his fingers. With his other hand he cupped her cheek and his lips lifted with a smile that quickly turned boyish and playful.

Laurel found herself smiling back at him, “What are you smiling about?”

“I take it back,” Jason’s voice was even deeper than usual.

“Take what back?”

“Any time you want to yell at me without pants on, you go right ahead.”
I <3 my beta readers.
Episode 7

Chapter Summary

The decision to keep Quentin's relationship with Darhk a secret is about to bite just about everyone in the ass.

Laurel has been lied to by people she cares about for the last time.

Anarky returns and joins the legion of insufferable men trying to control Thea.

Oliver and Felicity are fraying.

And Jason is about ready to kick this whole "team" concept to the curb.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oliver bent and dropped the weights back on their rack, wiping a bead of sweat before it fell to the floor. He looked up to the platform, hoping to see Felicity, but it was empty. She had been adamant about the importance of putting in face time at Palmer Tech. The company she’d inherited from Ray Palmer was hurting and good, bad or ugly, she was the CEO.

He had been chewing over Alex’s words, but hadn’t yet brought himself to verbalize any of it to Felicity. There was no alternate Earth on which she would ever be okay with the faux-engagement suggestion, and now any time he considered actually proposing, he wondered if any part of the impulse had to do with securing his campaign. He could throttle the little weasel for planting this seed of doubt. But then, he’d been holding onto that ring - the very, very wrong ring - for a while before Alex entered the picture. No, blaming Alex for this nagging sore was much easier.

Andy remained mostly silent in his cell, though he’d been speaking basic courtesies when they brought him food and fresh clothes, which marked a significant attitude adjustment. Diggle was glad Andy’s tip hadn’t been a misdirection like last time, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe that getting his brother back would be this simple.

Thea was upstairs with Alex, busy as a bee and offering a lame excuse for her medical emergency, which Alex bought willingly. Since first donning the hood, Oliver had quickly learned that most people were very happy to believe whatever they wanted to believe. It turned out that even included Oliver when the occasion called for it.

He was relieved she was feeling better since Constantine's magical band aid solution, but his inability to resolve the situation chafed at him. This wasn’t something he could fix with arrows and
violence. It apparently chafed at Constantine, too. The man had slipped into some kind of manic state, furiously pouring over dusty tomes and searching for some kind of alternative idol or a spell he could use without taking one of Damien’s idols. After a nearly twenty-four-hour binge over the books, Constantine had taken off in the middle of the night in search of some magical trinket or another.

Oliver hadn’t heard from Constantine since, nor had he heard from Jason, or Laurel for that matter. Their mutual absence was something he didn’t want to think about. And he didn’t want to think about the fact that he didn’t want to think about it. He picked up more plates and stacked them on the bar, setting to another round of deadlifts. He puffed and grunted through the motions, mentally checking off every completely valid reason why it should bother him.

Laurel was a good person. She’d been through hell - he put her through hell. She deserved the best, not some violent, cocky asshole with a bad attitude and a rap sheet that made his own look small time. And certainly not a violent, cocky asshole who slept around more than he did. Constantine, really? Now there’s a match made in hell, he huffed and dropped the weight bar one last time.

As he was reaching for his post-workout shake, Diggle joined him in the training area. John cast a quick glance over his friend, his lips pursed for a fraction of a second before he hid the expression. “Getting a...another workout in?”

Oliver bit back a knowing smile, catching his friend’s judgment. “It pays to stay on top of your game in this business, Dig.” He took a swig of the brightly-colored drink in his hand.

“Yeah,” Diggle crossed his arms, fighting to hide his own smile. “You and Todd are gonna be neck-and-neck in that pull-up competition.”

“Har har har,” Oliver rolled his eyes. “Hey, we never talked about it, how was Helena the other night? I know she can be…”

“A little rough?” Diggle finished Oliver’s thought. “She’s a little rough, but no more so than you were.”

Oliver sighed and set his mouth. “Dig, as rough as I was when we started this is not a good thing. Maybe…” he paused, considering actually verbalizing the thought that had nagged at him since Laurel had insisted Helena join them. “Maybe from now on, we make sure you or I are with her when she patrols. She said she’s coming by tonight.”
Diggle’s eyebrows raised a fraction. “I don’t think she’s going to like being babysat.”

Oliver shot him a look over his shake bottle. “We don’t need to shout it from the rooftops. We just make a point of going with her. And Thea, too.”

Diggle made a low, dissatisfied hum and leaned against the squat rack. “I don’t like the idea of keeping a secret from them,” as he said the words, he shook his head and cursed, rubbing a hand across his face. “I have no right to say that.”

“What are you talking about?” Oliver’s voice lowered with concern.

Diggle watched his friend for a beat before speaking. Oliver was not going to like this. “My source, with HIVE and Darhk, it’s um, it’s Quentin Lance. He got me information about Andy, been helping me confirm details about HIVE and the Ghosts, their operations, everything.”

Oliver nearly dropped the shake bottle in his hand. “Your inside man is Detective Lance?” His eyes widened as his brain went over each increasingly worse part of that statement. “How the hell is Lance tangled up in HIVE?”

Diggle dropped his head into his hands, rubbing his eyes with his palms. “Well, uh, the entire city council is on the string with Darhk.”

The shake bottle crashed against the wall in an explosion of blue liquid. Oliver’s chest rose and fell with the rapid breaths puffing out of his nostrils and gritted teeth. “You didn’t think it was important to tell me this? Or Laurel?”

“Laurel is the last person who needs to know,” Diggle spoke up. “We cannot run the risk that she is going to go after Darhk herself.”

Silence passed between the two. Oliver’s jaw clenched and ground, and Diggle struggled to find his footing. When Lance had first come to him, it had seemed so simple and obvious to keep the interaction a secret. Now, though… “Darhk is smart. If he knows that Lance is double crossing him, it’s over. The less people who knew, the better.”

“What else?” Oliver spoke quietly, setting his hands on his hips.
“The team has pretty much come up with everything I know on their own,” Diggle looked down at his hands. “Darhk owns HIVE, he’s got some human trafficker named Mother working for him. He’s into magic and apparently politics. He’s got every member of the city council on a leash. Jason has dealt with Mother before. He’s not a fan of this, either.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Oliver held up a hand. “Jason knows? You told Jason?”

Diggle pressed his lips together and sighed through his nose. “No, he caught me meeting with Lance, followed by Lance meeting with Darhk.”

Oliver paced a short line around the training area. He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced. “I hate this. I don’t want to lie to her, especially not about her father.”

“But you’ll lie to Helena and Thea?” Diggle countered.

Oliver opened his mouth in shock then snapped it shut before speaking. “That is different. They are both dangerous—”

“And telling Laurel will be dangerous,” said Diggle. “You know that, man. We cannot risk that she’s going to go after Darhk to save her father, or that Darhk is going to come for her.”

Oliver slid down onto the weight bench in the squat rack with slumped shoulders. “Some new leaf we’ve turned over as a team.”

Diggle snorted a laugh down at Oliver. “Same shit, different day.”

Laurel squinted in the dim, orange-lit alley. The light from the streetlamp reflected off the puddles of water lining the asphalt and dripping from the buildings’ fire escapes.

She had something important she was supposed to be doing, but she couldn’t place what. Her nose wrinkled at the damage the murky puddles were doing to her expensive shoes. She kept walking,
slowly, down the alley. There was somewhere she had to be.

She turned a corner and came upon Sara, in her Canary costume.

“Sara...what are you...” she turned and looked around herself, then back to her sister, struggling to place what she was supposed to be doing. “I thought you were in Central City?”

Sara laughed, a bright, bubbly noise unique to Sara. It stood out stark against her costume and the darkness of the alley. “Why would I be in Central City, Laur?”

Laurel’s eyes narrowed. There was something so familiar about this. The creeping dread and unease kept her turning, searching for the thing that was sure to jump out at them. When she looked back at Sara, she was no longer wearing the wig or her mask. Sara’s bright blue eyes shined even here.

Laurel’s heart sank and her stomach flipped. This was a dream. She knew this dream. She’d had this dream a dozen times over, and a dozen times more. “This isn’t real,” she admitted quietly.

“Of course it’s real,” Sara spoke through her small smile, a hint of teasing in her voice.

“No, no,” Laurel said firmly, shaking her head. “It’s not real. You’re not-”

The Sara standing before her now had a series of arrows protruding out of her body. Her face was ashen and she opened her mouth as if to speak, but only blood slowly dripped out. She dropped her staff and held a hand out, reaching for Laurel.

But Laurel crouched to the ground, hiding her face in her hands, repeating “It’s not real” over and over again. She felt Sara’s cold hand touch her shoulder and she gasped into broken sobs, pulling herself into a tighter ball in an attempt to escape.

“Laurel, Laurel, it’s okay,” Sara said, shaking Laurel’s shoulder harder.

She fought against the dead hand on her, hiding her face from the sight of her dead sister, crying “No!” between sobs.
Then, a hand was on each shoulder, pushing her down and forcing her arms down, away from her face.

“Open your eyes, Laurel,” a male voice said. “You’re okay, just open your eyes.”

A male voice, that was different. That’s not how this dream ever went. The ground beneath her didn’t feel like wet asphalt, it felt soft and warm. The hands now rubbing her shoulders and arms didn’t feel like corpse hands. They felt alive, and far too large to have ever belonged to her sister.

“You’re with me, and you’re safe,” the voice said again. The voice was familiar and she believed him.

Laurel cautiously opened her eyes, blinking into the darkness. As her sight adjusted, the face staring down at her filled with concern was decidedly not her dead sister’s face. No milky, lifeless eyes or gray, cold skin. Jason was warm, the hard planes of his face had bloodflow, his brows were knitted in concern, even his lips were still a little swollen from earlier.

“There you are,” his countenance relaxed and he brushed some stray hair off her face. “You’re okay, it was just a dream.”

Her heart was still racing and sweat was cooling on her skin. She struggled for breath and fought the tears of grief threatening to strangle her.

“I didn’t think I’d still be having that dream,” she said as she slowly caught her breath. Jason waited a beat for her to continue, then shifted onto his back, pulling her into his arms until she was cuddled securely against his chest.

When she didn’t speak, he said quietly, “I used to have nightmares, too. Still do, sometimes. They get better.”

“I found Sara, when they killed her,” her voice came out barely above a whisper. “I found her body in an alley. I brought her back to the Foundry. She’s so small, y’know? But she’s not dead anymore, I didn’t think…”
Jason’s hand brushed the back of her head and down her hair. He breathed a slow sigh. “It doesn’t change what you saw. That part doesn’t go away.”

“I guess not.” Laurel stared into the darkness until she felt gentle fingers tilting her chin up. He guided her up until their lips met in a slow, gentle kiss. Laurel eased back into the crook of his arm, the tension from the nightmare finally leaving her body.

“It gets easier.” Jason’s voice broke the silence. He saw Laurel looking up at him, the question in her eyes. “I can’t promise you a whole lot, but this part does get easier.”

She eased back into him. “What did you dream?”

“Mostly a fucked up clown with a crowbar.”

“I’m sorry.” Laurel stretched an arm across him, returning his embrace.

Jason let her long hair curl around his fingers. “Also, sometimes there are shackles. I’ll try anything once, but you and me? We are never doing the bondage thing.”

Laurel huffed a laugh. “Noted,” she said, smiling into his expansive chest. Her fingers trailed across the planes of muscle and hair and she smirked playfully. “I have an important question.”

“Go ahead.”

“So,” she began, “I’ve seen pictures of the other Robin, the new kid.”

“The replacement, go on.”

“Yeah, him. And his costume. I’m assuming you wore something similar?” She rested her chin on his chest so she could look up at him. He nodded, suspicion and amusement teasing at his face. “And I’m guessing, just based on what I’ve seen, puberty hit you like a ton of bricks fairly early, am I right?”
“Yeah,” he continued nodding and chuckling.

“What in the hell did you look like in that outfit with chest hair?”

Jason snorted, bringing a hand up to his eyes and his shoulders shook with laughter. “It was uh, well Br-Batman took it in stride until it started to look like I might get taller than him. I outgrew Nightwing pretty quick.”

“Oh, naturally,” Laurel replied with mock seriousness.

“I am the best Robin in many ways.”

“Oh really?” Laurel raised a challenging brow. “We might have to put that to the test. Nightwing works out of Bludhaven, right? Might be good for me to at least meet the guy...”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jason’s smile dropped. She continued with the arched brow and pursed her lips up at him. She erupted into giggles when he flipped on top of her, pinning her arms above her head. He tickled her waist with his free hand while she giggled and writhed, begging him to stop. “Nope. Say I’m the best Robin and you’re not gonna run off to Nightwing.”

“You’re. The best. Robin.” She laughed between the words and he eased off his tickle attack and released her arms, allowing her to loop them around his neck.

She pulled him into a deep kiss, her nightmare already forgotten.

The cereal was getting soggy. Thea sighed and resolved to dump the rest in the sink. At some point. Despite the extra energy she’d had since Constantine’s spell, she couldn’t seem to harness that energy into anything productive. Free running twice a day and extra archery practice? No problem. Laundry and making the bed? Not a chance.

The front door unlocked and quietly slid open, drawing Thea’s immediate scrutiny. A wicked grin spread across her face when she saw it was Laurel, trying to make her entrance as subtle as possible.
“Young lady, where have you been?” Thea said in her best impression of a stern parent, peeking over the back of the couch.

Laurel froze in the doorway, color flooding her cheeks, her eyes wide like a child caught in the act. “Thea,” her voice cracked, “it’s so early, I thought you’d be asleep.”

“Did you?” Thea slid off the couch, that devilish look still firmly in place. She crossed her arms and pursed her lips, critically assessing her friend’s appearance. “So, sneaking in at the crack of dawn on Monday morning. My, what a big jacket you have…” Thea ran her tongue over her teeth and pulled on Laurel’s sleeve for a closer look.

Laurel pulled her arm back protectively and sidestepped Thea to escape the corner she’d been backed into. “I…forgot to pack a regular jacket in my bag. He let me borrow one of his. It’s cold outside,” she added lamely. She set her bag on the couch and went to her room to start getting ready for work, with Thea close behind.

“Did he?” Thea flopped onto Laurel’s bed, tracing patterns in the comforter with her finger and pretending to be interested in something else for a fraction of a second. “So, after we dropped you off and Diggle helped you carry his half-conscious ass upstairs, you were still pretty angry. Would you say it was a Nurse Ratched situation, or more of a sexy Blink-182 nurse situation?”

“Thea!” Laurel nearly choked and clutched the blazer she was inspecting to her chest like it would protect her.

“Oh my God,” Thea sat up, grinning. “Look at you, you’re almost purple. You only came back because you have work today.”

Laurel pulled, replaced and pulled the same shirt and blazer combination a few times in her attempts to brush off Thea. “I…no, I mean yes, I do have to work today, but no.” She set her clothes out on the bed at Thea’s feet and took a deep breath. “One of us had to be the adult and break for air.”

“Sexy Blink-182 nurse!” Thea practically squealed. She settled back against the headboard and pulled a pillow to her chest. “C’mon, details. Tell me. Is that whole force-of-nature vibe something he just puts on when he’s working, or is it like, all the time?”
Laurel had her back to Thea, pulling on her fresh clothing, so Thea couldn’t see Laurel smiling. “You know, it seems like just yesterday you were a precocious ten year old begging me to babysit you rather than stay with your nanny.”

“And now I’m a badass vigilante trying to live vicariously through your sex life, so spill.”

Laurel smoothed her blouse over her pants and slipped her shoes on. She tossed a sly smile over her shoulder at Thea. “I have to go to work. I’ll see you later.”

“Killjoy,” Thea called at Laurel’s retreating form.

Although she got a reprieve from the invasive questioning, Laurel did not get any gentle easing back into her normal work week. It wasn’t even 9 a.m. and she was already at a crime scene with her father.

She steeled herself to approach the crime scene. There was a particular flurry around this one - an officer and his family had been killed in their home. Officers were moving up and down the block in all directions asking questions and searching for any clue the killer or killers may have left. Crime scene techs swarmed the house. She followed the stream of people in, avoiding those on their way out.

Laurel’s mouth went dry at the sight of the covered bodies. There was blood everywhere. This was no random slaying or break-in gone wrong. Her eyes naturally found the red anarchy symbol spray painted over the mantle. She was so lost in the scene she nearly jumped when Quentin touched her arm and said, “Sweetheart, what are you doing here?”

She tore her eyes away from the sight. Her father looked terrible. “The D.A. sent me.” She paused to wet her lips, struggling to speak against the sudden dryness. “Who’s taking the lead on this? I have a stack of warrants ready to go if they can point me in the right direction.”

“I am,” her father shrugged as if the idea was distasteful to him. “I’ll get you whatever you need. Speaking of, c’mere.” He pulled her into an empty guest room and handed her a crumpled piece of paper. “Don’t ask me where I got any of that. You guys need to look into those addresses.”

Laurel inspected the scrap. “Where…nevermind. What are these?”
“They might be places where your bad guy is operating, might not. I figure you guys are better equipped to check than we are.”

Laurel looked up at her father. His hair stuck up at odd angles, his face looked more wrinkled and drawn than normal, even his clothing was rumpled. “We’ll cross reference these with the properties Felicity flagged. You’re full of good tips lately.”

“Yeah, well,” he shrugged again, his face searching anywhere but Laurel.

“Isn’t, um, the anarchy symbol what Lonnie Machin used when he kidnapped Madison Danforth?” Laurel attempted to get her father back on track. She was an expert at that, even when he was drinking. Which it appeared he might be.

Quentin shot a look at the slightly-ajar door toward the busy living room. “It is, and he was working for that Darhk guy, right?”

Laurel’s eyes crinkled at the corners. Had they told him that? “He was,” she confirmed. “But it looked like Darhk cut ties, and it also looked like Machin was pretty dead. I guess not.”

Quentin looked at Laurel, assessing her the way she had assessed him. “You look good, sweetheart. You finally sleeping?”

Laurel smiled and fought the blush that immediately heated her cheeks. “Yeah, I’m fine. Good weekend. I’m gonna get this to the team and this,” she motioned to her folder.

“Go talk to Detective Kane, she’ll tell you what we need,” Quentin answered her question.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. “We’re still on for dinner this week, right?”

“Of course,” he gave her arm a reassuring squeeze before she left the room. When he was sure she was gone, he let out a deep breath and ran a hand down his haggard face. He told himself again, as he had at least five times when he wrote the list, that their team was good at what they did, and they had Andy locked up and he could be blamed for this leak.
He couldn’t sit idly by and let Darhk’s people start picking off cops and their families in their homes. It was well past time to talk to Diggle about making sure Laurel was safe, then dumping everything he knew about HIVE and Darhk.

The fire burning beneath his feet was getting too hot.

“Are you sure this is it?” Laurel adjusted her ear radio and frowned at the decrepit house she and the team were surrounding.

“This is the only one that matches the parameters you gave me, plus it kinda fits with Lonnie’s M.O.” Felicity responded over the radio.

“I can see through the back window,” Speedy’s voice came. “There are anarchy symbols spraypainted all over the inside living room. This is the place.”

Red Hood had already reluctantly dismounted Black Canary’s bike. “I can see why you always ride with her, Speedy.”

“I know right? Such a rush.” The humor in Thea’s voice was unmistakable. Laurel shot him a look but he was already focused on the house.

“I’m a good driver,” Black Canary muttered, picking her way quickly through the overgrown front lawn, just a few paces behind Red Hood. His preferred tactic was to just march in through the front door, despite everyone’s insistence that Machin was unpredictable at best.

“No one said you weren’t,” Jason’s voice was low. “It’s just, y’know, you go hard on that thing.” He turned to her, his expressionless red helmet cocking a little to one side, “I think you already know how I feel about blondes who can kill me.”

“Yeah yeah,” she smirked and shouldered past him up the warped and broken steps of the patio. “If you make a move on Green Arrow or my sister, it’s gonna get really awkward.”

“Everyone, focus,” Green Arrow sniped from his position on the roof of the next house over.
“We’re here for a reason.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Red Hood responded, dripped with mock sincerity. “What was the comms conversation last time? Oh right, whether to delete Sports Center or Doctor Who from the DVR. My mistake.”

“Hey, Doctor Who is a classic,” Overwatch corrected.

“Doctor Who is on Netflix,” Green Arrow countered.

Black Canary turned to Red Hood in the flickering patio light, her arms crossed. “Look at what you did.”

“Hey, I didn’t…” he held his hands out at his side helplessly before letting them fall back to his hips. “Overwatch, am I good to kick down this door yet?”

“Please,” Spartan’s dry voice nearly begged.

“Looks like everyone is in position and I’m not seeing any movement inside so…go ahead.”

Without further ado, Red Hood kicked in the door with Black Canary right behind him. Spartan and Speedy would be doing the same at the back door, while Green Arrow came in through the attic window. The city records on the house indicated that there was no basement, so this left nowhere for Machin to run, if he was even here. They didn’t have a whole lot to go on at this point.

Red Hood marched through the house, unconcerned with the noise he was making. At Black Canary’s peevd expression he simply shrugged, “What? You think he didn’t hear us coming in? Machin, get out here you little shitweasel!” he barked.

There was no response. A bare bulb on a dingy lamp faded in and out, and the rest of the entryway was lit by candles. More anarchy symbols and the word “Anarky” crudely decorated the walls.

“We have got to get this guy a spellcheck,” Overwatch stated.
“We’re clear in the front of the house,” Black Canary reported.

“I’m moving to the second story,” Green Arrow responded his own report.

After a moment of silence, Spartan said, “You guys need to get to the back bedroom, just off the kitchen.”

Red Hood and Black Canary exchanged a quick look before darting in the direction Spartan gave. Black Canary pulled up short at the sight. Speedy was frozen, staring at the candlelit mantle in horror. Nearly the entire feature from floor to ceiling was papered with photos and newspaper clippings and webpage prints of her. Some were about Speedy, others about Thea Queen.

Laurel placed a hand on Thea’s shoulder. The smaller woman was trembling.

“Well, the creeper award goes to…” Red Hood trailed off, taking one of the pictures off the wall for closer inspection before dropping it on the ground. “Safe to say the guy knows your secret identity.”

Green Arrow appeared in the doorway and stopped to stare at the wall that still held his sister transfixed. Red Hood was already moving through the room, dumping desk drawers and pushing furniture over and out of the way. Spartan mimicked the action through the kitchen, searching for any indication of where Machin was or might be attacking next.

Green Arrow stepped quietly to the other side of Speedy. “We’ll find him.”

“He just wants me,” she said without taking her eyes off the shrine.

“We’re not going to let him near you,” Black Canary resolved, stepping in front of Speedy and blocking her view of the shrine. “Look at me, it’s going to be fine.”

Speedy turned her eyes up to Laurel. She blinked back the tears of frustration and guilt and determined to stop trembling.
“Got something,” Spartan called from the kitchen. The group gathered to him and he held up a receipt. Fertilizer and gasoline from a tractor supply outside of the city. Lots of fertilizer and gasoline for a farm that didn’t exist.

Red Hood snatched it out of his hands. “He didn’t use any of this on the attack on the cops.”

Green Arrow inspected the wallpaper over the stove and pulled at a frayed edge. It came away easily, revealing the city plans for two other houses. He pulled them away from the stove and into the light. “I think I know where he put the fertilizer.”

“Overwatch, isn’t there a Federal watch list for this stuff?” Black Canary asked.

“I’m already on it, but it’s not the most organized. Turns out a lot of farmers use this stuff and I think our guy sent someone else to buy it for him.”

A low whistle sounded from the kitchen door and the group all turned at once, cumulatively shocked to have been taken off guard. A man who once looked like Lonnie Machin leaned against the doorframe, a clear plastic mask obscuring what appeared to be a network of burns across his face. He had a lit flame thrower in his hands and a smile that could be seen even through the mask. “You’re even more beautiful than I remembered, Speedy,” he seemed to only see Thea.

Oliver and Thea had arrows nocked instantly, Spartan and Red Hood guns drawn. Black Canary pushed her way in front of Speedy.

“Heh, I wouldn’t shoot me,” he chuckled. “I mean, I don’t really care, but this thing is lit and this house is gonna go up like a tinderbox if you hit it.”

Red Hood sighed and shifted uncomfortably. “Lonnie, we both know I can cap you between the eyes from this distance.”

“It’s Anarky, now,” he turned his attention to Jason. “And nice to see you, too, Boss. I like the style. Are you a good guy? A bad guy? With you, who knows! It’s fun, I dig it.”

Red Hood groaned, “Can I please kill him?”
“What do you want?” Black Canary ignored the question. “Why did you kill that police officer and his family?”

Anarky gestured with the nozzle of the flame thrower to the symbols all over the house. “Um, isn’t a little obvious? This beautiful angel,” he pointed at Speedy, “freed me. Now I’m just doing the Lord’s work. I’m just doing what you guys do. Even the playing field a little. That cop raped a girl, did you know that? I went to school with her.”

“That is not what we do,” Green Arrow drew back further on his arrow.

“Really?” Anarky was openly incredulous. “I mean, you’re with Red Hood, and I remember when the Hood first started, he killed a lot of people. And I heard you’re running with Huntress again. What makes you guys so special, huh?”

“We are not the law,” Black Canary ground out, trying to shut out Jason and Oliver before they could antagonize the man further. “Neither are you.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” he grinned. “Thea showed me the light. There is no good or evil, just survivors. We’re survivors, me and her.”

“There is no me and you,” Thea spat. She tried to step forward, but Black Canary blocked her.

“Seriously, I can just-” Red Hood started.

“No,” Spartan and Green Arrow simultaneously cut him off.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t,” Anarky waved a garage door opener in his free hand, pressed the button and dropped it to the floor. “You got about 90 seconds to get the neighbors out.”

The group exchanged panicked looks. Green Arrow grabbed the house plans they had discarded on the table, searching for addresses.

“Learned from the best,” Anarky tipped his nonexistent hat at Red Hood while backing out of the house. “See you soon, Thea.”
“Red Hood, Spartan, Black Canary, take the house to the right, Speedy and I go left,” Green Arrow ordered, already moving toward the back door.

Spartan paused to look over the blueprints and shook his head. “G.A., the house to the left has three floors and the other one only has two. I’m coming with you, we can clear it faster.”

No time to argue, Green Arrow only nodded and the two group split off in sprints toward the houses.

“I’ll take the top floor, you get the first,” Red Hood said, already firing his grappling gun at the chimney. He was on the roof before she could respond. Black Canary rushed the back door, kicking it open.

She was greeted by a small, yapping dog and a small, old lady already out of her easy chair yelling and waving a cane.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry, but we have to get you out of the house,” Black Canary tried to yell over the woman but she wasn’t getting anywhere. She continue yelling and swinging the stick, which Canary dodged easily.

Red Hood vaulted over the stairs. “No time, get the dog.” He scooped the woman off her feet and over his shoulders as Black Canary grabbed the only slightly more compliant dog. He led the way out the front door and they took off in a sprint down the sidewalk. Fortunately, in this particularly hard-hit neighborhood, most of the houses were already abandoned and there were no witnesses to their bizarre race. The poor, beleaguered woman hollered for help that simply wasn’t coming.

Laurel realized she had lost count of how many seconds had passed since she saw Anarky drop the door opener. A crack, followed by a boom and a blast of heat behind her answered that question. She dove to the ground, shielding the dog under her body and waited for the sounds of broken wood and shrapnel to stop falling around her before uncurling.

Red Hood had adopted a similar pose over the now silent, bathrobe-clad lady. He sat up, helping his victim to a seated position before he stood. Her gray hair fluttered in the breeze and her eyes watched her blazing house like saucers. Her mouth hung open and she blinked vacantly at the two heroes.
“It’s going to be alright, Ma’am,” Laurel leaned down, passing the dog back to her owner. “Emergency services will be here soon.”

The woman took the dog, and began to rock the animal back and forth as tears started to flow freely down her face.

Laurel stood up and looked down the potholed street at the twin fires. Only a handful of people were coming out of their houses to investigate.

“You are wasting your damn time,” the woman sobbed. “They won’t let us live. Should just let us burn, at least it’ll be over quicker.”

Laurel started to step toward the woman, unsure of what else she could say or do, but Jason stopped her with a hand on her arm and a headshake. “We gotta go.”

He led her through a maze of yards until they reached a narrow alley, even more unkempt and degraded than the main street. None of the streetlamps worked. Laurel wondered if she could make a call to the public works office in the morning to look into that. Trash littered the ground, piling on itself. Star City was looking more and more like a deserted Gotham every day.

As she pondered the urban decay, Laurel didn’t notice Jason turning and pulling his helmet off until he had her pressed against the back wall of some long forsaken small business, his knee pushing her legs apart and pinning her hands by her head. His lips found hers, hard and demanding. The domino mask he wore under his helmet collided with her mask. She opened her mouth, letting his tongue lay claim to hers. He released her hands so he could sink one fist into her hair and the other on her hip, bringing her closer.

Laurel dropped her hands around his neck, letting her fingers drag through his short, still damp hair and along the scruff on his chin. The scent of smoke drifted to her nose and she slowly became aware of where they were. She eased back reluctantly, letting him tug a bit on her bottom lip as she pulled away. “What was that for?” she breathed into him, her hands now fumbling with his jacket, torn between pulling him closer and pushing him away for propriety’s sake.

“I kinda like escaping firing explosions with you,” his mouth ticked up at the corners. “We should do it again sometime.”

“Maybe next time not someone’s house.”
“Obviously. Saved the dog, though.”

Laurel leaned her head back against the wall and smiled at him. “About that, are you always a softie with animals, or just dogs?”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone think I’m this heartless monster?” He leaned in again, this time nuzzling into her neck, alternately kissing and sucking on the especially sensitive, he’d quickly learned, skin between her jaw and throat. The way her breath caught and her fingers dug into his chest and shoulders confirmed that yes, he’d found the spot. “You think maybe,” he said between kisses, “you could bring this,” he nosed her Canary Cry collar, “to bed tonight?”

When she froze, Jason pulled back, wincing a little at her befuddled expression. Her confusion melted into a burst of laughter, and then body-quaking laughter. “What is wrong with you?” she grinned up at him.

He licked his lips, fighting his urge to join her hilarity. “I...it’s a valid request.”

Laurel put a firm palm on his chest and pushed him away so she could stand on her own. “You’re kind of a sicko,” she winked at him. “We need to get going or G.A. is going to be pissed.”

Red Hood groaned, again. “Isn’t he always?” He slid his helmet back into place and together they continued down the alley to rejoin the others.

Malcolm Merlyn sucked in a long breath through his nose. The intelligence his men gathered was everything he had predicted before returning to Star City.

He’d aggressively sought information about all the big names who’d managed to make a mark on the last Ra’s when he first went to the League. Learning everything he could about his most successful - and notorious - predecessors had been common sense.

Damien Darhk had been a name he’d studied carefully. A former League Horseman who, after being denied the al Ghul name he felt he deserved, escaped the League’s assassination attempts and even managed to abscond with Lazarus Pit waters. When the League wouldn’t give him what
he wanted, he founded his own shadow organization and fashioned himself as his own sort of magical tyrant.

The last Ra’s had largely ignored the growing threat HIVE and Darhk presented, but Malcolm had never bought into the self-limiting notions that kept his organization like a leashed wolf. He and Darhk had that in common.

The last Ra’s would only intervene once HIVE threatened to imbalance the precarious power structure the League supported around the globe. Malcolm and Darhk were both of a mind that real leaders built, they did not simply maintain. And Darhk was a busy, busy bee.

With a cursory wave of his hand, his men bowed and backed out of the room. As things were, he could not follow in the footsteps of his predecessor. The last Ra’s may have been able to ignore the lapping waters of the flood Darhk was raising, but Malcolm wouldn’t.

A firm knock rapped on his door and he bade them to enter. Two of his men approached his desk and paused to pull their masks down. He raised his brows expectantly. “Well?”

“We have him, in the location you requested,” the more senior man answered.

Malcolm gave a curt nod, dismissing them. Good, now it was time to see about the other issue he had in Star City.

Shoop thumped over the bass speakers in Laurel’s apartment. Of the amenities Thea had insisted on bringing into their little roommate arrangement, a really good sound system had been near the top of her list.

As she bobbed around the kitchen to Salt-N-Pepa, licking the extra peanut butter remnants off her spoon before depositing it in the sink, she mentally patted herself on the back for this amenity. Laurel may not fully appreciate the joys of a post-patrol jam session, but Thea sure did.

Between the music and the peanut butter, she felt her nerves unwinding. Seeing Lonnie, or Anarky as he was calling himself, and his little temple of Thea-worship had done nothing to help her nerves, nor had the thought that he knew who she was and could find her at any time. And had walked away tonight, disappearing into the smoke.
With pursed lips and a nose wrinkle, Thea forced the thoughts away and forced herself to continue enjoying the music. For some random, unmarked CD Laurel had left in her nightstand, it was a pretty epic throwback mix. She had no idea her roomie was still holding onto her old mixed CD’s, but she wasn’t wont to question it.

Thea slowed her gyrations just enough to safely pour another glass of wine. She turned and gazed around the empty apartment, her lips turning up into a smirk as she put the glass to her mouth. She had been accustomed to solitude in the sprawling Queen mansion, but since moving in with Laurel, she seldom had time to herself like this anymore. Well, until lately, she snickered into her glass. Laurel was, yet again, mysteriously absent from the apartment.

Laurel and Jason had yet to say or do anything in front of the others to indicate what had been going on. They even made a point of leaving the bunker separately. But each night Thea spent rocking around the apartment alone, she felt a flutter of happiness for her friend. It was about damn time, as far as Thea was concerned.

Maybe it was the wine, or the thumping music, or Thea’s belligerent commitment to letting go of her worries for the evening, but somehow she missed all the signs. She never heard the pick jimmy the deadbolt on her door, or the subtle whoosh of air as it pushed open behind her. She didn’t hear the whisper of soft clothing as the men fanned out silently.

She did, however, feel the sharp, blinding pain of something hard and heavy cracking down on the back of her head, for just a second before she lost consciousness and fell the the floor, wine splashing across the carpet.

When she came to, a growl rumbled out of her throat before she mustered the energy to open her eyes. Her head throbbed and ached. A quick assessment determined that she wasn’t bound anywhere, but was definitely left lying on cold, hard ground. Thea gritted her teeth and forced her eyes to open. Even the dim lighting felt like an assault on her senses. The images around her blurred and slowly fell into focus. Sets of uniformed men stood around her and posted around the wide, empty space, maybe an empty warehouse. They were League uniforms.

A pair of men in front of her drew her attention, and she felt another growl snarling on her lips. Her father stood before her, with Anarky on her knees, hands bound behind his back, at Malcolm’s feet.

Thea pushed herself to her knees, groaning. With an unsteady hand, she shoved her choppy hair away from her face and glowered at Malcolm. “What the hell?”
“Let’s be honest here, Thea,” Malcolm tilted his head with a friendly lilt to his mouth, “we both know you wouldn’t have come if I’d asked.”

She forced her unsteady legs to stand and stretched her neck, her brows drawing together in discomfort. Her breath came out in an angry huff. “What. Do you. Want?”

Malcolm raised his brows and nodded at Anarky. “I thought it was kind of obvious. I’m here to help, Thea.”

Her eyes fell to the man she thought had successfully escaped earlier this evening. As creeped out as she’d been, as much as his obsession made her skin crawl, seeing him tied at her father’s feet, bleeding from an open head wound, she felt sorry for him. She felt worried for him. She was unarmed and there were more League assassins here than she could take on without a weapon, not to mention her father. “Well, thanks a bunch for catching my stalker. I’ll take him to the cops,” she nodded resolutely, knowing full well that was not Malcolm’s intention.

Malcolm’s placating smile returned. “You know he has to die. You need to kill, and I cannot allow a threat to my heir to live.”

Thea’s eyes narrowed, moving between Lonnie and her father, letting his words sink in. “I told you in Nanda Parbat that I didn’t want your help.”

Malcolm stepped forward, but Thea stepped back, countering his move and unconsciously raising her arms to a defensive stance. He stopped himself, dragging his tongue across the back of his teeth before responding. “You’re very sick, Thea. They can’t help you, but I can. You need this.”

Her heart fell as he confirmed her suspicion. “Oliver called you.” It wasn’t a question.

His chin rose. “He did. We care about you, Speedy.”

Thea blinked back the tears of rage that threatened to make her look weak in front of this man. She took a measured breath. She was already showing him too much. The assassins flanking her stepped to her sides, one of them put a sword in her hand. “I’m not going to kill him.” She kept the sword low at her side.

“‘He’s going to die,” Malcolm sighed, losing patience with this game. “I cannot allow him to live
knowing he is a threat to you. Either you kill him and help yourself get better, or we kill him anyway, and I will send others you will be forced to kill.”

“No,” Thea spoke in an even voice. “He’s going to jail.”

Malcolm chuckled. “You really believe that, don’t you?” He watched his daughter for a moment, feeling a small trace of regret that she was still so naive. “I know about Darhk and HIVE. I know that you think you have an idea what’s coming, but you don’t. Thea, you are my heir and it’s time you took your place at my side. It’s where you belong.”

Thea’s shoulders stiffened. “I don’t think you know the first thing about where I do and do not belong.”

Ignoring her, Malcolm continued, “Darhk is going to force all of our hands. The League, the Court, the Crescent Order, we are all going to have to chose sides. He wants to control all of it.”

Thea pursed her lips petulantly. “Hm, power-hungry tyrant trying to control people. As the reigning champion, scared he’s going to take your crown?”

Malcolm adopted a contrite expression. “I’m sorry to have to do this to you, Thea.”

“Wha-” Thea’s brow furrowed and before she could assess what was happening around her, something sharp slipped into the flesh of her arm. Thea hissed and tried to pull away, but the assassins next to her were holding her in place. Before the syringe was out of her arm, Thea’s vision clouded and her world became a muddled mess.

Visions of Lonnie Machin’s scarred face thanking her blurred with visions of her hand on a sword, blood, that peaceful feeling she got after she killed and settled the ghosts of the Pit that chased her. Thea sat bolt upright in bed, panting and drenched in a cold sweat. It was a dream, just a dream. A quick glance around the room told her she had never left the apartment. Her empty glass of wine sat on her nightstand and the TV had been left on, the way she often did before falling asleep.

Her head pounded and her stomach twisted into knots. She’d had dreams before about her father poisoning her, then making her murder people, but this had been so visceral and real. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and fought a wave of dizziness from standing too quickly. It had to be the wine, she reassured herself.
Thea padded to the bathroom and flicked on the lights. Her thin face looked gaunt and drawn. Dark circles shadowed under her eyes. Her short hair hung limp and greasy from sweat and days without being washed. Being a murder-zombie was exhausting. She remembered the part of the dream where she was stuck with a syringe. That was strange. Her dreams usually involved tea, as had been Malcolm’s preferred method of mind control. She turned her arm in the mirror and sucked in a breath. A tiny, angry red dot, no doubt inflamed by her struggle against the needle, stood out against her white flesh.

Fresh sweat broke out on her hairline and her heart stumbled over itself.

It wasn’t a dream.

Laurel shifted uncomfortably in her seat. From her booth facing the door, there was no way she could miss her father’s arrival, yet the minutes ticked by without even a text to let her know he would be late.

Her fingers tore absently at the bread in front of her. At first she had munched and sipped water, but as the ice in his glass melted, her stomach twisted until she no longer felt hungry. Her mind gnawed at the possibilities.

When Quentin had been drinking, it wasn’t uncommon for him to go off-radar like this. A lot. But since he’d sobered up, all her unanswered calls and unread texts blared like warning alarms. She’d even called his office. He had left work hours ago.

After 45 minutes, she couldn’t justify waiting any longer. She left a generous tip for taking up a table and breezed out of the restaurant, making a beeline to her father’s home. Finding it empty, she went to the only other place she could think of.

Oliver was in his office alone, working well past the hour he had sent the rest of his campaign staff home. His expression instantly clouded with concern when Laurel burst in, visibly frazzled. As they made their way down the elevator, she told him in rushed breaths about Quentin’s missed date, unanswered calls and empty house. He nodded and silently took it all in, his conversation with Diggle turning over and over in his mind.

“Don’t worry,” he rubbed her arms, “I’ll call the team. We’ll get Felicity to track his phone. I’m sure it’s nothing.” He didn’t miss Andy’s subtle head tilt, listening to their conversation from his cell.
Diggle made it to the bunker first, exchanging a hooded look with Oliver before setting to work at Oliver’s computer bay.

“What are you doing?” Laurel stood behind him, arms crossed, trying to keep her emotions reined in.

Without looking up from what he was doing, he replied, with a small smile, “You know, we are all capable of learning how to do stuff on the computer. We used the same system for tracking cell phone GPS signals in the Army that Felicity uses.”

Jason arrived next, his face darkening when Oliver quickly broke down what was happening. He turned to Laurel, opened his mouth to say something, then turned back to Oliver. At the other man’s stony expression, Jason clamped his mouth shut. His eyes narrowed and he felt his blood steaming quickly in his veins. The three men in the room knew exactly why Lance was missing, and still wouldn’t say anything.

“Felicity said she’s on her way,” Oliver cleared his throat. “She’s been tied up at work. Helena is coming. Thea isn’t answering my texts, but she’s getting them.”

That caught Laurel’s attention. Her face wrinkled in confusion. “She’s not? She’s been talking to me. I’ll try her.”

While Laurel busily typed into her phone, Jason paced restlessly, his eyes moving between Diggle’s back and Oliver. When the anger felt ready to boil over, Diggle spoke up, stopping him before he could burst. “I got something.”

The group gathered around the computer, but Diggle sighed and cursed under his breath. “I’m sorry, his phone’s at his house. We can try Felicity’s facial recognition software, when she gets here.”

Laurel ground her teeth and whirled away from the computer bay. “I can’t just stay here and do nothing.”

“Let’s patrol,” Jason suggested before the others could argue. “Suit up, Huntress and Speedy can help us cover more ground.”
Oliver started to argue, “He could be anywhere, we don’t even know where to start.”

Jason stepped next to him and leaned in close, speaking low enough that Laurel couldn’t hear from where she was already pulling her costume from the lockers. “Don’t make me say it, you son of a bitch.”

Oliver glowered up at the taller man. “If you force this, all you’re going to do is upset her more and she will make bad decisions. I know her better than you, Jason.”

Jason smirked, letting out a mirthless laugh. “You think so? I think she has a right to know that her friends know exactly where to start looking for her father.”

Diggle had silently moved from his chair and moved to Jason’s other side. Oliver gripped Jason’s wrist, digging in painfully and bringing his ear closer to ensure the other man heard his growling, whispered threat. “If you blow this up because you are in love with her—”

“Fuck this,” Jason snarled, wrenching his wrist around Oliver’s and twisting until he had the other man on his knees with his arm locked in a painful arm bar. Before Diggle could take a step forward, Jason had a gun drawn in his free hand. “I’ve shot people I like more than you for less than this, Diggle.”

Diggle drew back with his hands up, shaking his head. “Don’t do this, man. Put the gun down and let him go.”

Oliver tried to step out of the grip, only to be painfully jerked back, lower this time, by this locked-out arm. His sudden shout of pain brought Laurel jogging from the locker area, not fully in her costume yet. She skidded to a stop at the scene.

Before she could open her mouth to say anything, Jason snapped at Diggle, “Tell her.”

“Put the gun down, and we’ll talk like normal people,” Diggle forced his voice to remain calm.

Jason rolled his eyes. “You tell her, or I do.”
“Woah, what have we missed?” Thea’s voice broke the tense standoff. They hadn’t noticed Thea and Helena enter through the alley door.

“Tell who what?” Helena asked, moving slowly to Laurel’s side, making a quick list in her head of the weapons she had on her person and what was in immediate reach.

Jason raised his brows expectantly at Diggle. Oliver looked up and gave his friend a quick nod. Diggle’s lips fell flat and his eyes cast to the floor. He forced himself to look back up and look Laurel in the eye as he said, “Your father has been working with Darhk for months now, the whole city council has. If he’s missing, we have to start looking at HIVE locations.”

Laurel’s throat went dry. Her mind turned over what her friend had just told her, searching for the right question to ask first. Jason pushed the hammer forward on his pistol and holstered it, simultaneously releasing his grip on Oliver and letting him collapse, clutching his arm.

“You...you all knew?” Laurel slowly turned to each face in the room. Thea and Helena looked just as confused as she did, but the three men wore the same dark, pressed expression.

Diggle only nodded. “And, he was your inside source?” Laurel continued. Diggle nodded again. Oliver wouldn’t look at her. “You all knew my father was in danger, and you didn’t tell me?” Her eyes moved between Jason, Oliver and Diggle. None of them replied.

Oliver slowly stood. “Laurel…”

“Stop,” she cut him off with a raised hand. She closed her eyes and fought the urge to scream. “I...we don’t have time for this. If Darhk has him, we have to get him back, now.”

“We don’t know for sure…” Oliver started.

“Yes, we do,” Jason cut him off again. He moved to step toward Laurel, but when she jerked back, he froze. The tiny, violent step backward she took hit him like a bullet in his gut. He felt his breath sucked out of his lungs, and then the weight of resignation sinking onto his shoulders. He knew this was coming.
Laurel turned to Helena and Thea. “Will you help me?”


“When Felicity gets here, we’ll still run the facial recognition software, see if we can track where they took him,” Oliver began.

“I don’t care what you do,” Laurel whirled on him. “Do whatever you want. When we find him, I don’t ever want to see you again.” The words tumbled out before she could think about them. “All you’ve ever done is lie to me. And now you?” her eyes turned glassy at Diggle, “and you?” she turned to Jason. She turned back to Helena and Thea. “I still have the list we compiled of possible HIVE-owned buildings. We’ll start there. Suit up.”

The women nodded. Thea’s eyes drifted to her brother. He had the audacity to look pained. Anger burned through her chest. She swallowed it back. Now was not the time. Laurel needed her, and not in a Pit-rage-monster way. There would be plenty of time to confront him later.

Jason watched in silence as Laurel led the women through a quick prep and then out the door. He could have smiled, seeing her finally taking command. But watching her walk out without him behind her, twisted the pain in his gut. He watched Diggle and Oliver, still sitting in shocked, contemplative silence.

Fuck this, he could have screamed. Again. He knew which buildings they needed to search. He stormed off to change.

Red Hood didn’t need Team Arrow to search a few properties.

Tapping away at her laptop, Felicity was simultaneously glad she was who she was and infuriated by it. She could work anywhere, but that meant she could work anywhere. Including home, when all she had wanted to do was relax after an emotionally exhausting day going over mass layoffs for Palmer Tech.

She stopped typing and mentally checked herself. She refused to be angry or annoyed over the work she was currently engaged in. All things considered, the work she was currently engaged in was literally life or death, and for a friend. A very good friend. A friend who had been nothing but
kind and accepting toward her when lesser women might have been catty and competitive.

No, she could not give in to the impulse to be annoyed that her night off had been ruined by Laurel’s call. Except, it had. In a big way, bigger than relaxation. If what Laurel had said was true - and Felicity had absolutely no reason to doubt her - it meant her closest friends had been lying to each other.

It made her sick. What else had Oliver been lying about? And Diggle lying was almost unthinkable. But then, hadn’t she lied through her teeth to Oliver throughout their globetrotting non-honeymoon? She told Oliver, and herself almost daily, that it was because she needed to confirm her commitment to the whole hero-thing.

But with Helena’s return, old feelings had resurfaced, nagging at her. Was she really committed to helping people with Team Arrow, or was she just still trying to be Action Girl? Did they even need her? Slade Wilson certainly hadn’t needed tech support and he almost took over Starling. Malcolm Merlyn managed to become Ra’s al Ghul without opening a laptop. And this Oracle person that Jason apparently preferred to rely on, well, she didn’t even know she could be so easily outclassed by someone she’d never even heard of. Jason only grudgingly used her Overwatch support, and probably only to keep up appearances with the rest of the team, Felicity guessed.

Felicity took her eyes off the screen for just a moment when the front door clicked open. Oliver entered silently, his head bowed low. She let him hang his coat on the hook near the door and slowly, hesitantly, settle himself into the chair across from hers at the table.

She didn’t look up from her work when she said, “Laurel called me.”

“I figured she might,” Oliver replied quietly, nodding slowly.

Felicity stopped typing to look up at him over the screen. “You know, she asked me if I knew. She thought there was a chance that you had told me and I was also keeping this huge secret from her. Which is kind of hilarious, because that would mean that you actually tell me important things.”

Oliver studied her face. She had been keeping her hair in a slicked back ponytail most days, too tired to do anything else with it. She was still so pretty in his eyes. Her anger didn’t surprise him. She had proven early in their relationship to have little to no tolerance for his habit of keeping information to himself, whether he intended it to be a secret or just didn’t consider it important or relevant to their relationship. Felicity always had to know; it’s what made her so good at her job.
“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he chose his words carefully.

Felicity pushed the laptop out of the way and huffed, “I don’t even know if I should be angry that you kept this from me or grateful that you didn’t try to rope me into lying to our friend. I can’t find him, by the way. Whenever they snatched him, they made sure his face wasn’t on any street cameras, security cameras, nothing.”

Oliver let the silence hang in the air for a beat before attempting to speak again. “Felicity, we’re gonna find him. I’ll make it right with Laurel, we’ll-”

“What is this ‘we’?” Felicity crossed her arms and shrugged. “You say ‘we’ but you didn’t tell me about this. I can’t even help because it’s too late. He’s gone,” her voice cracked. “There is no ‘we’ if you refuse to talk to me when something this important is hanging over your head.”

Felicity watched his face work through the emotions; hurt, anger, rejection, argument. She sniffed back tears welling in her eyes. “Are we even a team if we all just lie to each other all the time?” She brushed a tear away. “What are we doing together if I can’t trust that you’re ever telling me the whole truth?”

Oliver sat back and pressed his fingers to his temples. “This isn’t about our relationship, Felicity. Diggle got caught up in a lie and when he told me, I agreed with him that Laurel would be in more danger if she knew.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make!” Felicity’s voice rose and broke. “And this is about our relationship. People in relationships talk to each other about important crap in their lives, Oliver! This was important, and you didn’t care if I knew. You didn’t care what I thought about the situation. Or you did and you knew I’d tell you that you were being an ass, so you lied.”

Oliver couldn’t speak. He had nothing to say, or couldn’t find the right thing to say. She was right. He knew she would talk him into convincing Diggle to come clean with Laurel. So he kept the whole thing to himself, and assured himself that it was for their safety.

Felicity nodded, her jaw working against itself, taking his silence for consent. “I should have seen this coming. I saw the wreck you left Laurel in, I saw what you did with her sister, and I should have known this is just what you are. You can’t help it.”

His hackles raised. He sucked in a breath and unleashed. “No, you don’t get to do that,” his voice
was low but her bright eyes flashed behind her glasses. She could read the anger radiating off him. “You do not get to keep throwing in my face the fact that I cheated on my ex-girlfriend. That has nothing to do with you and me, or the person I am today. I am sick of justifying that to you.”

“Really?” her voice came out surprisingly cool. “Because you’re still pretty good at lying whenever it suits you.”

Oliver pushed away from the table and strode to the door, pulling his jacket back off the hook. As he opened the door, he paused. “I need air.”

The door pulled shut with a quiet click, leaving Felicity alone to stew in silence.

A quiet knock half an hour later sent her heart racing. He’d come back, apparently contrite enough to knock rather than barge into the loft.

She trotted to the door, then paused to collect herself. She ran a hand over her ponytail and pulled at her shirt to straighten it. Felicity opened the door and the friendly face standing there was the last face she would ever have expected. Her mouth formed an “O” but no sound came out.

“Hey, Felicity,” he said with a shy smile.

Time stood still and Felicity forgot to breathe. She forgot to breathe so much, in fact, that moments later, she was in an unconscious puddle in the doorway.

Ray Palmer rushed forward to catch her fall and winced at the unconscious woman now in his arms. “Heh, surprise,” he muttered to himself.

Quentin Lance took a moment to take in his surroundings.

He’d been on his way to his car when a sharp pain resounded in his neck, a burlap sack had slipped over his head, and had remained in place until it was ripped away moments ago.
His hands were bound too tightly with plastic flex cuffs. They’d been locked together, rubbing against the unforgiving plastic long enough to already have aching, weeping open sores on his wrists. He ignored the feeling, as well as the dull ache that radiated from the back of his neck down through his shoulders. He was way too old for this horseshit.

He’d been brought to an expansive office, it must have been nearly the entire floor of whatever building they were in. Councilwoman Linda Nguyen was bound to his right, sniffling and putting up a desperate battle to keep from crying. To his left was a man in an Army uniform. Quentin recognized him as the commanding officer of the nearest National Guard unit. They’d only met in passing a few times at emergency preparedness meetings. They were a maintenance company, if Lance remembered correctly. They hadn’t been much help during any of Star City’s latest disasters.

Ghosts were positioned around the empty office area, armed to the teeth and standing by. There weren’t even chairs in the office space, leaving it barren and dark, lit only by the city lights streaming through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows everything he could see. They were up high, very high. The lights from the nearest buildings were low and almost out-of-sight. That was important, Lance checked himself. There were only so many buildings in Star City this tall.

*How the hell did Darhk get access to a building like this?* Lance frowned and cringed at the thought. With the Army colonel to his left, and himself and Linda there, *Darhk must be more entrenched in every aspect of the city than he’d let on.*

Speak of the Devil.

“Button, button, who’s got the button?” Damien’s cheery voice sang from an opening elevator somewhere behind their sad little trio. “One of you,” he skipped up behind them and leaned his head close to theirs, “has been very naughty.”

He strolled around them to stand in full view, pushing his trim blazer out of the way so he could slide his hands into his pockets. He clicked his tongue at them.

“We’ve done everything you asked,” the colonel answered in a stilted voice.

Damien’s mouth ticked up and he waved a finger in the air. “Ah, not exactly. You see, I’ve been in this game a while. I like to make sure no two people have the same information, just for situations like this.” He started to pace, nearly glowing with glee.
Quentin’s heart sank. It could only be him. Linda wouldn’t risk her kids, and he had been sloppy. Asking about Andy right before they took him was a big one.

“Only one of you,” Darhk punctuated his words by turning on his heel in his small pacing circle, “knew about the hangar property, among others the masks have been poking around. Only one of you was dumb enough to ask for one of my Ghosts by name - they are ‘Ghosts’ after all. And,” he crouched to one knee before Lance, “only one of you has a pretty little daughter running around town at night in that ridiculous BDSM outfit screeching at people.”

Lance’s eyes went wide and his jaw trembled, rage and fear roiling in his skin.

Before he could form words, Damien tapped him on the nose with a playful finger. “C’mon, you had to know I knew. Laurel isn’t particularly subtle and neither are you, my friend.”

“What do you want with us?” Linda found her voice, staring up at Damien, unflinching.

“What witnesses, of course!” Darhk stood back up. “You two get to tell your friends what happens when they cross me, and give some credence to the wild rumors they’re about to hear.”

They stayed silent as Damien clapped his hands together and strode to one of his Ghosts, holding a large metal case. He set the case on a small table Quentin had missed earlier and flipped it open with flourish. He didn’t remove what was inside, but instead whirled around to face his captives, grinning from ear to ear.

“This is going to be so much fun.”

Chapter End Notes

EPISODE 8 IS GONNA BE LIT.
Episode 8

Chapter Summary

Team Arrow has fractured. Laurel leads her group to rescue Quentin while Oliver struggles to clean up the mess. Old and new faces arrive just in time to help, but it won’t be enough.

Diggle makes the most questionable decision of his life.

Red Hood falls back into old habits in the worst way, but you can't argue with results, and he is nothing if not a man who gets results.

The fight to get Quentin back from Darhk's clutches ends with a bang.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re saying the reason they never found your body…is because you were very small,” The words tumbled from Felicity’s mouth in a breathless squeak, her mouth still agape at the sight of Ray sitting casually next to her on the couch. “And you only came back here because you’re about to go on a time-travelling spaceship and needed to tell someone?”

The broad-shouldered man sitting next to her - a sight she still couldn’t take her eyes off of - pressed his lips into a tight, toothless smile and he shrugged his shoulders. “That about sums it up.”

Felicity was off the couch and pacing again, confusion and frustration warring across her face. “But you…why didn’t you come back and tell anyone you were alive? You signed Palmer Tech over to me, and I gotta say, I’m not doing that great running your legacy, I have to lay all these people off, and…”

Ray rose and placed his large hands on her shoulders, stilling her. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, dropping his hands uselessly to his sides. He turned to the large window and looked out over the city. “By the time I figured out how to fix the Atom suit and got myself back to, you know, human-size, the funeral had already happened. I was legally dead and after losing Ana, and you,” his eyes drifted to hers before quickly averting back to the Star City skyline, “and knowing my company was in good hands, I guess I just wanted some time to be someone else. I wanted a break.”

“And the spaceship?” Felicity croaked, desperate for him to just look at her and acknowledge that this wasn’t nearly as casual as he was pretending.

“Time ship,” he corrected with a boyish grin. “The captain, Rip, he showed me how it works. You’d love it. They’ve figured out how to manipulate time as an independent dimension. They treat time the way we treat space. It’s like these constantly moving rivers they know how to navigate.” His voice perked up and his eyes lit with excitement.

Felicity could only stare, mouth struggling for the right words and forehead wrinkled in shock and confusion. Even her glasses were fogging. “Ray, ‘time ship’? Captain Rip? You sound like you’re
going hitchhiking with a biker *Doctor Who*. You couldn’t have at least told me you were alive? I wouldn’t have said anything. “her mouth clamped shut at his amused single eyebrow raise. “Okay, you’re right, that would have stayed a secret for about six hours before I would have told someone because *oh my God you’re not dead. ”

He sighed and slipped his hands into his pockets, unsure how to answer her. Ray turned stepped toward the expansive kitchen table where Felicity had her work laid out. His eyes roamed the files and documents before one caught his attention. He scooped it up and quickly scanned it before turning back to Felicity, “You’re going to lay off Curtis Holt?”

Felicity frowned and followed him, taking the paper out of his hands and looking it over with a critical eye. “Yes, he’s on the list.” She looked back up to him, her expression tight, certain he was quickly realizing what a mistake it had been to name her as his successor.

Ray slid into a chair and pulled her computer to his large hands, his fingers flying on the keyboard with more agility than what was normal for a man his size. Felicity’s heart stuttered in her chest. Ray’s skills with computers and technology had always impressed her. She forced herself to watch the screen to see what was so important to him in that moment. He was pulling up schematics from the Palmer Tech server for something that looked like a battery. “Has he finished work on this?” Ray looked up over his shoulder at her.

Felicity leaned closer to get a better look. She’d never seen this design. In fact, until Ray mentioned the man’s name, she’d never heard of him. “Uh…that’s a great question. What is it?”

Ray looked taken aback. “It’s his battery. If he can finish it, this one battery can power the entire Palmer Tech building for years. It requires almost no electricity to charge and generates its own power once it gets going. His design doesn’t cost that much to produce and is going to revolutionize how we think about energy. It’s why I hired him.”

The way he looked up at her with a mixture of hurt and confusion struck at her core. Her face fell and she gently lowered herself into the chair next to him. She took a deep breath before admitting, “I had no idea. I didn’t even know who he was. I pretty much am only aware of what they talk about at the board meetings and have been struggling to keep my head above water just on that.”

Ray nodded slowly, pulling away from the laptop. His mouth ticked up, but fell again as he struggled to understand. “It’s not your company, not really. I made it my company, but gave it to you without even asking you if you wanted it…”

“No, no, Ray,” Felicity closed her eyes and took a deep breath, “you trusted me with it, and I haven’t been, well, anywhere I need to be.” She caught herself chewing on the inside of her cheeks, fighting back the sickening feeling of what she was about to say. “I…when you were working on the vaccine for the Alpha-Omega virus, and I…“

“No, Ray. I need to get this out,” her voice came out stronger than she expected and Ray stilled for her. “I tried to stop you, because I was so worried about Oliver that in that moment, I didn’t care if you finished that vaccine or not.” She clapped a hand over her mouth, stopping a sob. She forced the emotions back so she could continue. “All of those people were depending on us, and I was only worried about getting what I wanted, which was keeping Oliver. When everyone else was focused on how they could help other people, all I wanted was for myself to be happy, which meant not losing Oliver again. Ray, what kind of person am I?”

His face softened and he took her hand in his. “You are the kind of person who cares about the
people she loves. The kind of person who, when I told you no, stole my Atom suit, figured out how to fly it yourself, and went after the person you love.”

The tightness in her chest eased just a small measure. Ray saw the best in everyone. The pressure weighing her down returned with gusto when the next thought popped into her mind. “I didn’t go to your funeral.” Ray nodded solemnly. Of course he’d known; he’d been alive the whole time. “I got what I wanted and we just ran off. I didn’t try to help anyone else, I didn’t go to the funeral of a man who was nothing but wonderful to me, and now it looks like I’m running his company into the ground. I thought if I kept helping the team it would, I don’t know, make up for all this, but I’m not doing anything right.”

Ray brought her hand up to his lips and lightly kissed her knuckles. “You’re pretty hard on yourself for a woman who’s juggling running a major, and struggling - and it was struggling before you got it,” he added for emphasis, “tech company and helping what I assume to be a fairly large team of vigilantes every night.” He watched her face. She was trying to accept what he said, but he could still read all the doubts in her eyes. “I wasn’t upset that you didn’t go to my funeral. You went through a lot last year, and to be honest, the eulogy was so awful I decided to stay dead.”

Felicity snorted then quickly smothered her laugh. She gave his hand a squeeze then turned her attention to the files on the employees to be laid off. “I will give these all a serious investigation before signing off on any termination. That seems like a good place to start, right?”

Ray beamed, pleased to see her picking herself up out of the hole she’d apparently been digging. “I’ve got a few days to kill. We don’t have to meet up with the others for about 48 hours, so I’m happy to help. You know, if Curtis finishes that battery and gets the entire Palmer Tech building on its own power source, you won’t have to lay off anyone.”

Felicity was nodding absently when she realized Ray said something strange. “We? Who else is with you? And time travel, you’re dead serious about the time travel part and this isn’t some bizarre post-fake death prank?”

“It’s not a prank,” Ray spoke with an amicably raised brow. “We’re going to save the world, apparently. And I’m here with Sara Lance, who is also surprisingly not dead. She wanted to talk to Laurel before she agreed to all this.”

Her attention whipped back to Ray, the blood drained from Felicity’s face. “Oh no,” her eyes turned to saucers behind her thick-framed glasses. “Or it could be good,” her gaze drifted sightlessly back to the table. “I don’t know. Shit. Laurel hasn’t been returning my calls.”

Ray let her get through the entire stream of uninterrupted verbal-thought before gently asking, “Want to catch me up here? It seemed like you guys already knew she was alive.”

“No, I mean, yes, we knew that part, but…” she trailed off and caught her breath. “I really have a lot to tell you.”

“Another dead-end, Oracle,” Huntress rumbled through gritted teeth into her radio. She scowled at the nearly empty warehouse. The guards out front were sparse and had been an easy obstacle; also an opportunity for a modicum of relief from the growing tension bubbling out of Laurel. Sara’s sudden reappearance hadn’t helped, either.
Neither woman had reacted beyond a shuttered look and tightening of their individual postures when Helena had - delicately, in her opinion - suggested that Quentin was likely already dead, or had turned full dark side. Helena knew a thing or two about having a father with questionable motives and practices.

The Lance sisters hadn’t been interested in entertaining either thought.

“There are tire marks and some fluid all over the ground.” Laurel stood slowly from the stain she was inspecting on the ground. “I think this place might have been a motor pool.”

“They used a lot of vehicles during the raid on Iron Heights,” Oracle’s smooth voice replied. “They probably used this building for staging.”

“Yeah but why did they leave it guarded if they aren’t still using it?” Sara returned from her inspection of the three private offices in the back. “There was another creepy shrine back there, but no totem. Constantine will be disappointed.”

Something caught Helena’s eyes in the floor. She holstered the crossbow she’d been holding and squatted to investigate the incongruous pattern in the floor. Laurel and Sara joined her. Sara pulled a knife from her boot and edged it along the seam in the ground until it caught and she leveraged the panel in the ground up, revealing a set of narrow metal stairs leading down.

They all exchanged a silent look before Huntress lowered herself down the passage, crossbows out first. Sara and then Laurel followed. The now sadly familiar sight of animal cages lined the walls, but at least this chamber had been cleaned. They didn’t have to face the overwhelming stench of human waste and absolute despair.

“I’m thinking they don’t actually leave this place empty,” Sara muttered, taking slow steps around the room.

“How many?” Oracle asked.

“At least 50,” Laurel said in a soft voice, trying to keep the image of the cages filled out of her mind. “It’s one of their processing stations.”

“Was there any gasoline up there?” Huntress asked. Sara nodded and a small, devious smile turned Helena’s lips. “Well, we can do some good tonight.”

She led the way back up the steps and then followed Sara to the fuel can she’d found on a shelf filled with assorted tools and car parts that appeared long forgotten. Sara tossed a small stack of packing blankets at Laurel, then invaded one of the offices she had seen several boxes of copy paper stacked in. “Put those around edges of the building,” she nodded at the dirty blankets in her sister’s hands. “I’ll start on the other side with the paper.”

Helena pursed her lips and nodded in approval. “We’re all on the same page. Oracle, are you good with this?”

“Don’t tell Red Hood I said this, but burn that mother down,” the other woman replied dryly. “There’s only one building we haven’t searched. I’ll start working up the plans on it.”

It was one of the more noticeable skyscrapers in the heart of the financial district. Getting in and out would be no easy feat.

Sara shot a look over her shoulder at her sister. “I don’t think we’re talking to him about a whole lot right now, Oracle.”
“You should go,” Laurel said suddenly. “With Rip, I mean. It sounds like a good opportunity for you.”

Sara and Helena stopped what they were doing to stare at Laurel, who still had her back turned, busily laying out the burnables so that the flames would engulf the whole building. “I will, if we find Dad before I’m supposed to meet up with the rest of the team.” Sara turned her attention back to her own kindling.

“No,” Laurel slowed her work, catching up with Sara on her circle around the building, “I mean no matter what. We can handle things here, and I don’t want you to miss out on something that sounds pretty exciting for you. You wanted a fresh start, right?”

“Yeah, but,” Sara straightened and frowned at her sister, “I’m not going to walk away from this without Dad. We need to find him, together.”

Laurel bristled, then warmed at the sight of her sister’s determined face. Before she could continue the argument, a crash resounded from the back offices, followed by a stream of familiar cursing. Laurel gritted her teeth and felt her spine involuntarily stiffen.

Sara whirled in the direction of the noise, her bo staff at the ready, and Huntress had already launched two quick arrows at the intruder. Even distracted by his semi-embarrassing stumble, Red Hood brought his arms up in time to block the arrows, sending them clattering to the floor. Huntress groaned and rolled her eyes, lowering, but not holstering, her weapons.

“Hey! Easy, Triggers McGee.” Jason dropped his guard. “You guys know all those Ghosts you tied up out back have already escaped, right?”

“Thanks for the tip.” Sara stepped toward him without adjusting her grip on the staff. “Is that all?”

Red Hood was watching Black Canary, who remained silent and unreadable. “This building was on my list, too. Didn’t mean to step on any toes.” He peered around at their work. “I have some sticky bombs that could speed this process up. Those Ghosts will be back with reinforcements.”

Huntress holstered her crossbows and stood in front of him, holding out an expectant hand wordlessly.

Under his helmet, Jason raised his brows and snorted under his breath. “Yeah, right. I’ll place them. You finish spreading out the fuel.”

Huntress’s eyes narrowed but Black Canary caught her with a silent look and a small nod. Huntress drew back reluctantly and continued dumping the contents of the fuel container along the path of kindling they’d created. The gentle splashing of liquid onto concrete echoed throughout the cavernous building. None of them were talking.

“You know there’s only one building left we haven’t searched,” Red Hood’s gravelly voice broke the silence as he carefully placed the small explosives at places he’d determined would cause the most damage. “It’s not going to be easy.”

“We don’t need your help,” Laurel said evenly, her arms crossed, watching him work.

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” he muttered and continued his work. After a lifetime of being on his own, the past few evenings alone had been colder than he cared to admit. The first night shocked him. He hadn’t realized how accustomed he’d grown to her presence. In a short time, his place suddenly smelled nicer, even feminine. He found hair ties scattered randomly throughout his space. Some of her clothes had found their way into his closet, and her toothbrush rested next to his. His bed felt
too big without her there, next to him, on top of him, beneath him.

He’d made no attempt to contact her and try to explain himself, though the impulse had pushed him until he stood outside the D.A.’s office seriously considering walking into a place where his picture was probably tacked to the wall and cornering her at work. But that wouldn’t be fair to her, would probably get him arrested, and, if he were honest with himself, he didn’t deserve to even try to fix things with her. There were a lot of things he deserved in this life, and Laurel Lance had never been one of them.

No, it was better this way. This way she was seeing him for what he really was. She could return to her world, and he would stay in his. Once he successfully took down HIVE, got Darhk and Mother locked up, he could move on from Star City and Laurel would join his memories of wonderful things he’d destroyed.

“Are you done?” Sara’s stern voice broke his thoughts. He hadn’t realized he’d placed the last charge and was simply squatting over his handiwork, feeling sorry for himself. He turned and rose to his full height, yet the tiny blonde in white managed to still scowl and look down her nose at him. “You remember what I told you back in Central City, right?”

“How could I forget?” He said with a sardonic lilt.

“Stay out of our way.” Her order came harsh and under her breath. He took Sara’s meaning well enough. Stay out of her way. Stay out of Laurel’s way. He didn’t respond. This had started without them, and by God, he could finish it without them.

Without moving and relenting his place, he turned his radio back on. He’d long since networked the frequencies they used, as well as what Oracle used. “Oracle, I placed the remote timers. You know what to do.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Oracle sounded tired. “The last one out, just tell me when you’re all a safe distance.”

With that, Jason nodded his head at Laurel. “Ladies,” he gave a mocking two-finger salute against his helmet and strode out the way he came.

Laurel didn’t let out the breath she’d been holding until she was sure he was gone.

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The early morning buzz of activity throughout the campaign office was almost too much to handle. Oliver grimaced into his coffee cup and tried to focus on the update Alex was rattling off. It was too early, and he was too wrapped up in Quentin Lance’s disappearance to give his undivided attention to the consultant.

On top of that, everyone except Diggle was doggedly avoiding him. For his own part, Diggle had thrown up a wall. His friend remained stoic and silent unless it was absolutely necessary to speak. They only interacted to work on hunting down Lance and Darhk.

Diggle blamed himself. Oliver blamed himself for encouraging the lie. The few words they exchanged outside of necessary mission communication was the constant refrain that they did what they thought was best given the information they had. Perhaps, if Oliver said it enough, one of them might start to believe it.
“That’s why I think you really should consider this offer for a live broadcast town hall forum,” Alex ended his run down, watching Oliver with an expectant gaze.

“Huh?” Oliver blinked a few times, trying to recall the bits and pieces he’d caught from Alex. Something about social media going well, attendance at public appearances increasing, but still not connecting to older voters. Maybe.

Alex had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold back the sarcastic expression his face was fighting valiantly to display. “You didn’t get any of that, did you?”

Oliver let out a long sigh and let his shoulders slump in his seat, nodding in defeat.

“It’s okay,” Alex continued amiably. He set the papers he’d been holding on Oliver’s desk and gave them a pat. “I made a copy of the important points in bullet format for you to look over… whenever.”

“Thanks, man,” Oliver murmured, glancing over the papers but not fully seeing them. Alex had already left his office.

Another figure shadowed his door and Oliver fought the impulse to tell whichever staffer it was to just come back later. The familiar sound of his sister’s annoyed throat-clearing got his attention. He brightened at her presence, but then grew nervous. Thea was standing with her arms crossed and a deep frown cutting her pretty face.

“We need to talk,” she stated, “downstairs.” He only nodded and she closed his door, ensuring that no one would see them access the private elevator.

When they made it to the bunker, Oliver started, “Thea…”

She slapped him across the face, sending a loud crack echoing through the mostly empty chamber. His head barely turned, but he felt the sting of her rage somewhere deep in his chest. He nodded silently again, rubbing a hand across the now tender spot on his cheek. He expected to see her quivering with anger, eyes glazing over as she fell into a Pit-induced fury, but instead her face remained calm. She returned her hand back to her folded arms and took a deep inhale through her nose.

Oliver’s eyes hit the floor before he raised them back to his sister’s unflinching stare. “I take it Malcolm showed up?”

“I told you I didn’t want him here.” Thea’s voice was dangerously quiet.

“I thought he could help,” Oliver murmured without looking up.

“So you completely ignored what I asked you to do and didn’t bother to tell me that the man who has a history of poisoning me might be showing up?” Her voice never wavered. She kept Oliver locked in her stony gaze.

“I just wanted to help you…”

“That’s what you always say!” Thea snapped. “You can’t keep using that as an excuse, Oliver!”

Oliver’s neck colored with shame. He could barely speak above a whisper. “What happened?”

Thea stalked away, decidedly ignoring their imprisoned witness. “What do you think happened? The same thing that always happens when he shows up.”
“Are you okay?”

Thea turned back to her brother. His brows were knitted together in concern and the red on his neck contrasted with the sallow expression on his face. She thought about the events she only barely remembered, absentmindedly rubbing at tiny spot on her arm that was her quickly fading proof that Malcolm had violated her.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “When he poisoned me before, it left my system pretty quick. But I can’t be sure that’s even what he did.”

“What do you remember?”

Thea swallowed hard. “Not much, but I’m pretty sure we won’t be seeing Anarky again.” Thea watched his face drop. “Before you say it, I know this is not my fault. At the moment, I’m blaming Malcolm and you.”

Oliver sighed and gingerly stepped up to the computer bank, leaning his long frame against the desk. “You’re not wrong.”

“No,” she said archly. “I’m not. And neither is Laurel. I don’t understand how you can keep doing this.”

“I agreed with John-“

Thea rolled her eyes. “I have words for him, too. After everything we’ve been through, you still take that path. Every. Single. Time. You just make these decisions about everyone else’s welfare, like you are the only one who can possibly make good choices.”

“I should have told you,” he conceded quietly.

“Yeah, you should have,” Thea bit back. “And you should have told Laurel. You should have told John and Quentin they needed to fess up. Now Laurel is running around with Helena and Sara looking for Quentin without our help-“

“Sara’s here?” That, naturally, got his attention.

Thea gave him a nonplussed look. “Yeah, are you really surprised she hasn’t said ‘hi’?” She didn’t wait for a response. “If I had known Malcolm was coming, maybe he wouldn’t have gotten one over on me this time. I don’t even know if I still have this crap in my system, and we have no idea what nonsense he is cooking up with everything else going on in this town.”

Oliver perked up, his eyes narrowing quickly. He immediately shook his head, muttering to himself that it wasn’t a good idea.

“What?” Thea ground out. “What are you thinking?”

Oliver raised his eyes hopefully to Thea’s. “I have an idea about that, but you’re not going to like it.”

“Let me guess,” Thea squared off with him, “it comes from page 1 of the Oliver Queen Handbook of Shitty Ideas?”

Oliver smirked and his jaw flexed. “Yeah, pretty much. I’m not going to make you do it, though. It’s up to you. We can handle this some other way.”
Thea leaned on the desk across from Oliver with a resigned shrug. “I already know what you’re thinking because I’ve been thinking it, too. We need to get him off the board in a way he won’t see coming. I’m in.”

By the time Diggle showed up to the bunker, it was long empty, save his brother.

He had to do something. He had to take some kind of decisive action. After a few days of stewing, he’d come to a simple conclusion: everyone needed to be involved, and that meant everyone.

Team Arrow was as much his family as Lyla and baby Sara. Oliver’s desertion had cut him to the quick because he felt like he’d lost a brother. His choice to go along with Lance and cut everyone out of what they were doing had gotten them into this situation.

“Many hands make light work,” was a phrase he’d grown up with. He’d used it in the Army countless times to encourage his troops to work together. At what point in his life had he forgotten the importance of sharing the load?

Felicity was by far the smartest of them, Laurel could hammer out a solution to any problem in front of her, Oliver would stop at nothing to help people, hell, even Jason had the tactical skills of some especially violent bastard child of Genghis Khan and Patton. John Diggle was quite literally surrounded by people who all could have offered something to the situation if he’d let them work together on it. Instead, he’d stuck to secrecy and the separation of knowledge, and they’d gone along with it because they trusted him.

At the moment, they were all sitting on a person who had firsthand knowledge of Darhk and Mother, their operation, experience with Darhk’s magic and Mother’s mind control techniques, a tactical and functional skillset that would make him an asset, and, most importantly, was quite literally family.

Andy glanced up as his brother stepped to the bars of his cell and started laying out playing cards on the small open slot where they usually left his food. He stood slowly and took a tentative step across from John but didn’t say anything.

“You remember when we used to do this almost every night?” John asked without looking up from his slow, deliberate dealing.

“What’s tonight’s game?” Andy didn’t let his gaze waver from John.

John pursed his lips in thought then nodded to himself. “Crazy Eights.”

Andy harrumphed under his breath but took the cards John had dealt him, shuffling them in his hands. “Is this your way of telling me you want me to lay my cards on the table? Because I’ve already told you -“

“Maybe I just miss my brother,” John cut him off and fixed Andy with a look that swirled between anger and grief. He gritted his teeth and continued, “We need your help, Andy, and I need to know you’re still my brother.”

Andy didn’t respond for a long stretch of silent card playing between the two men. Finally he let out a sardonic chuckle. “You’ve had me locked in a prison cell in here for weeks, like a damn
dog.” John’s hands froze as he was laying down another card onto the pile. “Worse than a dog. We never kept our dogs locked up in cages in our house. You guys even started talking like I wasn’t in the room. Every day I hear things. I hear what everyone says when they think they can get away with it. What makes you so confident that I might be your enemy here, but Oliver isn’t? Or Jason? Or Thea? How about Laurel and Felicity? Even your wife works for the organization that wants all of you in jail. I have heard and seen each and every one of them down here plottin’ and schemin’ to get things over on each other.”

John dropped the card in his hand with more force than he intended, scattering the small pile. His teeth ground together and he fought to quell the instant, protective rage that swelled. He knew, despite his desire to not see his friends tarnished by Andy, the man had a point. They had all kept secrets from each other, some worse than others. “I know that,” he conceded in a soft voice. “We’re not perfect, neither are you. Right now, we could use your help. I want to believe you are still my brother, Andy.”

Andy took a deep breath, set his cards down and leaned with his hands against the bars of his cage, looking down at the floor before responding. “Whatever Darhk is doing with Lance, it’s a distraction,” he brought his eyes up to John. “It’s a trap. He wants all the vigilantes off the board and he knows Lance’s daughter is one of them.” John’s dark eyes widened and he felt the blood draining from his face. “He might…” Andy paused, internally debating whether or not he could speculate this kind of information, “he might be moving his central totem while he’s got you guys busy with Lance.”

“You mean like his main magic doo-hickey?” John’s interest piqued. Totems had been all Constantine and Oliver and Thea had spoken about. He vaguely understood that Darhk used a magical network not that different from a computer network.

Andy smirked. “Something like that. I know where he keeps it,” he said meaningfully. “It’ll be a fight no matter what, but if you can secure it before they move on Lance, this might be a win-win. John, let me go with you. I can help.”

Andy pushed himself away from the bars and let his brother consider. “You don’t have to trust me, but I am your brother and I have your back on this.” Emboldened by John’s lack of response, Andy pressed on. “You know they’ve been lying to you. You know it, John. If you want to help Lance, you’re gonna need all the help you can get.”

John placed his hands on his hips and nodded his consent. Before he could talk himself out of it, he fished into his pocket for his keyring and selected the appropriate key.

*Family is family*, he thought, turning the key in the lock and letting his brother stand beside him for the first time in years.

“Remember what we talked about,” Oracle’s voice was even, strong and commanding. This was not her first rodeo. “You drop in, get the hostages, and get right back out. There are too many Ghosts in that building and there is no sense digging into a fight with civilians at risk.”

The hostages weren’t really civilians in this case, but they were a small group of people who were far out of their depth.
Laurel pressed a hand to her sonic collar, swallowing back the shaky, unsure feeling in her limbs. With Huntress on her left and Sara, now the White Canary, on her right, and the ever-present Oracle talking them through the situation, she had no reason to be nervous.

Sara’s return to Star City had been a surprise, but her eagerness to join a new team had not been. The concept of time travel had been a little brow-raising, but Sara was confident and her keen desire to be part of something that was actually meant to save the world was all Laurel needed to know. Her sister might finally be getting that fresh start.

From the moment Sara had found out about their father’s disappearance, she had insisted that this take priority over this Rip Hunter character. Laurel had argued - a shallow, half attempt - that the search for Quentin was something she and Helena could handle, but Sara was not to be moved.

Laurel’s heart warmed in selfish relief that Sara was here in time to help retrieve their father. Between Sara, Helena and Oracle, Laurel couldn’t ask for a better team at her side. This was a team of people she could trust without reservations. So far, they’d cleared out no less than five buildings and had taken on teams of Ghosts with the ease of a well-oiled machine.

So why did she feel so nervous? A snatch-and-grab should be no problem. They knew what they were doing.

“We grapple up to the roof, then I place the charges where you tell me to,” Helena repeated the steps they’d gone over at least a dozen times since realizing that their father was definitely in the MacArthur Financial building, one of the city’s most opulent skyscrapers. “We drop in through the great big hole I made, Laurel belts the hostages up for a repel while Sara and I hold back the Ghosts, and we repel out to the street where the van will be waiting already running thanks to that automatic starter you sent us. Right?”

“Sounds about right,” Sara confirmed, her eyes never leaving their intended target. The cool autumn night air blew her loose hair and her long white jacket, giving her the appearance of some kind of avenging angel blown in from the clouds. The wind had a similar effect on Huntress, but her dark clothes and hair and mask gave her a more threatening air, like something blown up from below instead of above.

In the center stood Laurel, the nervous energy sending tingles through her fingertips and toes. She un-holstered her grappling gun. “It’s now or never, ladies.”

The three women raised their guns and launched themselves off the building and up to the MacArthur building, diving into the fight without further discussion.

The high-pitched boom launched John clean off his feet, sending him tumbling and rolling until a pair of strong, familiar hands caught his shoulders and jerked him behind the overturned desk that had become their only refuge.

Physically moving a man of Diggle’s size was no easy feat, but the adrenaline pumping through Oliver’s veins certainly helped. Andy popped up from their cover to send a few rounds at their opponents, temporarily silencing the deafening sound of the man with that damn special weapon on his arm.

John rubbed his ears, wincing and flexing his mouth a few times against the pressure the sudden
noise had produced in his head. “This guy is gonna give Black Canary a run for her money;” he shouted over the din.

They were pinned down in a back corner of the warehouse they’d invaded on a hunt for the totem Andy still swore was safely ensconced somewhere in the building. Getting John’s call had initially lifted Oliver’s spirits, but his quickly-rambled explanation about releasing Andy and the pressing hunt to secure at least one of Darhk’s magic idols had raised his hackles.

From the outside, everything had looked all clear. There were no guards posted and Felicity couldn’t see any movement inside the building. Andy’s intel appeared legitimate, that is until the moment they kicked through the door and a swarm of Ghosts ascended from a large open panel in the floor, followed by none other than Chien Na Wei and a handful of metas at her side.

“Do you like my new friend, Green Arrow?” Chien taunted. “Discord makes our LIGHT guns look puny.”

“He seems like a cheap knockoff of Black Canary to me,” Oliver shouted back in response to both Andy and Chien. He growled low in his throat in frustration. He hadn’t had the opportunity to fully unload on John what a monumentally bad idea it was to not only trust Andy’s intel, but to bring him along. As John recovered himself from the blast of sonic noise, Oliver hoped maybe the hit had knocked some sense into him. “Andy, your hot tip isn’t quite panning out,” he called through gritted teeth.

Andy’s face crinkled as if he was going to bite off a sharp retort, but instead he only shook his head. “You’re one to talk. Where’s Speedy tonight, huh, Green Arrow?”

While laying out a quick, shot-from-the-hip plan for this little outing, Oliver had been forced to mutter a lame excuse about Thea’s conspicuous absence. The others wouldn’t want to come along at all, but it did look awfully strange that she wasn’t taking part in a mission that could fix her post-Pit rage issues. Oliver could see John’s eyes instantly narrow in suspicion from between the visor opening of his helmet, but John didn’t comment on it.

“Listen,” Overwatch snapped over their radios, “his name is Sean Sonus, he’s one of the Iron Heights escapees, not a meta, and that gun is about as simple as it looks. If one of you can get a projectile down the barrel, he’s out for the count.”

Andy and John simultaneously shot Oliver a look. He grimaced, took a deep breath and prepared to take the shot of a lifetime. Making a last-minute decision, he pulled one of the exploding-tip arrows from his quiver and nocked before twisting on the balls of his feet so all he had to do was pop up, find his target and fire.

As he pushed to his feet, Andy and Diggle followed, guns drawn and firing at Ghosts around the perimeter of the wall, forcing the group to consolidate. Like clockwork, Sonus rose from his own position of cover and drew down on the vigilantes. Oliver waited for Sonus to level his weapon. He took a deep breath, in and out, found his natural point of aim and released. The strings of his bow snapped free from his gloved fingers and the arrow sailed just as Sonus pulled the trigger, unleashing another deafening sonic boom. The three ducked down, covering their ears uselessly against the noise, but then each relaxed when the boom was followed by the crack of an explosion. Oliver jumped to his feet again, launching several arrows in succession and getting a solid visual that Sonus was down, clutching his now mangled hand and arm to his chest.

Chien was on him in a whirl of razor sharp blades and flying kicks before he could follow up with Felicity about getting to the totem. She barked an order in Mandarin to one of the Ghosts, who disappeared back through the open panel in the floor. Chien grinned maliciously at Green Arrow.
Kids started to emerge from the floor with far more energy than they had any right to given their bedraggled state. The stream of young teens and kids kept coming, each more feral than the last.

They swarmed Andy, John and Oliver. Each man did his best to disable, not injure, but it was immediately apparent this was not a fight they could win by being gentle.

“Mother’s army is going to catch what Darhk’s sheepdogs miss,” Chien hissed when she got close enough to Green Arrow, before backing off again to let the kids do their work.

John shot a look to his brother and, despite the hopeless situation collapsing around him, he smiled a little. Andy was doing exactly as he and Oliver were; tossing the kids to the side as gently as possible given what he was working with. John was ripped from his moment and roared in pain as one of those little bastards sunk his teeth into his arm. He checked himself, halting the impulse to bash the kid across the skull, and went for simply using his weight and muscle to shove off the little biter.

“Guys, you need to get out of there, now!” Overwatch’s voice rang with panic. The three men exchanged brief, confused glances with each other between throwing and blocking hits from their opponents. “We have two much bigger problems right now. The first is...I think there is a comet heading toward you.”

“Overwatch, I the army of angry zombie kids is a pretty significant priority,” Green Arrow got the words out between measured breaths. A fight with Chien required all of his concentration and energy. Mixed in with freakishly strong and violent kids coming at him from every open angle Chien left, Green Arrow was rapidly losing patience for the scenario.

“It’s...I don’t know. It’s not a missile and I think it came from space. You just need to go!”

Andy broke off his fight with a well-placed right hook before diving out of range of the other Ghost’s fists. He brought his gun back up and took aim on the two Ghosts his brother was battling. He jerked between targets. Every time he zeroed in on a clean shot, another kid got in the way. It was only a matter of seconds before they realized one of their targets was getting away and at least half a dozen were snarling after him.

“There is no time, all of you just need to run!” Felicity shouted, her voice breaking in panic. “Oliver…”

All activity came to a screeching halt as a streak of orange flame burst through a skylight in the roof. Even the apparently feral kids were entranced. It maneuvered and dodged around the steel support beams crisscrossing the roof and made a beeline for the center of the fight, where it released its cargo before coming to a gentle halt, floating in the center of the room.

Everyone - Ghosts and vigilantes and brainwashed kids alike - stared in silent wonder at the unusually tall, purple-clad, orange woman with long flaming hair casting her green eyes in a silent but clear threat. The kids lost their dangerous air and staring up at her wonder, they momentarily looked like the children they were.

Her cargo was just as surprising. A green trucker hat on his head and wearing head-to-toe red - the material looked like the same high tech material the orange woman was wearing - Oliver’s first protege had his bow drawn with three arrows ready to fly at the Ghosts.

“Roy?!” Oliver, Diggle and even Felicity burst in unison. “What…?” Green Arrow couldn’t finish the question.
Roy Harper grinned roguishly at his mentor. “You didn’t think I was gonna see all the news about that mess at Iron Heights and just not come, did you?”

“How did you know where to find us?” Diggle risked the question, as everyone else seemed too distracted by the woman with the flaming hair.

Roy snorted and the woman cast her glowing green eyes at Diggle, dripping with sarcasm. “You’re kidding, right?” she spoke in a voice that sounded human enough.

“We just looked for the biggest mess in town,” Roy grinned.

“Not to interrupt whatever this is, but the totem is in the floor,” Andy gestured with a pistol to the open panel leading below the floor that had unleashed the small army. “If we destroy it, the mindfuck on the kids should stop.”

Roy turned to his flying, orange partner. Whatever was communicated between them without words, the woman took his meaning, flew straight up, then turned in the air and fired herself toward the floor. She flew straight back down, her arms extended to fists that were now producing matching green energy. As soon as she blasted through, her spell over everyone was broken. The kids re-launched their assault, aided by the far more controlled Ghosts.

“She can’t destroy the totem!” Green Arrow shouted, blocked a series of vicious swipes from Chien with his bow. “We need it!”

“You’re not going to help Speedy if we don’t get out of here in one piece,” Andy countered from his own fight, one that he was quickly losing.

Spurred on by his own frustration over getting so close to another totem only to know Andy was right and they had to destroy it, Green Arrow pummeled into Chien with renewed vigor. She deftly dodged most of his hits, but one landed square in her gut. The smaller woman crumpled to the floor, clutching at her stomach. Green Arrow stood over her, assured that she was beaten, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. Chien’s eyes stayed on the floor, but she was lightning quick. She had one of her curved blades in her hand and imbedded deep in the meat of Oliver’s calf before he realized she was feigning her injury.

He dropped to a knee, roaring in pain as Chien ripped the blade back out and stood over him. She wiped the blade off on her pants, and twirled it playfully. As she reared back to plunge the blade down in a killing strike, a red arrow knocked the knife out of her hand. She screamed in pain, and then again when another red arrow landed high in her shoulder.

Roy was at his side, immediately followed by Spartan at his back and Andy on the other side. They kept the swarm of kids and Ghosts back long enough for Oliver to push past the pain and force himself to stand and draw his bow again. Chien was down, dragged away by a comrade.

The fire-haired woman burst through the hole she’d made in the floor, a creepy two-faced totem on her hands. “Ro...Arsenal, you want me to destroy this?” She corrected herself. Apparently Roy was the one to insist on codenames, as Oliver had taught him. She floated peacefully over the absolute chaos below.

Roy turned in silent question to Oliver, who in turn looked to Diggle. John nodded, so Oliver said, “Destroy it.”

The green energy radiating from her hands flared and brightened. Her lips curled in effort as she used her natural strength and whatever it was she producing from her hands to smash the
magically-protected statue. It cracked, then shattered under her efforts.

The kids slowed and backed off, staring around at the situation and each other in confusion. It only took a breath before broken cries began to echo around the warehouse. The Ghosts took the distraction as their opportunity to make a silent, ignored exit.

Some of the kids were still staring in wonder at the orange woman, including Felicity, who had been shocked into open-mouthed silence since she showed up. “Uh...okay...who or what is that?”

As if he heard the question, Roy looked between John and Oliver and his new friend. “Look, this is Kori and I’ll explain later.”

“We have to get these kids somewhere safe,” Diggle agreed.

“About that second thing, someone needs to get to the MacArthur building, like now,” Felicity’s voice regained the edge of trembling panic. “Something is happening, Huntress and the Canaries are in trouble. The Atom is on his way, but Green Arrow...I think she needs you.”

Diggle turned to his brother, got a quick nod of confirmation and then turned back to Oliver. “We’ll stay here until first responders show up. You and Arsenal and...Cory? Get downtown.”

Oliver didn’t need further discussion on the matter. He had his bow slung across his back and was already marching with a faint limp toward the exit. “My bike is out back, do you two have transportation, or is she going to fly you there?”

Roy smirked up at Kori, who responded, “I can carry you both faster than you can drive.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow. This was turning out to be a most interesting evening.

“If you think you can torture information out of me, you have seriously overestimated your abilities,” Palette slurred, his head lolling to one side. He had to hand it to the guy, not many people in this world could get him even unconscious, let alone move his dead weight, secure him, and inflict a degree of pain he seldom experienced. But Palette sure wasn’t going to admit that to Red Hood.

Jason flipped the pliers in his hand, then tossed them back on the table where he’d set out an array of tools and weapons. He bent at the waist just enough to get eye level with Palette and cocked his head to the side. “C’mon, big guy, you can’t tell me this isn’t at least a little fun for you. I’m having a great time. I don’t want this to end. You of all people know how hard it is for men like us to find people who can punch at our weight class.”

He turned back to the table and feigned taking his time waffling over finding just the right tool. Team Arrow was not the right tool for the problems in Star City, and it had taken him far too long to realize that. How many kids had been snatched up and sold, tortured or killed? How many families had disappeared? Why, so the do-gooders could pussyfoot and debate morality? The butterfly knife was what he needed. It was long enough to easily get to bone, but thin and narrow enough to not cause too much damage. Plus, he liked doing the flippy thing with it.

They would all hate him for this, but they’d also all be grateful that the blood wasn’t on their hands. If there was one thing he could still offer this world, it was to take on this role. He could get
messy and sink to the monsters’ level. It was good that Laurel had pushed him away. Without her, or trying to prove himself to the rest of the team, he could actually get things done.

They were deep underground in some kind of work area in the city’s sewer system. Everything was wet and moist and moldy. The smell was almost unbearable. Every few minutes, a brave rat skittered along the edges of the room and away into the darkness of the tunnels. A single bulb in the center of the room cast orange shadows, giving the activity going on an even more ghastly edge.

“Blondie’s not doing it for ya?” Palette spat blood as he spoke.

Jason guffawed and turned back to his victim with a wide grin. He had to keep up the casual amusement, but the thought of Laurel even knowing about this made him feel sick. The helmet was threatening, but for something like this, he stuck to just the domino mask even though it was harder to hide his natural reactions. He found that letting people see his eyes, see him actually enjoying this, was far more unnerving than a faceless monster. “Oh buddy, you are so not my type. Plus, I’m not really into the crushing kink.”

He leaned in close to whisper, “I learned how to take down men like you and monsters like Mother from the best instructors the League could buy.” He flicked his tongue across the butt of the cigarette between his teeth and slapped a hand across the newest open wound on Palette’s back, eliciting a quick grunt of pain. “But this, this I learned before I died from the grand master of torture himself. How long do you think you’ll last when I hang you from a meat hook by your hands? You’re a big dude, and all that weight will slowly rip you limb from limb. I don’t even have to do anything. I can just sit back and wait for you to break. You’ll tell me what I want to know.”

Palette glared up at him, ignoring the shiny silver blade Jason spun casually in his hand. Red Hood stepped slowly around Palette, dragging his free hand across the bigger man’s shoulder. “You know why you’re here,” Red Hood said from his position behind Palette. He leaned down to whisper again, “You know I can keep this going for days, weeks even. You know I’m not going to stop until you tell me what I want to know. I haven’t even begun to hurt you. Do yourself a favor and tell me where Mother is holed up.”

Palette was already missing three teeth, a finger from each hand, all the toenails on his left foot, and was riddled with shallow cuts and burns. When he didn’t answer, as Jason knew he wouldn’t, Jason slammed the blade into Palette’s shoulder blade. A quick wrist wiggle - and Palette’s strangled roar - and he knew the tip of the blade was broken off in the bone. He heaved the knife back out, needing almost more strength than stabbing clean into bone had.

Good, now Palette would give him answers no matter what. He discarded the knife back where he’d gotten it and ran a tired hand across his face. He winced as he realized he was mixing Palette’s blood with the open scrapes and gash near his eye. Ugh, I’m gonna need so many antibiotics after this, his lip curled at his bloodied hands. He tapped a fresh cigarette out of the beaten pack in his pocket and took a long drag.

“Red Hood, stop what you’re doing,” Oracle’s voice in his ear jarred him. He brushed it off, huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Don’t you dare tell me how to handle my business here, Oracle,” he snarled, his throat more hoarse than he expected. “I’m finishing this my way.”

He could practically hear her jaw clicking with tension. “Normally, I’d be quite happy to lecture you, but now is not the time. They need you at the MacArthur building in the financial district, do you know where that is?”
Jason froze, fear tingling up his spine. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t have time to explain,” Oracle snapped. “You have to get down there as quickly as you can. I’ll talk you through any updates on the way.”

Jason pulled his helmet on and patted Palette on the cheek. “Well, you probably heard, but we’re gonna have to finish this another time. Don’t wait up for me.”

He checked the man’s restraints once more before striding into a darkened tunnel.

Jason left just one cuff slightly looser than it was before. That should be just right.

When they crashed through the ceiling and launched an all-out assault on the Ghosts, Quentin’s heart surged with pride and terror. This was exactly what Damien wanted, he’d said so himself, but damn if he wasn’t proud to see his girls, his beautiful, very much alive daughters, fighting side by side to stop Darhk and for him.

Quentin couldn’t consider himself a father worth effort and risk like this, but somewhere along the way he’d helped instill a sense of family in these girls so strong it transcended death. Not a lot of fathers could claim that his kids loved each other so much that one would dive straight into hell to save the other. Literally.

In the time he’d been snatched and left here, Quentin had come to a sense of peace. No matter what happened to him, he could rest easy knowing his daughters would take care of each other.

“Woo-woo!” Darhk clapped his hands together with a mad grin. He was standing over his charges, safely ensconced by Ghosts. “Lance, I gotta hand it to you, they really brought the cavalry out for you. Even the dead one is here!”

He hadn’t seen Sara’s white costume before. Even with Darhk standing over him, cackling and cheering at the melee, Quentin’s eyes glassed over.

She’s so beautiful, he thought. And to see her so alive, working seamlessly with her sister, his Laurel, his rock; the child who had to grow up so fast just to keep his drunk ass from drowning. There was a time when they were in high school that he feared his girls would never get along. Dinah had poo-pooed his concerns, but he really couldn’t see a future in which his daughters would ever be more than relatives who saw each other only at Thanksgiving.

Yet here they were, with Helena Bertinelli of all people, moving together like they’d been doing it their entire lives. He certainly never thought he’d see Bertinelli and feel anything other than disappointment and revulsion, but watching her fight with his daughters, using her skills for something good, he loved her just a little. When she shot a bolt into a Ghost Sara hadn’t seen coming, he loved her a lot.

Had he ever taken a moment to truly appreciate what his daughters had become? He had been so busy burying himself in his grief over Sara and projecting his fear as anger, he really hadn’t properly acknowledged that Laurel had turned herself into a warrior. His face lit up and he bit back a whoop of delight watching her twist one of her tonfas over a Ghost’s arm and use his own weight to flip him onto his back. She spun back around with the tonfas now along her forearms, gripping them by their handles, and slammed her guarded forearms against the sides of the next opponent’s head.
“Well, no time like the present,” Damien exclaimed, clapping a hand on Quentin’s back. “Let’s get this show on the road, people!” He swirled a finger through the air and two Ghosts followed him back to the case he’d brought in earlier to gloat. Damien pulled a square, metallic box from within. It was large enough that he had to hold it with two hands, and covered in all kinds of circuits and whathaveyou’s that Quentin wouldn’t know the first thing about. Damien pressed a series of buttons Quentin couldn’t see and then set the box on the ground a few feet behind the hostages.

Damien stepped back, fiddling with a tablet and nodding with a smile at whatever he was doing. A quick hand gesture had the two Ghosts collecting Linda and the colonel, removing them from Quentin’s side.

“You two need to watch what happens next very carefully.” With the streetlights providing the only light inside the office floor, Damien’s smile took on a ghastly edge. “When you want to give this planet a fresh start with only the best of the best, you’re going to have to deal with the other 8 billion people, right? I’m thinking the vacuum of space.”

Laurel struggled to comprehend what she was hearing. The fact that she was up to her neck in Ghosts - better trained than they had faced before - was not helping. She did note that two of the hostages had been moved and that box was directly behind her father. Laurel ducked tight swing from one of the Ghosts and swung one tonfa at the man’s knees and came back with a strike from her other tonfa across his face.

She didn’t have to look at her partners to confirm that they saw it, too. Sara was brutally making her way through Ghost after Ghost, holding nothing back. She used a Ghost struggling back to his feet as a boost, jumping off of him and slamming her staff into the head of the next challenger. She had to make her way through this mess and get to her father and the other hostages, but for every Ghost she dropped, two more recovered themselves. They should not be getting back up after the damage she was dealing to them.

Huntress faced a similar problem. She had already run out of arrows and was diving to collect the ones discarded by Ghosts who had been shot, only to stand back up and rip the arrows out. When yet another shot went barely noticed, Huntress snarled and tossed both crossbows to the ground. She deployed the telescoping staff Sara had given her and set to work doing more up close and personal damage.

“Oh shit,” Oracle breathed over their radios. “One of you, quickly, tell me what you see. What did Damien just turn on?”

Laurel threw another attacker over her hip, then brought her knee up to the next one’s groin, spinning herself to get a quick look across the room. “It’s...I don’t know,” Laurel panted, struggling to speak between the nonstop attacks. “It’s bigger than a breadbox and kinda looks like an overgrown computer chip.”

“Oh fuck,” she cursed again. “Listen, you have got to get the hostages and get out of there right now. Once that thing starts up, you’re not going to have much time.” Sara and Laurel exchanged a quick look, wearing matching expressions of confusion and frustration. “I’m networking in with Overwatch and we’re sending you reinforcements.”

A Ghost grabbed Huntress from behind and slammed her into one of the support beams. She grunted, pushed back enough to get her feet moving up the piling and flipped over his head. She took his moment of surprise to slam his head into the beam. “We’re working on it!”

With the press of a button on Damien’s tablet, the device hummed and sprang to life, emitting bright blue waves of visible electricity. “This is going to be beautiful,” he grinned down at
Quentin.

From her workspace in Gotham, Oracle’s panic-induced sweat was beading across her forehead and down her neck. The building’s security cameras were an easy hack, even with the added security measures HIVE had taken. With a few too-hard keystrokes, she pulled up every scrap of information she had the box Damien deployed.

She locked onto the information she was looking for and compared it to the chip she’d sent to improve Laurel’s Canary Cry device. The Ghosts were too many and they recovered too quickly. Her little makeshift team was not going to get out of there without help, but there might be a way to stop the box.

“Black Canary, listen to me very carefully,” Oracle commanded, struggling to keep her voice calm. “That box, it’s like a computer, and it’s emitting a frequency to communicate with Darhk’s tablet like wifi. Your Cry emits a frequency in the same band.”

“I have no idea,” Laurel spun, landing a solid kick to a Ghost’s chest and getting her steps closer to her father, “what you just said.”

“You need to amp up the energy your Cry device already emits. You might be able to disrupt the signal between the tablet and the box and shut that damn thing down before it gets going,” Oracle clarified, long out of patience.

Black Canary cast a quick assessment around the room before unleashing the sonic scream at a pack of Ghosts surrounding Damien. The noise threw off the other Ghosts enough to allow White Canary and Huntress to cut through their latest opponents like a hot knife through butter. Sara got her bo staff around the neck of her latest victim, and snapped his neck. She dropped him and moved onto the next. The sisyphean task of making ground against these guys was pushing her in all the worst ways. Even Huntress paused her own assault in surprise at Sara’s violence.

Black Canary caught her sister’s eye and they exchanged a quick, silent agreement. They had run out of time to worry about who these Ghosts were as people. Laurel pushed past the icky feeling that her sister might not forgive her for letting this happen and continued seeking out targets for her sonic cry that didn’t require her also blasting her friends and hostages.

She didn’t have time to gauge whether or not Oracle’s advice was working. Backup arrived in the form of a bright orange, flaming woman who dropped Green Arrow and...was that Arsenal? Right in the center of the fight.

Green Arrow and Arsenal put themselves on either side of Laurel, each already launching arrows. “Hostages?” Oliver asked over his shoulder.

Black Canary nodded at the now separated group. “Can she carry them out of here?” She had seen far too much in the last month alone to be particularly concerned about why Arsenal had appeared in town on the arm of...that.

“Kori!” Arsenal called to the woman who just punched a Ghost clear out the window on the opposite side of the room. “Get those two down to the ground!”

Kori blasted the Ghosts encircling Linda and the soldier with that hypnotizing green energy from her hands. The two hostages gaped at her in open wonder. Linda didn’t protest when Kori hoisted her over a shoulder. The colonel flinched when she reached out to him and her solid green eyes narrowed, then relaxed. “Apologies,” she spoke gently, “My name is Koriand’r and I am told this is quite emasculating.”
The colonel couldn’t speak. He stood six feet, a height he considered decently tall, and he had to crane his neck to look up to her. He didn’t protest anymore, though. She gripped him under her arm and set out through an open window with both hostages.

That only left Quentin to retrieve and one freaky computer box to destroy. A box that was now the source of a glowing, flashing blue whirlpool of lightning and wind growing incrementally with each passing second.

“Everyone listen,” Oracle came in loud over all their radios, “cover Black Canary. BC, start singing.”

Laurel hooked a tonfa around the neck of a Ghost in her way, easily flipping him onto his back as she fought her way to a good position to blast the box without hitting her father, still bound on the floor. Sara and Helena were both fighting their way in his direction. Laurel licked her lips, focused on the swirling vortex, and released a sonic scream that resonated from deep within her diaphragm.

Nothing changed, except the vortex got a little bigger and was now drawing in anything loose. Papers, a few chairs, discarded office supplies were all being sucked into the mass. Quentin’s jacket blew behind him. Huntress got to him first, using a flechette to cut the bindings on his wrists and ankles, but a swarm of Ghosts descended on them, shoving her away.

Laurel started toward the fight, but three Ghosts set on her in a stream of fists and booted feet and batons. She fought back in turn, bringing her tonfas up along her forearms to shield herself.

“Focus, Canary!” Oracle barked. “Louder. I need you to get louder. It’s the only way you can help him.”

Black Canary snarled and screamed, pulling force from her growing frustration at their quagmire. The device on her throat responded to her fury with a now-familiar and pleasant tingling, amplifying the sound. Any remaining glass on the entire floor exploded and everyone, Ghosts and Damien included, winced and covered their ears. The three Ghosts that had been attacking her blew backwards. One of them blew into the vortex and disappeared. Laurel clamped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with terror.

The mass of energy shuddered and grew, as if it had been fed. The only sound on the floor was the air and debris being sucked into it, until Darhk let out a whoop of joy. He clapped his hands together and cackled. His excitement broke the spell of shock that had descended. Oliver and Roy hurled themselves after Darhk, while Sara and Helena fell back to defending Laurel.

“Again, Canary!” Oracle’s voice was right there, egging her on. “You have to stop this!”

The device was gaining momentum. Quentin staggered to his feet, only to be knocked backward and sent tumbling toward it by a wayward chair.

Black Canary screamed again, pulling in every ounce of energy she had through her throat. The vortex waivered, but so did the entire building. She could see her sister’s lips moving, calling for their father as she mercilessly tossed Ghost after Ghost aside to get to him.

He was too close to it. Damien had set it up only feet behind him in the first place, and then when he was knocked back...he was too close.

Huntress had long since lost patience for non-lethal measures. She shot an arrow between the eyes of the Ghost she was entangled with, then, almost without looking, shot an arrow clean into the head of a Ghost Laurel hadn’t seen coming.
The energy from the vortex was growing stronger, pulling in everything like a black hole. Laurel ramped up her sonic cry again, raining down ceiling tiles and dust and actually buckling the floor along with the energy from the box.

Sara threw one last Ghost before sliding down to Quentin and grabbing his arms. Helena was right behind her with her arms around her waist, both struggling against the immense gravity of the vortex. Laurel kept screaming. It had to work. The vortex was wobbling and had stopped growing. Sara had their father and Huntress had Sara.

It had to work.

None of them saw it coming.

Going head-to-head with Damien took everything Arsenal and Green Arrow had. The noise from the vortex and Laurel’s sonic cry deafened everything. They couldn’t even hear their radios anymore. The Ghosts were disbursing on some silent command, but two Ghosts had their own orders. They rushed past the three women and grabbed Quentin by his waist and legs, letting the vortex take them.

It was too much. White Canary and Huntress were strong, but between the weight of three men and the force that demanded everything within reach fall into it, they weren’t strong enough. Laurel could see her father slipping and her scream turned into unrestrained panic. A jolt of electricity bolted through her and echoed from her throat. She was finally loud enough to send the box sputtering and the vortex began to collapse on itself. A resounding crack, followed by another shower of insulation and ceiling tiles, indicated that she had shattered more than the box.

It still wasn’t enough.

Laurel and Sara both felt their hearts stop as Quentin’s hands slipped from Sara’s. The Ghosts at his legs were gone first, and then, just as the ball of energy collapse, their father vanished into it.

Sara’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. Laurel fell to her knees, her brows knitted together in confusion and disbelief. Helena rushed forward to the box, reaching out tentatively to inspect it, only to be blown back by an unseen force.

Damien stepped gingerly over the mess of destruction toward his device. When Sara saw him, she was on her feet with a guttural scream. Before she got two feet, he blew her back, knocking her clean into Oliver and Roy’s advancing forms with little more than the wave of his hand.

Laurel was still on her knees, staring at the empty space where her father had been. Her lips trembled as she whispered, “What did you do?”

Damien gestured for one of his Ghosts to collect the box and return it to its case. “What did I do?” He turned to her, incredulous. “What did you do?” He squatted to get eye level with her, cocking his head to the side. “What exactly is that little device you’re wearing?”

“Come a little closer, I’ll tell you.” Laurel’s green eyes hardened with steely resolve. The building swayed precariously and groaned like a disturbed beast. There was something hollow in her chest. She remembered screaming and wailing and raging when Tommy died. She remembered the grief and shock when she found out about Sara and Oliver, believing they had died together.

At this moment, she felt empty. It wasn’t real. She didn’t know what had just happened. In the past few months she’d raised her sister from the dead and travelled to the spirit realm. The possibilities swam, murky and untouchable through her mind.
Damien raised his eyes at the ceiling then clucked his tongue. “You sure, little bird? It’s gonna get messy.”

Around them, the Ghosts were busy making their own exit with the box while Oliver passed a very unconscious Sara to Huntress and Arsenal with strict instructions to get her to safety. By the time Laurel pushed herself back to her feet, it was just the three of them. Her legs felt wobbly and uncertain, but that could have been the unstable building. Her fists clenched at her sides.

There was only one thing she could see and feel that was solid: she was going to kick Damien’s ass.

“I want to see what you got.” Damien grinned only at her.

Oliver was at her side with an arrow nocked. “What did you do with him?”

Damien sighed and cast his eyes toward the back of his head at the intrusion. “Look, it’s a whole lot of complicated science, but long story short: vacuum of space. Hitler himself couldn’t think of a better way to dispose of billions of unwanted humans.” He actually beamed with pride at that one. “And thanks to Detective Lance, I now have a successful human trial under my belt.”

Laurel swayed again. The blood rushing in her ears felt like a tsunami drowning and beating her against the shore. No. Not now. She’d gotten Sara back and together, they’d get their dad back. She forced the dizziness back down into the pit of her stomach. Her sonic cry device was still crackling energy through her limbs.

The floor dropped suddenly, then stabilized again, much to Damien’s unending amusement. Next to her, Oliver was warm and solid and strong. She peeled her mask off, feeling it rip and pull in places where the flue was still strong, and tossed it to the floor.

“There you are.” Damien’s eyes maintained that predatory gleam that came so naturally to him.

“We have to go,” Oliver said under his breath. He was right. The building was dangerously unstable and they didn’t stand a chance against Darhk’s magic. He turned and launched a grappling arrow out the nearest window. He looped one of his massive arms around her waist and started slowly pulling her toward the window. “C’mon,” he urged.

Laurel dragged her feet and turned to face him. She stared up into his blue eyes and watched him realize what she was about to do. “I can finish this. Sara can get Dad back.”

“I am not. Leaving you.” His arm tightened with his words.

Her lips pulled up in a sad smile. She brushed a hand down his cheek. “I know. Hold onto your bow.”

Oliver had only a moment to process what she said before she stepped back and hit him with her scream, sending him tumbling out the window.

Laurel’s chest tightened as he fell out of sight. She didn’t want to hurt him. She hoped she was only just loud enough to knock him off his feet and he’d keep a grip on his grappling line. That flying meta Roy brought was out there somewhere. He’d be okay.

Laurel turned back to Damien, who watched her with a bemused smile. “That was ice cold.” They began a slow, wary circle around each other. The dim static in her ear told her that she’d blown out her radio already. She was alone. Somehow, that felt right. “It’s just you and me, banshee. You know, if you broke my toy, I’m gonna make you pay for it.”
“You wanted to talk, let’s talk.” Laurel channeled everything she had into her cry. The rest was an explosion of light and sound.

When Oliver’s feet hit the pavement, he was already moving through Plan B.

“Shall I get her?” The orange woman spoke while staring up at the top floor of the building. Even down here, they had to yell to be heard over the noise of Laurel’s cry and groans and booms of critical support structures giving way.

“That building is gonna come down any minute,” Ray chimed in.

“When this is over, I’m gonna need explanations for all of this,” Oliver gestured dumbly between Kori and Roy. “If this building is going to come down, I need you guys clearing the streets and the buildings around it.”

The team didn’t need further instruction. John and Andy had arrived at some point with the van. After Roy and Helena loaded Sara into it, they broke off toward their bikes to start clearing the north and west blocks.

“I can get back up there.” Oliver made the statement without taking his eyes off the sight of light and blue waves of electricity exploding out of building, as if saying it might make it happen by pure force of will.

“I’m on it,” Jason’s voice came over their radios, followed by the roar of a motorcycle engine.

Oliver didn’t know whether to be miffed or massively relieved to see Red Hood fly by, barking orders over him and driving his bike straight up the courtyard and through the glass doors of the building. He decided to go with relief and turned back to the immediate problem of clearing bystanders from the impending destruction.

“Oracle,” Jason didn’t need to finish his question.

“All the elevator banks are clear, Red Hood, but you only have about 60 seconds to get up there. I lost her when she shut down the motherbox.”

Jason didn’t bother to come to a complete stop inside the marble-floored foyer. He leapt off the bike, racing ahead as it slid behind him. His pulse thundered through his veins, letting him force the elevator doors open with what felt like minimal effort. He took only a cursory glance up, raised his grappling gun toward the roof and shot.

Back on the top floor, Laurel and Damien were locked in a duel that was, surprisingly to both of them, equally matched. Damien’s magic could block Laurel’s sonic cry, but only so much, and not enough to stop her.

With each breath of air, she sucked in more rage and grief and let it explode from her throat in a banshee’s scream. Tears ran openly down her face. She felt the loss of Sara, Oliver, Tommy, even her broken relationship with her mother. She saw her father’s face in his last seconds. She saw the unabashed pride that had lit through him when she and Sara had burst in to rescue him. She saw him drunk and angry and cursing her for taking his keys and dragging him out of the bar. She saw the hope in his eyes when she sat across from him at AA.

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She saw Damien’s face. Every time she renewed her scream, she stepped closer, forcing him toward the broken window. She could see the blue iridescent energy sparking around her and following the pulsing waves of her sonic cry. Some part of her registered that it looked the same way the vortex had looked, but she just kept screaming. Another part of her registered that it was
unnatural and she should be afraid, but she wasn’t. The more she screamed, the stronger she felt. The energy touched every part of her down to her soul.

Then she saw something really unexpected: Damien was afraid. That gave her pause. They were so close now, he simply reached forward and took her by the throat, squeezing his strength and his magic, cursing her into silence. Blood dripped out of his ears and nostrils. A burning sensation lit at her collar, but she was too strong now.

After a brief moment of triumph, Damien’s face dropped into terror when Laurel smiled at him over his outstretched arm and started to hum against his crushing hand. She could burn him right back.

When Jason dropped through the open elevator door, he had only seconds to register what he was seeing. The floor was buckling wildly. Laurel’s sonic scream had compromised the structural integrity of the steel frame of the building, shattering it like glass, or at least that was Oracle’s assessment.

Laurel had her back to him, leaning against Damien’s hand at her throat, bolts of blue lightning striking out from where he gripped her.

Jason sprinted, his feet barely touching the collapsing floor. Time slowed down. Debris fell around him, in front of him; he barreled right through all of it. A high-pitched noise buzzed through the air, growing louder as his feet brought him closer to Laurel’s back. Each stride felt like an eternity. He could make out Darhk’s face, twisted with rage and fear. Laurel was still on her feet, her hands gripping Darhk’s hand around her neck and damned if she wasn’t leaning right into him like a defiant figurehead blasting through a storming sea. He ducked his head like a seasoned football player, grabbing Laurel around the waist with both hands while slamming his shoulder against Darhk, sending all three of them out the shattered window of the 62nd floor of the MacArthur building.

He didn’t give two fucks what happened to Darhk, but he had Laurel in his arms and not a lot of time to think of a way out of this little pickle.

“Left shoulder!” an unfamiliar voice crackled in his ear. “It’s gonna hurt!”

Oh, fuck.

He shifted Laurel, who had gone suspiciously limp, under his right arm and shot his left arm out. A second later, he was blessed with the burning pain of an arrow shot clean into his left shoulder. He wrapped his wrist around the wire so that when it went taut he couldn’t physically let go no matter how painful it was.

And boy, it was painful. The second it went taut, Jason’s eyes crossed, but the wrapping kept him bound and kept the arrow from ripping out of his body. Now they were swinging toward the building across the street, which presented a whole new problem in the form of unbroken plate glass windows. He turned so his back was leading the way, shielding Laurel as the crashed unceremoniously but in mostly one piece through the window.

During their tumble, he lost his hold on her and the arrow broke off. He groaned and ripped the remainder away. “Whoever did that, please don’t ever rescue me again.”

He struggled to his feet, searching for Laurel among the debris. He found her on her back between some desks. Jason fell to his knees next to her, trying to understand what was happening. Her feet and legs struggled uselessly against the floor and she writhed, gasping and clawing at the collar.
Her eyes were wild. Blood ran freely from her nose and mouth, and from beneath her collar. Blue sparks licked out from her sonic collar.

“Laurel? Sweetheart, what’s wrong? What’s going on?” Maybe it was the pain or the adrenaline, but Jason’s mind was seized with panic, and Jason was not one who panicked. She didn’t speak, she could only gasp, staring at him with so much fear in her eyes Jason felt it in his bones. He reached for the collar but even his gentlest effort at pulling it away resulted in an extreme gasp and strangled noise of pain.

“Oracle, I...I don’t know what to do.”

“Hold still and look at her face and neck.” Oracle’s voice had a way of bringing him back and centering him, but in this moment he fought the urge to swear at her and curse her for not having an immediate answer. His hands were shaking. A pair of booted steps thumped up behind him. Green Arrow crouched on one side of him, and another archer in red followed.

“What’s happening to her?” Oliver’s voice rose with panic.

“Do I look like I fucking know?” Red Hood had to force himself to keep his helmet pointed down at her. For her part, Laurel didn’t take her anguished eyes off him.

“Okay, Overwatch is calling the Flash. She needs to get to STAR Labs. Jason, do you have any morphine on you?”

Jason nodded. Oracle must have seen the nod through his own helmet camera because she continued. “Okay, good. She is going into shock. Her airway is clear but I think she’s just in pain. She’s going to send herself into cardiac arrest if you don’t calm her down.”

Jason’s hand moved to the pouch where he kept first aid supplies, including a single dose of morphine. Green Arrow’s hand reached out to stop him. “She’s an addict; you can’t give her this.”

Red Hood ripped his hand away. His lip curled and his blood flamed. His hand almost crushed the syringe. “Dead and strung out, I’ll chose strung out. If you can’t handle that, get the fuck out of my way.”

Oliver stilled and drew back with his mouth shut. His heart stuttered and in an instant, he knew he didn’t belong there. He sat back on his heels to let Red Hood work.

Jason stuck the handle of the syringe in his mouth while he cut away one of Laurel’s sleeves. Her blood pressure was so high, he only had to glance to find a ready vein. She visibly fought to restrain herself from bringing her hand back to clutching at her throat. Her teeth clenched, breath puffed hard and hot through her nostrils, she didn’t take her eyes off Jason as he positioned the needle and had it in and out of her arm as quickly as a seasoned medic.

He pulled his helmet off and took her hand in his. Her breathing was already slowing and her muscles relaxing from the writhing tension. She continued to watch him with glassy eyes, but the wild fear was fading. He muttered reassurances mixed with apologies and tried to reach up to smooth her hair, but the arrow wound was catching up with him. He winced and kept his left arm clutched to his chest.

Sirens and dust and smoke filled the air. A collapsed skyscraper tended to have that effect. Kori floated in through one of the shattered windows, tossing a piece of steel beam to the floor casually. Oliver watched her silently float to Roy. He couldn’t begin to imagine what had transpired since Roy left town to earn him such a friend, but tonight he was glad for whatever it was. As the
building came down, the three of them had worked in seamless concert upon seeing Jason and Laurel plummeting through the sky. Arsenal and Green Arrow were already in the building directly across the street trying to formulate a plan when the MacArthur building shuddered and gave way. Arsenal had rushed toward the empty space where a window had once stood with an arrow already nocked. From wherever she was, Kori must have seen the falling pair and Roy at the window’s edge. She had flown in like a rocket, vaporizing debris and clearing a path for them. Oliver anchored himself to a support beam and latched onto his former mentee for dear life, which it nearly had been once the combined weight of Laurel and Jason caught on Arsenal's grappling line.

“The Flash is on his way.” Overwatch sounded exhausted. “The team on the ground is all accounted for and they are already looking for survivors. White Canary is up, pissed and would like to know what’s going on with BC.”

“I’ll meet you guys at STAR Labs; I’ve already sent them the schematics on the sonic device,” Oracle added.

Jason didn’t look up from Laurel. His only reaction that betrayed he had anything to say about sending Laurel to STAR Labs and Oracle coming in person was a tick in his jaw.

“Uh, Overwatch-Oracle, you guys got any situational awareness on the helicopters heading this way?” Arsenal stepped toward the shattered window with Green Arrow not far behind him.

“ARGUS,” Green Arrow and Overwatch said in unison. “Tell Spartan to get out of here.” Green Arrow watched the formation of helicopters that was still a good distance away, but approaching fast.

A red blur blew straight up the building and into the wide-open floor, sliding to a stop next to Jason and Laurel. Behind his red mask, Barry’s face crumpled at the sight of Laurel, bloody, her mouth still trembling and struggling for breath. He knelt at her side and slid his arms under her, but froze at Jason’s sharp look. “I...I have to take her to STAR Labs.”

Jason was gripping her hand so tight part of him thought he must be hurting her, but her hand was clinging right back, eyes still on Jason.

“We can help her,” Barry spoke gently. Jason’s gaze flicked back to the Flash, awash with uncertainty. He looked back at Laurel who struggled to give him the tiniest nod, so he slowly released his grip on her hand and let Barry take her. The air blew up around him with a quick *whoosh* of red lightning. They were gone.

The burning pain had settled fully into his left shoulder. Jason groaned and pressed his hand into it to staunch the bleeding, and maybe alleviate some of the pain with pressure while distracting himself from the empty space where Laurel had just been. There would be no such luck for either.

The red archer in the trucker hat helped him to his feet and handed him his helmet. “Roy, Arsenal.”

“Jason,” he grunted in return. A sudden rush of wind blew through the broken windows, followed by the loud, steady thump of helicopter rotors. Roy released Jason to - in Jason’s eyes, comically - draw his bow with Green Arrow falling into place next to them. Kori, far more threatening than all of them combined, glided in front of the bedraggled group, her hands pulsing with green energy. She tossed a look back to Roy with the smallest hint of a smirk.

Green Arrow caught the look and nearly snapped, “Don’t kill them. Just crashing that thing could kill anyone in the way on the ground.”
Kori’s solid green eyes narrowed at him before responding to Roy. “The humans in this town are especially awful.”

Roy shrugged apologetically. “He’s right, Kor.”

The helicopter rotated to the side. The door slid open and Amanda Waller moved to it, gripping a hand on the roof to steady herself. She pointed a sharp finger at Jason, still a little hunched and gripping his bleeding shoulder, and mouthed in no uncertain terms, “JUST HIM.”

“Oh good, they missed the disaster and got here just in time to collect Waller’s latest Task Force X recruit.” Oliver set his jaw and moved so he could sight in on Waller with his arrow. “Get him out of here, I’ll take care of this.”

The energy at Kori’s hands flared. “I can end them now.”

“Can you get him to Central City?” Oliver turned his head from his target to nod in Jason’s direction.

Kori’s chin raised but Roy responded. “Her shuttle is nearby and cloaked. Can you drop us there on your way out?”

She softened for the smaller man. “The Starfire can wait a little while longer for me, but we must be quick.” Without further ado, she looped an arm under Jason’s good shoulder. He blinked up at her, his human green irises shrinking to thin rings as he took in her appearance up close.

“You’re tall.” He closed his eyes and checked himself at her silent, arch look. He opened his eyes and tried again. “I like the way you carry me a lot more than the other guy’s method.”

She graced him with a smile and throaty laugh.

“Can you guys maybe do this back on your shuttle or whatever you rode in on?” Green Arrow growled, his arms beginning to shake from the effort of staying drawn on Waller. They weren’t moving, yet, but there was a small strike team on the helicopter and they looked like they were waiting for Red Hood to make his move.

Kori half-carried Jason, who persisted in keeping his feet on the ground, with one arm out toward the helicopter. Arsenal fell in with them, also drawn down on the helicopter, striding backwards with the easy confidence of a man who knew his tall not-human friend wouldn’t let him plummet to his death when they reached the window.

“Hey Arsenal,” Oliver called, shifting just his eyes over his bow arm, “nice hat.”

He heard Roy’s bark of laughter before the three of them were out the window. Waller and her helicopter hadn’t moved. She merely continued to stare at him across the expanse like he was her cat’s paw.

One of the other helicopters dropped out of the sky on the other side of the building to give chase to the group making their escape.

Oliver muttered a curse and went through the rapid fire decision making process. Did he fire the grappling arrow into this helicopter, go for the fight with all of them and try to go head-to-head against the other two - he remembered they had come with three, total - helicopter crews? He had minimal flight time on fixed wing aircraft. He had about zero hours on rotary wing. It was a risk.

As luck would have it, he didn’t have to take the risk. He thought he’d been surprised enough
when Roy had dropped in out of the clear blue sky on the arm of a flying orange woman - not human? - but at least he had known Roy was alive somewhere.

The sight of Ray Palmer zooming past in his Atom suit made him nearly drop his bow.

“Uh, yeah, the Atom is in town and not dead,” Overwatch croaked in his ear.

“You’re going to explain this to me later.” It was a statement, not a request.

Waller’s face had fallen into a mask of confusion and fury. Their helicopter broke off and gave chase with the other, quickly joined by the third.

“It’s a long story.” Felicity audibly cringed. It’s not like there had been a good moment to tell Oliver about Ray’s impromptu visit.

“I was just small,” Ray’s cheerful voice rang out. “Don’t worry about these guys. I’ve got an EMP device on the suit I need to test and a big open field just outside of town.”

Oliver let his arms drop. They felt like he’d been holding out fifty pound weights in each hand. This was a long day, even for him.

He stepped to the window’s edge, glass crunching under his boots. Sara’s white-clad form was easy to pick out. She was staring right at him from nearly forty stories away. He could swear he could actually see and feel her icy blue eyes, hard and angry. His day was far from over.

“Get me to Central City now.” Sara dropped the ear radio on the asphalt and turned without waiting to see him descend from the building.

She had seen her father go into that...that thing. Whatever it was, she could stop it. She had nothing but time. Even with that assurance repeating itself in an endless loop in her mind, every cell in her body screamed at her to get to her sister. She had to see Laurel. She had to see Laurel okay before she left. She had to know that Laurel knew she was going to fix it.

She could fix this.

Chapter End Notes

If you're still reading, GOD BLESS. You guys give me life.
Episode 9

Chapter Summary

The team deals with the fallout of Darhk's big show.

Oracle makes a rare in-person experience to explain herself and help wherever she can.

Laurel lingers in her injured state, while the Earth 2 crowd raises concerns about Laurel's new abilities that divide loyalties.

Someone needs to step up and lead this army, but first Laurel needs to let herself wake up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason hissed and ground his teeth at the burning in his shoulder.

“Sorry, man,” Roy frowned but kept the steady stream of whatever space-tech first aid thing flowing into his shoulder wound. “It burns like a real bitch, but it’ll close up the wound and even knit back all the tissue.”

“You keep helping me out like this, I’m gonna start feeling inclined to pay you back.”

Roy straightened with the injection-like device in his hand, turned his ball cap back around to face front and made an unimpressed harrumph. “If you can find someone else who can save two people plummeting to their deaths with trick-shot archery and a spaceship, be my guest.”

“We’re three minutes out,” Kori called from the pilot’s chair.

Jason’s eyes drifted to the front of the ship. His vision was hazy with pain and exhaustion, and the general shock of meeting an alien. That one was weird, even for him. “Her hair’s not on fire anymore,” he mumbled.

Roy smirked. “Yeah, she mostly does that to scare the locals.”
Kori unfolded her long frame out of the seat to join Jason and Roy near the back ramp of the ship as it slowed to a halt, presumably at or near STAR Labs. This thing didn’t have a lot of windows. “I have to return to the Starfire.”

Roy smashed his hand against a large button and the back ramp began to lower itself dutifully to the roof of STAR Labs. He reached out and took one of Kori’s hands in his own for a gentle squeeze. “Do what you gotta do.”

She jerked him forward, cupped his chin in a demanding hand, and leaned down to lay what was, to Jason, an impressively deep kiss. He didn’t know whether to turn away or continue gawking. She released Roy, calm where he struggled to regain balance and breath. “If you need me, for any reason…”

“I’ll call.” Roy smiled fondly up at her. Jason thought he spotted a spark of familiar warmth in her eyes before she gave him a cool nod and strode back to her seat.

“And Roy,” she called over her shoulder, “if you are in doubt, remember the one rule of the Starfire.”

Jason was already off the ramp, but Roy paused before jumping to the concrete roof to laugh, “Kor, ‘no survivors’ isn’t really okay around here.”

“Don’t make me come back here to rectify that,” Kori’s voice shouted above the din of the craft warming up to fly again.

They stood long enough to watch the ship disappear into the clouds. Jason briefly wondered what kind of stealth technology she was packing, and what exactly the Starfire was if this was just a shuttle, then shut down the thoughts as far too complicated on top of what he was in Central City for. He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. The pain in his shoulder was fading. “So…you’re Oliver’s ex-Robin and your girlfriend is an alien princess?”

Roy didn’t look away from the spot in the sky where Kori’s ship had vanished. “That is a gross oversimplification. And only Batman has Robins. You should know that.”

Jason turned his attention toward the single door on the roof that would lead them into the lab, and to Laurel. His feet didn’t move. Roy started toward the door but stopped when he realized he was alone. One look at Jason’s clenched fists and the unsteady rise and fall of his shoulders, and Roy
felt an instant pang of pity. It didn’t take a genius to pick up on his new friend’s feelings. His first sight of the infamous Red Hood was him throwing himself and Laurel out of a 62-story building in a desperate bid to save her life; not exactly the heads-in-a-duffle-bag monster he’d heard about.

“She’s gonna be alright, Jay.”

The dozens of increasingly worse mental images of what he’d find when he got down to the lab faded. Jason cleared his throat and forced his feet to march forward, eyes downcast and away from Roy.

Downstairs, STAR Labs was in a state of chaos that rivaled something only the Joker could usually generate. The Central City team was so busy recovering and cleaning up, they hadn’t noticed an aircraft land on their roof, or the security alarm chiming on Cisco’s computer announcing the arrival of Jason and Roy.

Jason frowned. Scratch that, it was a small tablet chiming the alarm, which explained why no one was alerted. Every computer and piece of glass in the lab was wrecked. The blur that was Barry Allen whirred to a halt at their entrance. He had been zooming around the place, scooping up all the broken glass, anything that could be hazardous and righting the shelves and fixtures too heavy for the others too lift. His shoulders sagged and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Good, you’re here. You’ll want these,” his words were just barely cut off when he flashed away and back in a blink, holding out two sets of ear plugs. “Everyone, this is Roy-“

“Arsenal!” Cisco’s dark head popped up with a grin from the server bank he was repairing. His ear plugs hung haphazardly around his neck, and Jason caught sight of a hint of dried blood crusted around one ear.

Roy huffed, “Apparently my reputation precedes me. Though, I gotta say, I thought this place would be cleaner.”

“It was,” Harrison said. Caitlin and Jay Garrick were at his side, each more grim than the last. Caitlin had a bandaged wrist, a large band-aid near her ear and looked roughly like she’d been hit by a car. “When she regained consciousness, she almost vaporized us.”

“Where is she?” Jason twisted and turned, panic rumbling through his core. She should be here. Caitlin and Dr. Wells should be doing doctor things to her, but everyone was quietly cleaning up and recovering from the explosion that had apparently been Laurel Lance. “Is she okay?”
“We’re fine, thanks for asking,” Harrison grumbled and returned to his clean-up efforts.

Caitlin saw Jason spiraling and led the way out of the main lab to another office. “She’s fine,” Caitlin struggled to reassure him. Her own injuries weren’t very reassuring. “We got the schematics from Oracle before we even knew what was going on. I’ve already run her through a full-body MRI, and aside from the implant, there is nothing physically wrong with her.”

“Implant?” Jason sped up, unconcerned with Caitlin’s shorter strides or the fact that he didn’t actually know where in the building Laurel was.

“The sonic device,” Harrison jogged to catch up with them, “it implanted itself in her larynx and trachea.”

They reached the door and Caitlin pushed her way in, only to be nearly shoved aside by an impatient Jason. Laurel was unconscious on a gurney, stripped to an old hospital gown, with tubes and wires and monitors everywhere he could see. Fresh bandages covered her throat.

“When she came in, I had Barry do some quick imaging,” Caitlin continued while she checked Laurel’s vitals for the thousandth time, examined her fluids and meds IVs. “There is no way to remove the device. It’s like it melted into her. Somehow, when she was in that fight, it burned through the external tissue of her throat without damaging anything major, and then shaped itself to the primary structures of her larynx like a custom-fitted implant. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Jason was holding her cold, lifeless hand in his, not looking at either doctor. “Why is she still unconscious?”

“Did you see the war zone?” Harrison asked flatly. At Jason’s hard look, Harrison relented. “We kept her unconscious until Caitlin sutured her throat. When we eased off the general anesthesia, she produced a sonic scream before her eyes even opened. She almost killed Caitlin.”

Jason’s gaze snapped to Caitlin, softer, maybe even apologetic, but he didn’t speak.

“I’m fine.” Caitlin squeezed his hand over Laurel’s. “Barry and Cisco are already working on a way to soundproof one of the pipeline cells, so we can move her there before we try to wake her up again.”
The idea of locking her in the Flash’s metahuman prison made his stomach turn.

“It’s just temporary,” Caitlin said quickly. “Once she’s awake, we’ll be able to run more tests, but we can’t do that if we’re all deaf…or buried under rubble.”

“Or dead,” Harrison added.

“Oh shit,” Roy breathed from the doorway. He pulled his hat and mask off in one motion and stepped to the other side of Laurel’s bed. He took her other hand and pulled up a chair for himself.

“If you woke her up and she started screaming, how is she back unconscious right now?” Jason was stroking her knuckles with his thumb. He could see the purple bruise blossoming on her cheek.

Caitlin winced at Harrison who only shrugged in response. “Well…”

“Barry had to hit her.” Harrison braved both Jason and Roy’s wrath with that one, but he was too tired to care. “If he didn’t, we’d all be dead, including her.”

Heavy silence fell over the room. Jason and Roy both kept their attention on Laurel. Caitlin chewed her lip. “I’m sorry. We’ll get more answers when she wakes up. And Oracle said she was coming and she knows more about this device. How did you guys get here so fast, anyway?”

For a brief moment, the smallest smile lit up Roy’s face as he turned his eyes up to Caitlin. “Would you believe me if I said we got here by alien spacecraft?”

Harrison groaned, rolled his eyes and left the room. Caitlin allowed herself a half-smile. “No, but Cisco is already your biggest fan and will eat every ounce of that story.”

Oliver settled himself into the plush, cream leather seat. His mother had decorated this jet before it was rebranded with Ray Palmer’s name. “The pilot says it’ll be about five hours with a good tail wind.”
Sara wasn’t looking at him. She kept her icy blue eyes out the window, not really seeing anything.

After thoroughly shocking the four-man flight crew with a decidedly not dead Ray Palmer, Felicity bought their silence with a month of paid vacation each. And a gentle reminder from Ray about the non-disclosure agreements they’d all signed before being hired.

Felicity sat across the aisle from Oliver, with Ray across from her. No one would look at each other or speak. A buzz startled Felicity in her seat. She pulled out her phone and breathed a sigh of relief. “Barry says Laurel is fine, but they’re keeping her unconscious until they can get her into a soundproof room.” Her entire face crumpled in confusion. “I’m not sure what that means.”

“It means she’s done damage.” Sara didn’t turn to address them. “It means they’re scared of her.”

“We don’t know that,” Oliver tried, barely above a whisper. Sara’s eyes flashed to his, her mouth set in a hard line.

Ray frowned at the group before lurching out of his seat and making his way to the back of the plane. When he returned, it was with two handfuls of single-serving liquor bottles. He distributed accordingly before folding his lanky frame back into the seat. “Okay, we have a long flight and I think we could all use a drink.”

“Or five,” Felicity countered. She opened the first bottle and wrinkled her nose at it. “I’m gonna need a Coke or something.”

Silence descended quickly, like a heavy wet blanket. Ray fidgeted, squinting critically at the other three passengers. “Maybe we should play a game? Something to take our minds off things? Never have I ever?”

Oliver blanched, his eyes involuntarily shifting between Sara and Felicity. Felicity choked on her drink. Sara didn’t turn back from the window. All three of them managed to bark “No” in unison.

Laurel burrowed deeper into her soft mattress, turning away from the first rays of dawn. Her bed was everything warm and comfortable against what promised to be a chilly autumn morning and long day at the office.
The weight on the mattress shifted and a familiar, gentle hand smoothed her slept-in hair away from her face. “It’s almost time to get up, sweetheart,” Quentin’s voice was all rough edges warmed by affection.

Laurel slowly blinked her eyes open and smiled sleepily up at her father. “It’s too early, Daddy.”

Quentin couldn’t help but return a smile of his own, but his didn’t reach his eyes. “Naw, you haven’t seen the clock yet. It’s almost too late; you have to get a move on. Your sister is going to be here any minute.”

Her heart swelled and she found herself sitting up despite the comfortable draw of her bed. “Sara’s coming?”

“Of course she is.” Quentin placed a hand on his daughter’s knee and grew serious. “You two are gonna need each other.”

Something heavy settled on Laurel’s chest, so hard it almost hurt to breathe. The image of Quentin right before he disappeared into a swirling vortex stuttered across her vision, interrupting the pleasant morning light and her father’s downtrodden eyes. “You were gone.”

Quentin gave her knee a squeeze. “I’m still gone.”

The dam broke. Laurel’s breath caught in her throat and tears rushed to her eyes. She covered her mouth to quell the strangled sob then pushed the tears away with the back of her hand. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“You will.” Quentin leaned forward to brush the wetness off her cheeks. “You always know what to do, Laur. You know you’re going to have to help Sara.”

A rush hope filled her. “I saved Sara. We can find a way…” She trailed off at his sad smile.

“It’s not about me, sweetheart,” he whispered. “You’re the strong one in this family, and you’ve got a lot of work to do.”
Laurel pulled her knees to her chest and let the tears flow freely down her face. She pressed her face into her knees until she got her breathing under control, and when she looked back up, she was alone in her bedroom. She knew without having to call out or look that she was completely alone.

She leaned back against the headboard, crying openly now. Her sobs grew louder and more violent, shoulders shaking, until she tilted her head back and screamed.

“Did it work?” Malcolm looked up from his desk when Thea was escorted into his office.

Thea’s face remained stoic, even vacant. “Yes, Father.”

Malcolm rose and stepped around the desk to place an approving hand on her shoulder. “Good. You will continue the charade until the right opportunity presents itself. If I pull you away too soon, your brother will come for you and jeopardize everything I’ve worked for.”

Thea didn’t move or look at him. She remained still, blinking ahead at the empty wall.

“I will protect you, Thea.” Malcolm cupped her face between his hands, forcing her to look at him. “In this world, the new world, and whatever comes between, I am the only one who can protect you.”

The floor beneath the lab rumbled. Again. No one looked up, but a few cast hooded glances at each other before silently continuing their work.

Cisco and Barry’s sonic-proof cell was holding up against Laurel’s cries, but she was still hitting decibel levels so extreme the building shook. Caitlin had taken her off the anesthesia, but Laurel drifted in and out of consciousness, seemingly unwilling to wake up. Caitlin made a weak attempt at assuring everyone it had only been a few hours since she first arrived in Barry’s arms, and thus was probably just exhausted.
The security alarm beeped on Cisco’s tablet. The silent group all stopped what they were doing and waited while he pulled up the feed. Cisco brushed his long hair out of his face and recoiled at whatever he saw on the screen. “Uh, guys, a Wayne Enterprises helicopter just landed on the roof. And a woman in a wheelchair is waiting at the top of the roof access stairs. She’s looking at me.”

“That would be Oracle,” Jason grumbled.

Barry was gone and back, first with the chair, then with the woman, in a blink.

Barbara shifted in her seat and pushed her glasses back up her nose as her hair settled back down on her shoulders. “Well, that was different.”

She was still looking around the room, gauging her new surroundings and companions when Jason stomped forward, balled up his fist and swung at her. The lab erupted into a chorus of shouts and even Barry was too surprised to react.

Fortunately, Barbara had seen this coming. She had her guard up, deflected his blow while grabbing his wrist and upper arm to send him face-planting to the floor with his arm still in her hands at an especially painful angle.

“Jesus, Todd, it’s like you’re not even trying,” she growled into his ear, which was now conveniently at her level.

He snarled and tried to move, but she only wrenched his arm further. “What did you do to her?”

“I will tell you,” she breathed through the words, never letting her grip on him slacken, “if you can stop being you for two minutes.”

Jason twisted his head to look up at her. They studied each other in silence. Jason saw fractures in Barbara he’d practically grown up with - she was putting up a good front, but there was shame shadowing her eyes.

Barbara saw unadulterated fear in Jason, which, as she well knew, translated into anger. She had seen him this frightened once before, and only in CCTV footage Bruce had told her not to look for. She released him and he almost fell the rest of the way to the floor before his pride kicked in and he forced himself to stand, his arm protectively close to his body.
Six pairs of eyes - Jason wouldn’t look at her - fell on Barbara. She gave a sheepish shrug. “Now that that’s out of the way…I’m Oracle. Anyone want to tell me what Black Canary’s status is?”

The silence dragged on, only broken by a ticking from someone’s watch.

“She’s in and out of consciousness,” Jason broke the standoff. “You owe everyone here an explanation.”

Each face wore varying degrees of confusion and anger, as well as bruises and lacerations. They’d done a good job cleaning up the place, but the lab still showed evidence of the sonic bomb that had gone off in the form of Laurel Lance.

“I can’t tell you too much-“

“Bullshit,” Cisco’s arms folded and he wore an unimpressed scowl. “You hacked our servers and showed up here uninvited, and whatever you did to my Canary Cry projector nearly killed our friend. We’re going to need to know everything you know.”

Barry, Harrison and Caitlin all slowly turned to Cisco with matching expressions of surprise, before Caitlin turned back to Oracle. “Well, you heard him.”

Barbara sighed. “The modification I had Jason install probably saved her life. Darhk would have killed her without it.” She waited for further rebukes, but none came. She steeled herself for another outburst from Jason when he heard what she had to say next. “I was able to acquire a piece of advanced technology that could be used to make highly customizable and adaptive weapons for people like us. The individual components of the larger mechanism can adapt to their host. When I learned about Black Canary’s weapon, I thought I would be able to make it more functional for her. I was right.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed, everyone else remained confused.

“Why are you talking about this thing like it’s a parasite?” Barry ventured.

Realization dawned on Harrison first. “Because she’s talking about a biocomputer.”
“That kind of technology doesn’t exist yet, does it?” Barry looked for help from his team but all he got were confused shrugs and head shakes.

“We don’t have that kind of technology, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.” Barbara turned her attention to Jason. His body was tense, poised, as if he already knew what she was going to say. “There is alien technology that has been found on Earth, and more than one of them, because it’s the same device Darhk is using.”

Jason exhaled a sharp puff of air through his nose and started pacing, running his hands through his hair. He stopped at a metal cabinet long enough to punch it. The sound of his fist cracking against the metal echoed through the lab. He slowly turned back to Barbara. “You put a goddamn boom tube on Laurel’s throat.”

“That’s just one of the uses,” Barbara countered and wheeled closer to him. “They’re called Mother Boxes and they do whatever the user wants them to do. Interstellar travel happens to be what we know for sure it can do.”

“But you don’t know!” he roared at her. “You had no idea what it was going to do when you asked me to install that fucking thing and you used her like a guinea pig.”

Barbara’s face fell and she kept her eyes on her lap. She had nothing to say to that. “In testing,” she began softly, “a single chip could only perform one, maybe two functions. You need the whole box for something as complicated as a boom tube.”

Cisco raised a cautious hand. When Caitlin rolled her eyes at him, he went ahead and spoke. “Can we just back this crazy train up a few stops? You had Jason install a biocomputer chip in my Canary Cry device that I built for Laurel that may or may not have reacted like a parasite defending its host when Laurel was attacked?”

The lightbulb went on over Caitlin’s head. She snatched the tablet out of Cisco’s hands and pulled up the imagery they’d taken from Laurel’s throat. “That’s exactly what it did!” She thrust the tablet at Barbara. “Look, it made a surgical incision in her throat, missing all major veins and arteries, and implanted itself along the structures it must have been studying since she first started using it. It even removed itself from the Canary Cry housing. We couldn’t make heads or tails of it, the housing was a melted hunk of metal when we removed it.”

Jason crossed his arms and scowled down at Barbara. “Congratulations, Babs. Now you know a
single Mother Box chip is capable of more than one or two functions.”

“Um,” now Roy raised a hand, “are we all going to ignore the part where she said Damien Darhk has a…” He trailed off, looking for help repeating what he’d heard.

“Transwarp beaming device?” Cisco breathed and stared off into the distance with a vaguely dazzled expression.

“No, that would mean it works between vessels going warp speed,” Barry corrected. “It’s just standard transporter.”

“Technically, this planet is moving approximately 67,000 miles per hour through space, and if the Mother Box is sending stuff to another object moving at a similar rate - “

“That’s still not warp speed,” Barry replied.

“Guys,” Jay Garrick threw his hands up, “focus.”

“Yes, please.” Jason rubbed a hand over his face. “For the record, the ‘stuff’ Damien sent into space was Laurel’s father. So, whenever she wakes up, you should probably cool it on the nerding out for Star Trek shit.”

The reminder about Laurel’s father fell like a dark cloud over the lab.

“I assume you had Barry bring her here for a reason?” Harrison frowned at Barbara. Team Flash had enough to deal with without getting messed up in Star City and Gotham problems all at once.

“Yes,” Barry perked up again. “How do we get that thing off of her throat?”

Barbara’s jaw tensed. She shared a dark look with Caitlin, the only medical doctor in the room. Caitlin’s chin rose with understanding. “We don’t.”

“I think it’s fully bonded to her now.” Barbara continued swiping back and forth between the MRI
“Then why…?” Barry’s face was wrought with confusion, he swept a hand around the still-disheveled lab.

The daggers Jason was shooting Barbara hit her like ice picks. “Because she didn’t want her fancy alien hardware falling into the wrong hands.”

The hard judgment around the room was something Barbara could accept. In this, at least, she had been right. Had an organization like ARGUS caught wind of exactly what Laurel was wearing - and now had implanted in her neck - they’d be cutting her open right about now.

When Jason smirked at her, it was laced with cruelty. “You should be careful, Red. You’re starting to give credence to that whole gingers-don’t-have-souls thing.”

Oliver’s eyes burned from being awake too long, and probably from the ash and smoke of having recently been near a demolished building. When they arrived at STAR Labs, Sara made a beeline for Laurel’s cell. No one followed her and it had been several hours of silence now.

The lab had the solemnity of a hospital waiting room, or maybe a wake. Harrison, Jay Garrick and Ray were quietly comparing notes on the possible uses of a sonic projector. Cisco, Barry, Felicity and Oracle had put their collective genius to good use and now had the entire server bank back up and running. Iris had shown up with a mountain of sustenance in the form of coffee, pastries and an attempt at positivity that seemed to soothe everyone except Oliver and Jason. She moved on to quietly helping Caitlin run a battery of tests against the blood and tissue samples she’d collected from Laurel.

Roy sidled up to the desk where Oliver couldn’t even pretend to be working on anything and sat on it, folding the worn brim of his hat in his hands. “Where’s Thea?” The grimace from Oliver told him everything he needed to know. “You should have called me. I can help.”

Oliver ran a tired hand down his face. “I know you can, I just didn’t want to risk you getting caught.”

Roy snorted. “Look, man, it’s not every day some magical warlord releases all the metas in Iron
Heights and sends your ex flying through the air on a tornado before he opens a portal into space.” Oliver frowned skeptically up at him. “Okay, it’s kind of every day for us, but you guys are family to me. I’m not any more worried about getting caught than you are. Plus, I have some pretty powerful friends.”

“I noticed. Who is that?”

A wide grin lit across Roy’s face. “That would be Princess Koriand’r of the planet Tamaran.”

Oliver fought it, but an appreciative smile took hold anyway. “Thea said you were working as a mechanic in some Podunk town.”

“Heh, it’s a fun story.” Roy leaned his elbows on his knees. “Turns out the mundane life is mundane. I ended up in Syria, then on a boat crew in the Mediterranean helping refugees make the crossing.”

“You can’t help yourself, can you?” Oliver shook his head, but he’d already lost the battle against the pride swelling in his chest. As far as protégés went, Roy was a good one.

“It wasn’t too hard,” Roy demurred but sat up a little straighter. “But one night it went bad. The ship caught fire. We were overloaded, it was bad weather, everything that could go wrong, did. I was unconscious not long after I hit the water. And then,” Roy sighed wistfully, “I woke up on some tiny island in the Azores with a beautiful orange woman patching me up. She’s let me hang around ever since.”

Oliver leaned back in the rolling chair with his arms crossed over his chest, laughing to himself. It started as a rumbling chuckle, and then devolved into shoulder-shaking, silent, hysterical laughter.

“What?” Roy raised a hand in bemusement.

Oliver sniffed and wiped a tear away from his eye. “I leave you alone for a year, year and a half, and you came back with an alien princess and a hat.”

While they dissolved into laughter and commiseration, Sara sat cross-legged on the ground outside of Laurel’s cell. She rested her temple against the door and pressed the microphone function on the tablet Cisco had given her to ask, again, if Laurel would let her open the door and come in.
She got another hoarse, whispered “no.” Sara could see her sister on a feed from a camera in the cell. Laurel seemed to know exactly where the camera was and wouldn’t look up at it.

Sara’s arrival marked the exact moment Laurel fully woke up. Sara had given her a brief, extremely watered down version of the events since they last saw each other, and Laurel had curled into a ball as small as she could against the wall.

She’d been unsure about Oracle and Jason’s upgrades to her Canary Cry in the first place, but she’d enjoyed the extra power. She craved it. She’d gotten a taste of it and wanted more. Laurel never questioned what Oracle offered her.

Maybe Oliver had been right all along. She was just an addict chasing a new high, and she could have gotten her friends killed for it. Hell, she still could. Given their rush to get her into a soundproof box, they must know she’s a time bomb.

“Laurel, please just let me in.” Sara’s voice was rough and broken over the speaker in her cell. Part of her wanted to let Sara unlock the door, take her sister in her arms and cry for at least three days.

Bits and pieces were coming back to her in stunning clarity. She knew that they had failed - spectacularly - at saving their father. She knew that even though she still didn’t understand exactly what she saw, her father was indeed gone. Whatever Damien had cooked up ended him in the blink of an eye. She knew there had been a moment when she realized her sonic cry was strong enough to finish taking down the building, and she could take Damien down with it. She knew her family had been with her, and she had been sure they’d gotten clear. She knew she’d been toe-to-toe with Darhk and seen the fear in his eyes. She remembered feeling a rush of pleasure at the sight, even as her sonic collar burned its way into her throat.

She even remembered sensing instinctively that the device was taking control of some part of her, and she let it. She remembered fire and ash and Jason’s face hovering over hers, alight with panic.

Laurel knew she was in this cell because she must be dangerous. She was dangerous enough to put fear into Damien Darhk. She was vaguely aware that she must have been screaming in her sleep and sent thanks up to whoever had the foresight to get her to the only medical facility in the country equipped to handle something like her.

Telling Sara to unlock the door would make all of it real. It would mean having to talk to everyone about what happened. She would have to sit down with Caitlin and let her poke and prod and
attempt to explain why she now had a natural sonic scream. She would have to tell Cisco she’d let Oracle and Jason modify the device.

She’d have to face Sara, knowing she let her sister down.

For right now, she wanted nothing more than to stay curled in a ball on the small bed.

“I’m gonna get him back, Laurel.” Sara’s voice was low and determined. It no longer wavered. “I have to go meet Rip. He can help me fix this.”

Laurel slowly unfolded herself and sat on the edge of the bed. She wiped the tears away and looked up at the small, heavily-shielded camera in the far corner of the room.

Sara’s breath caught in her throat at the sight of Laurel’s gaunt and battered face. In the STAR Labs t-shirt and sweats, Laurel looked bony and frail. She hadn’t seen her sister like this in years. “Let me do this,” Sara addressed the figure haunting the tablet in her hands. “It’s my turn.”

When Laurel gave her a small, resolute nod, Sara was on her feet, marching back into the lab.

“Ray, it’s time to go,” she growled without acknowledging any of the questions about Laurel’s welfare. Ray had the good sense to drop what he was working on with Harrison and follow without question.

As they were leaving, Sara felt the floor of the building rumbling beneath her feet.

Back in her cell, Laurel gulped in air and screamed.

Huntress ducked a wide punch just in time to catch a well-placed kick from another Ghost. The swinging Ghost was thrown off his feet when a red arrow planted in his chest and, grunting from the impact of the kick, Helena captured the offending leg and foot and swept her opponent off his feet.
Andy made his way to the back of the semi, slipping easily past the Ghosts who were all more interested in Speedy and Huntress.

“It’s too early, don’t unlock that truck,” Spartan barked over their radios from his post in the bunker. With Felicity in Central City and Lyla pulling extra hours with ARGUS, Diggle was pressed into Overwatch and baby Sara watch.

Huntress shot a few of her crossbow bolts into the front wheels of the rig. The tires burst and hissed with expelling air and slowly the vehicle tilted off-kilter, hopefully too disabled to drive. An arm snaked around her neck and lifted her clean off her feet, and two more Ghosts took the opportunity to lay into her like a human punching bag.

From across the lot, Speedy’s eyes narrowed at the scene. She cracked her current opponent across the temple with her bow, then fired a quick series of arrows into the Ghosts attacking Huntress. One went low, nicking across Helena’s shoulder before it planted into the Ghost holding her neck. Speedy could only grimace and shrug when Huntress’s face screwed up in pain and she shot the younger woman an accusatory look from clear across the lot.

“No time,” Andy ignored his brother. He stepped back and used his gun to shoot the lock securing the truck’s door. “There are too many Ghosts here, we can’t keep this up.”

As the double doors swung open, Andy was blown clear off his feet by a blast of high-frequency noise. Sean Sonus’s lanky, greasy figure smirked and ambled out of the vehicle. “Stay put, kiddies,” he called over his shoulder to the tightly-packed human cargo. “New gun, you like it?” Sonus raised the weapon and inspected it appreciatively. “Mother and Darhk are fantastic bosses, wouldn’t you agree, Diggle?”

The younger Diggle groaned and shook his head, rubbing a hand against his throbbing head. Speedy started working her way toward the scene and Huntress frowned, suddenly bereft of anyone to fight. The Ghosts were fading into the night, abandoning their mission one by one despite the few numbers they faced.

Sirens in the distance confirmed Andy’s insistence that they were out of time, though, and Huntress brushed off the strange retreat of the Ghosts as they must have heard that first responders were on their way.

Huntress joined her partners for the evening with her crossbows drawn. In fact, everyone had weapons drawn, but no one seemed interested in doing little more than talking crap to each other.
“Still look like a cheap knock-off of the Canary to me,” Speedy paced in a semi-circle so she and Huntress could form a 180-degree barrier around Sonus. “For the record, it’s called a shower. Try it sometime.”

Sonus tsk ed at Speedy and shook his head. “That’s an awful smart mouth you’ve got considering I can level all three of you with a trigger squeeze before you get a shot off.” The sirens were getting louder. A shuffle of movement from the darkened interior of the truck caught Helena’s eye, but she didn’t betray any reaction. “I’d love to stay and chat, but…” he trailed off and squeezed the trigger, but he had his gun trained almost squarely on Helena. She flew backward, the wall of sound hitting her straight through her core until it felt like her insides turned to jelly.

Before Speedy of Andy could react, the figure in truck materialized: a small teenaged girl cuffed and sporting a tire iron. With all of Sonus’s attention on the three vigilantes and the boom of noise, he missed her approach right up until she whacked him across the head with the heavy tool.

Speedy flew to Helena’s side, brushing her hair off her face and helping her to a sitting position. “Damn girl, you okay?”

Huntress groaned and clutched at her side. That was going to leave a mark. “Why the hell did he just shoot me?”

Speedy looked back at the truck helplessly. Andy was busy un-cuffing the dark haired girl who had knocked Sean Sonus out cold. She gave him a kick to the ribs for good measure once her hands and feet were released. Andy leaped nimbly back into the truck, followed by the girl, and in a moment, kids and teens were slowly pouring out into the night.

“Hey Spartan, what’s the ETA on the first responders?” Speedy pressed her microphone to her throat.

“You got about two minutes,” he called back over all three channels.

When the crush of kids cleared from the truck, Sonus had vanished. Huntress cursed, loudly, drawing startled looks from the already wary children.

“You guys can go, I got it,” the brunette teen tipped her chin in the general direction of the sirens. She still held the tire iron in one hand, but now had an arm looped around one of the smaller kids,
and more seemed to be gathering under her wing.

“She’s right, we gotta go,” Andy growled without really looking at any of the faces searching his for a better answer than leaving them to the authorities.

Back on her feet, Huntress made her way to her bike with Speedy behind her. She stopped and gave the girl one last questioning look. The girl nodded again at the unspoken question. Speedy hopped on the bike behind Huntress, and Andy was already revving the engine of his borrowed motorcycle.

“Hey!” the girl called over the engine noise, drawing both Helena and Thea’s attention. “Thanks!”

Despite the pain throbbing through her abdomen, her general unease with the events of the evening, and the obvious mistreatment of so many children around her, Huntress felt the corners of her mouth turning up at the girl in response.

Maybe, despite her instincts, she could call this one a win.

Constantine took a long, leisurely drag from his cigarette, thoroughly enjoying the show before him.

These mooks had no idea they were about to get the walloping of their lives. He was feeling especially chipper. Weeks of nothing, not a single break in his research, until the idea smacked him in the face. He could pat himself on the back for his own genius. This would be dangerous and tricky, but those were two of his favorite words.

They were still laughing, circling the woman like a pack of hungry dogs. Even from his vantage point on the fire escape, Constantine could see the predatory gleam in the woman’s eyes. The doofs hadn’t even noticed. It didn’t occur to them that they’re the ones who should be afraid.

He could feel the power rolling off her in waves. Anyone with even the slightest inclination toward the magical realm could pick up on these things. Preternaturally powerful people gravitated toward each other, whether they knew it or not. It’s why he and Jason had zeroed in on each other. It’s why he felt a pull toward the younger Queen sibling. It’s why he knew that Vixen knew he was there without having to see or hear or smell him.
She would ignore him though – she was still new at magic and Constantine reckoned she wouldn’t fully grasp why he made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. That was fine enough to him. He enjoyed watching a good beat down.

The mother and daughter pair who had been cornered saw their opening with the gang distracted and scrambled for the mouth of the alley. They either didn’t notice or no longer cared.

“You can still run away,” Vixen purred. When they only laughed, Vixen shrugged and frowned in mock sadness for them. “Alright, don’t say I didn’t let you run.”

They started toward her, but she beat the flat of her palm against the tribal necklace at her throat and was engulfed in a glowing blue light. It took on the form of a tiger, growling and ready to pounce. The approaching attackers stumbled backward. One had the good sense to make a run for it.

Constantine chuckled and could have cheered. This was a magical sight he didn’t see very often. She moved in concert with the apparition, swiping out at the nearest man with inhuman speed and strength. He hit the bricks of the nearest wall hard. With a feline roar, she moved on to the next sad sacks who were only now realizing the full extent of their mistake.

One by one, the Vixen-tiger combination shredded, threw or otherwise knocked out the small gang. When she stood over her handiwork, huffing for breath, two stragglers struggled to their feet and made a limping exit, abandoning their friends.

The tiger apparition faded. Without looking up, Vixen called, “I don’t like lurkers.”

John harrumphed good-naturedly and made his way back down the fire escape. He flicked the spent cigarette butt from his fingers and stuck out a hand. “John Constantine. We have a friend or two in common.”

Vixen raised her chin and cast a suspicious eye at the hand before her. She crossed her arms and widened her stance. “Do we?”

“Heh,” John snickered and retracted his hand. “I’m a friend of the Green Arrow, and you are Mari McCabe.”
She didn’t move or react, but the muscles along her back and shoulders tensed, ready to hit her totem and fly away. “He didn’t say anything to me about sending a friend.”

“You’re skeptical, that’s fair.” Constantine started a slow circle around her. She still didn’t move except to keep him in her sights. “I’m something of a magician myself, working on a little project for him. I didn’t tell him I was coming, but if you’d like to call him…”


“Actually,” he paused when he came back to stand in front of her, closer than she would have liked, “it’s about Thea. She’s got a little problem, and I think you can help her.”

Caught off guard, Mari’s face wrinkled in confusion. “What’s wrong with her that I could help? My totem pretty much does one thing.”

John’s eyes drifted to the carved necklace then back up to Mari’s face. “The Anansi Totem. Pretty hefty bit of magic there. Uses the spirit of a trickster god to channel the essence of critters right through you.”

Vixen rolled her eyes. “If you just came here to tell me about my own totem, I think we’re about done.”

“Thea’s got a big problem of the magical nature, and you have a great big magical conduit.”

“Yeah,” Vixen sighed and set her hands on her hips. “A conduit for the spirit essence of animals. I still don’t see what problem she’s having that I can help with unless she needs to get hit really hard.”

Constantine’s lips lifted at the corners in what passed for an amused smile from him. “That’s what I’m curious about. What kind of animals exactly?”

“Animal animals,” Mari shrugged, growing impatient. “I have a few favorites but if you’re asking if I’ve tried the whole animal kingdom, I haven’t.”
John raised his forefinger and shook it toward the sky. “That’s the crux of it, though, what does the Anansi Totem consider an animal? Humans are animals. Have you channeled a human?”

Mari’s eyes narrowed and she set her jaw. “You know what, I don’t even know you. I’m not having this conversation until I hear from Green Arrow himself. You try cornering me in a dark alley again, and you’re getting the gorilla.” She turned on her heel to leave.

“Wait,” Constantine called to her. “What if you could channel something that could save Thea Queen’s life? Something a bit more exotic than your run-of-the-mill jungle cat?”

Vixen stopped without turning around. “The last skinny white man who suggested I experiment more and used the word ‘exotic’ with me got a pen through his hand.”

Constantine’s bark of laugh echoed through the empty alley. “Sorry, love, poor choice of words.” He pulled an unusually large, gray feather from his trench coat and turned it over in his hands. Vixen slowly turned around and joined him at his side, drawn by the energy rolling off the feather. “I should say, have you given any thought to whether or not this totem can work on creatures that are, shall we say, out of this world?”

He let her slide the feather from his hands to examine closer. Her pupils dilated and her breathing seemed to shallow out in her chest. “What the hell?”

The tension in STAR Labs had reached a boiling point.

Jay Garrick stood over the computer bay, arms crossed, using his large frame to keep anyone else from approaching.

“We cannot unlock that door,” he ground out, again.

“Didn’t you say she could let herself out?” Felicity hissed in a rushed whisper to Cisco.
“Dr. Wells changed the settings,” he murmured without facing her.

Jason ambled out of his seat, the picture of collected calm. Beneath his surface, his heart stuttered over itself in unadulterated anger. “I don’t think anyone here asked you, Not-So-Flash.”

“She almost killed Caitlin, could have killed all of us, just while she was asleep,” Jay growled back. “Until we know for sure that Oracle’s little computer chip is under her control, we have to keep her here.”

Barbara’s mouth formed a thin line. It had been a long time since she’d been questioned this hard. “The device is a slave to Laurel. It went off because she was half-conscious and afraid.”

“That’s not entirely accurate,” Barry’s soft voice drew surprised and betrayed looks from around the room. “It’s just that, the device acted on its own when it implanted itself. What’s to say it isn’t still evolving?” He closed his mouth and shrugged plaintively at Iris’s accusing stare. “We need to monitor her to make sure this thing isn’t going to kill her. It’s in everyone’s best interest. She’s not a prisoner here. We’ll let her go as soon as we know she’s healthy and in control, just like a regular hospital.”

“This isn’t a regular hospital,” Felicity’s voice wavered. “You have those cells because you made this place into a jail for metahumans, and now you have Laurel locked up in one of those cells.”

“People check themselves into a hospital,” Iris added. “If Laurel wants to stay for more tests, then it should be her choice.”

Jay groaned reached a hand out for help from Harrison. “We have to tell them.”

Harrison was shaking his head, but Cisco’s ears already perked up. “Tell us? Tell us what? This is an Earth 2 thing, isn’t it?”

“Earth 2?” Barbara’s forehead wrinkled at that one.

“In the other universe, where Jay and Dr. Wells come from,” Barry started despite Harrison’s obvious discomfort with the subject, “we all pretty much seem to exist, but we’re not ourselves.”
“We’re mostly evil,” Cisco answered the question before it could be asked. “Like, supervillain metas evil. Not all of us, but enough.”

“It’s not all bad,” Iris interjected. “Barry and I are married and I’m a super cool detective.”

Jason shifted his attention between Harrison and Jay. “So, I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess that your Laurel Lance is up to no good?”

Jay weighed his answer heavily. Harrison already gave up on trying to stop the subject. “No, she’s not. She’s a powerful metahuman, and a very angry young woman.” Harrison snorted in disgust. “She’s one of Zoom’s top lieutenants.”

“She calls herself Black Siren and she’s one of the most dangerous metas in the world.” Harrison’s voice was cold and clipped.

Felicity shot a confused look around the room. “I’m sorry, but what does that have to do with our Laurel? As far as I can tell, no one in this room is a supervillain and I don’t think Barry and Iris are married. I mean, I could be wrong on any of those, but…”

“Because on our Earth or here, Laurel is extremely powerful. You saw only a taste of what she’s capable of.” Jay’s voice rose, but he visibly settled himself. “As far as I can tell, her life here hasn’t been that different from her life in our universe. Knowing what I know, and what Dr. Wells and I have seen firsthand, I can’t in good conscience let her walk out of here unless we can be certain she’s in control.”

Jason ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth and huffed out a humorless laugh. “Garrick, you try to forcibly keep her here, and you’re going to answer to me.”

Silence fell over the lab. Iris caught Felicity’s eyes and flickered her gaze past the group slowly forming a face-off toward the entrance to the pipeline.

Barry’s shoulders fell and he shook his head. “C’mon, guys, we’re not doing this to hurt her and you already know me. You know I’m not going to keep her prisoner. We love her, too.”

Oliver finally stood and stepped next to Jason, crossing his arms and narrowing his gaze. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but Barry, I have kicked your ass before, and I’ll do it again if you
“keep her locked in that cell.”

Roy fell in on the other side of Jason without comment. Iris took the distraction and slipped away without arousing any interest. Felicity followed a moment later.

Cisco abruptly pushed back out of his chair and ran a shaky hand through his long hair. “Screw it. I saw our evil doppelgangers and that’s not Laurel. I’m Team Jason.”

Oliver’s face scrunched up as he mouthed “Team Jason?” to no one in particular before shaking his head in defeat.

The lab descended into arguing behind Felicity’s retreating form. Iris was waiting for her in the pipeline, scrolling through a tablet looking for just the right video. They were on the same page without needing it said. When they got to Laurel’s cell, Felicity hit the door release without announcing their arrival.

As gaunt and faded as Laurel appeared, she was on her feet quickly, defensively, blocking the doorway. “What are you doing? Close the door.” Her voice was still thick and scratching.

“Yeah, no,” Felicity shook her head and Iris placed herself in the doorway before Laurel could hit the door closed from inside.

“Sorry,” Iris shrugged without an ounce of regret.

Laurel crossed her arms and set her mouth in a hard line. “I understand that you guys think you’re helping, but you didn’t see what I did.”

Iris scoffed. “Uh, actually, I did help patch Caitlin up.”

“And I was watching a live feed from the traffic cameras around the MacArthur building,” Felicity nodded in confirmation. “We’re still here.”

“I can’t,” Laurel sighed and ran a tired hand across her face.
“Actually,” Felicity argued, “You can, and there is a big group of your friends out there right now arguing that you can. Sara wouldn’t have left if she didn’t think you could walk out of this room.”

“How about you just watch this, and then let us know if you still think there’s no reason for you to come out.” Iris passed Laurel the tablet and returned to her post blocking the door.

“We pieced it together from traffic cameras, security footage, and a few cell phone uploads to YouTube,” Felicity explained before Laurel hit play.

Laurel frowned at the object in her hands. She didn’t feel ready to watch this and relive the one part of that night she blessedly didn’t remember, but Iris and Felicity’s expressions brooked no argument. Laurel put on her game face and hit the play button.

It started with Oliver tucking and rolling free of a grappling line to the street. As soon as he was on his feet, he was barking orders. Then Jason flew by the camera, which managed to capture a moment of pure relief on Oliver’s face visible even behind the mask and hood. Then he was turning and running back down the street with Roy at his side, and that hypnotizing orange woman flying ahead. As he and Roy launched grappling lines across the street, the video cut to shaky, handheld footage.

A pair of dark-clad figures came crashing out of the top of the collapsing building, identifiable only by a blur of red and wild blonde hair. Even at a distant zoom held by an unprofessional hand, Laurel could see Jason cradling her head and turning so that his body was falling first. As they fell, he shot an arm straight up and Laurel quietly felt her breath leave her body. Sara had told her about this, but seeing it was something else entirely.

The lines were too thin to see in the camera, but she could clearly see the exact moment the arrow embedded itself in his shoulder and he clamped down on the wire. And then they were swinging, no longer in a freefall, all the while Jason held onto her and kept his body turned to take the brunt of whatever impact was coming.

The video cut to CCTV footage, jarringly silent, from inside the building with Green Arrow and Arsenal. To her surprise, it was Roy’s arrow that had saved their lives. Oliver braced his former partner like a pro football player. Both men could be seen nearly screaming with the effort to stay grounded. Then they relaxed. Roy collapsed to his butt and Oliver stumbled over him, rolling to his side, visibly groaning.
More silent, black and white CCTV footage followed. It was Jason bent over Laurel in a flurry of shaking hands and incoherent activity. Strange flashing lights arced out around Laurel at random. Laurel was surprised to see that she had been conscious, clutching at her throat and kicking out her feet in pain. She didn’t remember any of this, except flashes of Jason’s panicked eyes hovering over her. Oliver and Roy appeared. Jason and Oliver argued briefly over something before Jason stuck a syringe in her arm. Once he did that, her writhing and shaking stilled.

A burst of light washed out the frame, and then the video cut to static.

“That’s about the time Waller showed up,” Felicity explained. “All the cameras in the area blacked out at the same time.”

Iris gently took the tablet back from Laurel’s hands. “Look, I can’t pretend to know what you’re feeling right now, but I can tell you that you have friends and family who love you. You need to do what you think you need to do, but don’t make that choice because you’re afraid. There are people here who will be there to catch you if you need us. You are not alone.”

The three women stood in a silent standoff, almost afraid to breathe lest the tenuous footing they were searching for cracked and shattered. Laurel let out the air in a slow whoosh out of her mouth. She nodded gamely. “Okay. Okay.”

Felicity and Iris simultaneously rushed to embrace her in a hug. At first, she tensed and tried to step back, as if physical contact might set off another sonic scream, but then the warmth of their hugs and smiles against her cheeks had her relaxing and embracing them both in return.

“You’re pretty good at the pep talk thing,” Laurel smiled as she extricated herself.

Iris shrugged again. “Yeah, well, I have a lot of practice doing the superhero pep talk thing.”

Felicity started pulling them both by the hand and leading them out of the cell and back down the pipeline. “Not to rush this or anything, but I think if we don’t get back to the lab, Jason, Oliver and Roy are gonna kill Jay, Barry and Harrison.”

“Also, I need you to try on your new outfit.” At Laurel’s confused look, Iris winced. “Your jacket kind of got cut off of you, hence the sweats. Cisco and I had some down time…I maybe took a design course last semester and Cisco and I got a little overzealous. We thought you’d like a new look and some new gear to go with your new superpower.”
“I’m still not sure this qualifies…” Laurel trailed off as they entered the lab. It hadn’t devolved into fisticuffs, which was surprising given Jason’s knee-jerk proclivity toward expressing himself physically. But the lab was a ruptured mess of voices, all shouting to be heard over each other. Caitlin sat at her desk, bent with her elbows on her knees, rubbing the bridge of her nose, the only one refusing to speak at all except to repeat “I am not doing this,” any time a question was lobbed at her.

Barbara saw her first. Laurel recognized her, but her face remained impassive. Barbara’s shoulders drooped and she muttered, “Oh, thank God.”

Iris whistled sharply and the activity and shouting petered off. They all turned to see Laurel, flanked by Felicity and Iris, each wearing an expression less impressed than the last.

“Are you guys done, or do you want me to blow the lab up again?” Laurel’s voice was deadly calm, if a little rough around the edges. No one answered or moved, except Jason, who took a step toward her looking wonderstruck. “Good.”

Caitlin nearly flew out of her chair but slid to stop just short of Laurel, realizing she was in no position to assault the other woman. “How are you feeling? Are you in any pain? Do you mind if I take some vitals?”

Laurel nodded and let Caitlin sit her down in a chair to get as much medical information as she could while the others slowly unglued themselves.

“I’m sorry,” Laurel started but Caitlin was concentrating on rubbing the thermometer across her forehead.

“It happens. We’re okay.”

“Barry set me on fire once,” Felicity offered while Barry cringed.

“That was an accident!” Barry held out his hands helplessly but all he got were amused brow raises and snickers. Laurel and Caitlin shared a private laugh and Felicity patted herself on the back for breaking the tension.
Barbara wheeled closer and stuck out a hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you face to face. Laurel, I’m so -“

Laurel took Barbara’s hand and stopped her, “It’s fine. I don’t think you could have imagined that I might end up getting this thing magically seared into my voice box. That’s what I’m guessing happened?”

Caitlin and Barbara nodded in concert.

“It’s called a Mother Box. I should have told you what it was. I’m going to give you everything I have on it.” Barbara wanted to drop her eyes and cower in shame but felt she owed Laurel something, at least eye contact, maybe the opportunity to face her shame.

Laurel sighed. “It’s in the past now.”

The proud set of Laurel’s shoulders and grim attempt at a neutral, even pleasant expression, told Barbara a lot. It wasn’t in the past, not for anyone in this room. But they all had bigger fish to fry, and they’d do better working together, instead of tearing each other apart. “In that case, I’m already working on figuring out exactly what Darhk is planning with his Mother Box. We know he’s using it as a boom tube, but not why, or how. He has to be up to something more than sending people one at a time off planet.”

“Off planet” was the gentlest way anyone could describe what had happened to Laurel’s father. Laurel fought the moisture in her eyes and blinked it back before it fell. There would be time for that later.

“We’re working together,” Felicity added. “But since she has a Mother Box of her very own, Barbara will be taking the lead on that one.”

Something clicked in Laurel’s brain, something she’d heard but hadn’t had time to process. “Damien said he wants to give the planet a fresh start. He said he has to do something with everyone who doesn’t make the cut.”

“Make the cut?” Cisco was incredulous. “Is he holding auditions?”

Barbara’s nose wrinkled. “That doesn’t make any sense. He can’t just funnel millions, or even
billions of undesirables through a single boom tube.”

“They’re adaptable.” Jason stepped forward. “He’s got magic and the world’s leading brain
washer-slash-operant conditioner.”

“All those kids,” the idea dawned on Felicity, “and their families. They’re usually brainwashed
when you guys find them right?”

Oliver’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He’d missed about ten texts and calls from Alex, but he’d
have to worry about his civilian life later. “Felicity, you, me and Diggle should tackle this from
that front. We can start looking into the families who’ve gone missing, tracking the kids we’ve
broken out. Something will shake loose.”

With a clean bill of health from Caitlin, Laurel removed the blood pressure cuff herself and made
her way to the center of the room. “Jason, you know the most about Mother and her past. Do you
think you and Roy could dig into her operations?”

“Of course,” Jason breathed, relieved and a little wary of her sudden command presence, even in
oversized, borrowed sweats.

“Alright, that leaves me, Thea and Huntress going after Darhk.” Oliver made a face but Laurel
wasn’t in the mood. “I am the only one who has actually been able to fight back against his magic.”

Oliver conceded defeat with more grace than Laurel expected. “You’re right, but when we get back
to Star City, we need to talk about Thea.”

A shadow flickered across Oliver’s face. There was more to Thea’s absence than a need to stay in
Star City or the sickness still plaguing her.

“I’ll call the jet,” Felicity announced to no one in particular but Laurel stopped her as she pulled out
her cell.

Laurel winced apologetically at her friend’s confusion. “I need a few days.” She turned to Jason.
“Do you think you could drive me? I could use another practice session with this thing,” her hand
fluttered to her throat, “and I need someone who can drop me if I need to be dropped. Especially
considering I'm apparently some kind of supervillain on Earth 2.”
It rankled at him, the idea that she still didn’t trust herself. It rankled at him that she might be right.

When he nodded his assent, Laurel took a steady assessment of her friends around the lab.

“Then let’s hit the road. We’ve got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay! Life and work and all that caught up hard, and I got hit with some writer's block on a chunk of this and just couldn't figure out how to write through it.

But I'm back!

Also, I promise some Jason/Laurel fluff...in Episode 10.

It's not all sadness and pain from here on out.
Episode 10

Chapter Summary

Still reeling from the loss of her father, Laurel buries herself in training and struggles with the new reality in Star City: the legal system she's worked so hard for may not be the good guys anymore. No one understands the importance of forgiveness more than Laurel Lance, and she turns to Jason to get back on her feet in the immediate aftermath of her run in with Darhk.

When she catches wind that one of the teens they freed from HIVE's clutches has ended up on the wrong side of the law, she leads an intervention that forces her to make a choice between her public life and vigilante mission, and her new abilities put everyone at risk.

Oliver faces down Darhk and makes a public declaration that will have consequences.

A new face joins the team, but it's not really Team Arrow anymore, is it?

Chapter Notes

A big thank you to my beta readers! Your patience and attention to detail are a huge help!

Thank you to everyone who is still reading! I know my updates are slow, but I'm still here and still working. I've started drafting my outline for Episode 11 and I think the story pace is going to really pick up from here.

Just as a reminder, you can pretty much always reach me at redcanary-renegades.tumblr.com. I love talking story, fic, comics, DCTV/DCEU stuff, but I'm still not watching Arrow so I don't always have a response to those questions, haha.

Thanks for reading!

The smell woke her. Butter and sugar and cinnamon blended together, tempting and familiar, pulling her from the embrace of a deep slumber. Her stomach rumbled at the scent and her eyes finally fluttered open.

Jason had pulled one of the light-dampening curtains aside, letting morning sunlight filter gently through the gauzy white motel room curtain. Between the soft light, the smells and the sizzle of a pan, he had managed to turn the off-highway motel room into something nice. They chose this place because it sat far away from the main roads and was largely unoccupied. The damage here would be minimal if Laurel’s cry went off beyond her control.
Laurel gingerly pushed herself up to rest against the headboard. Her eyes wrinkled in confusion at the sight of Jason busily cooking on an electric skillet in jeans and t-shirt. He hadn’t noticed her wake up.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was still jagged. They hadn’t spoken much during the first day of driving.

He flashed her a bright smile over his shoulder, still pushing cinnamon rolls around the pan. “Look at that,” he said with a wry lilt, “eight hours of driving, six hours of sleep and so far so good. Cinnamon roll?” He slid the butter-fried pastries onto a plate and threw the remaining pastries from the box into the pan with another scoop of butter.

Laurel removed herself from the bed, moving slowly. Her entire body still ached. She stood closer to inspect his work. “What are you doing?” She was investigating the makeshift cooking area with amused awe.

“Oh, I, uh,” Jason actually blushed a little, coloring up his neck, “I went out early to get breakfast. I saw the cinnamon rolls, and remembered how you like them, so I grabbed one of these, too.” He tapped the brand new spatula against the electric skillet.

“Thank you.” She spoke barely above a whisper, staring up at him in wonder. He held her gaze, his eyes searching hers. Laurel felt her breath leaving her body. She wanted to throw her arms around him, to cry, kiss him, just be held and safe for this little moment. He wanted to say something, words piling into confusion on his lips, but he stayed silent and kept his hands firmly on the cooking, even though he’d stopped pushing the rolls around the pan. The butter popped and sizzled, breaking their moment.

“It’s nothing,” he said quickly, returning his attention to the simple task at hand. “Just warmed up cinnamon rolls.”

Laurel nodded and focused on the plate he’d served, separating a generous portion for herself. She settled at the foot of the bed, crossing her feet under herself and digging into the warmed and buttered pastry with a happy hum. Jason battled the pull at his lips and kept his back turned and attention on the task at hand, mentally patting himself on the back for a job well done.

“I was thinking,” he cleared his throat, “before we stop tonight, we could find another place off the highway and have another practice session. Make sure you still have a good feel for it.”
The happy humming and chewing behind him stopped. Jason ventured a glance over his shoulder. Laurel set the remains of a cinnamon roll back on her plate, finished chewing and wiped her fingers clean on a hotel towel. She didn’t look angry, or even perturbed, just thoughtful.

“A lot of people have lied to me lately,” she began carefully, “including you. I need to know I can trust you.”

With a resigned sigh, Jason shut off the skillet and turned to give Laurel his full attention. He’d been expecting something, anything; screaming at him, railing, stony silence, a finely-worded lecture, anything. Her quiet acceptance of his presence had, frankly, unnerved him. He crossed his arms, ready to get down to business. “What can I do?”

Laurel’s eyes drifted to her hands folded in her lap, the discarded cinnamon rolls, around the room, until finally returning to Jason. “I’ve been thinking about that and…” she trailed off, worrying at her bottom lip in a way Jason found pleasantly distracting, “is Bruce Wayne Batman?”

Jason froze, blinking dumbly back at her. “I…what? How did you…?” His mouth hung open like a fish before he clamped shut again and decided to go with it. “Yes. Bruce Wayne is Batman.”

“And…he’s alive, right? Batman’s not actually dead?”

“Yeah, he’s alive,” Jason smirked and pushed away from the dresser-cum-kitchen to sit next to Laurel on the bed. “He’s just laying low. I kinda did a number on him.”

The cinnamon rolls were calling to both of them. Laurel took one, chewing while she thought of another question. Jason took another, nodding in approval of his own handiwork. “I know you have some tie to Mother, but I don’t know the details.”

*Mother. What a name.* As if she couldn’t make Jason’s skin crawl enough, she had to go around calling herself *Mother.* “It’s a long story.” Laurel only stared at him expectantly. “Mother kept one of my sisters as a pint-sized murder slave. Orphaned her, manipulated her mind. Batman was also working on taking her down when I screwed everything up for him. We got wind of everything he knew and picked up where he left off. We stopped her before she gassed every major city in the U.S. with a toxin Scarecrow cooked up for her.”

“Scarecrow?”
“Yeah, see she worked off trauma. She doesn’t just orphan her projects, she mutilates their minds. It makes kids easier to work with. No one knows how to cook up instant fear like Scarecrow.”

“But, you stopped it?” Laurel’s face knitted in concern.

Jason blew a disgruntled puff of air from his lips. “We did, but not enough. We thought she was dead. When I saw missing persons reports coming out of Star City that seemed a little too familiar, I decided to investigate in person. It’s my fault she’s here.”

A humorless laugh fell from Laurel’s lips. At his confused expression, she buttoned up. ‘I’m sorry, it’s just, for as much as you and Ollie are at each other’s throats, you both have a knack for taking the blame for basically everything. The only person who is responsible for this is a creepy human trafficker who calls herself Mother. And Damien Darhk. Bad guys, Jason. Bad guys are the ones who see these moments of weakness and use them to hurt people.”

“Yeah, well,” Jason shrugged, “that’s not gonna stop me from trying to make it right.”

Silence fell over them as Laurel pondered her next question. “I know about the stealing tires story, but where were your parents when you went to live with Batman? How does a kid end up there?”

He didn’t particularly want to talk about it. He didn’t talk about it with most people, but he gathered that Laurel needed honesty right now, even at his expense. “My dad was mixed up in the criminal element around the Narrows, which was most of the Narrows,” Jason smirked at his own joke. “We even called it Crime Alley. I was too young to understand it, but I think he owed someone money. He didn’t come home one night. Without my dad around, my mom started using pretty heavily. I took care of her best I could, but I was just a kid and all I knew were the Narrows. My idea of being the man of the house was just stealing to get by. She started going out for a few days at a time, you know, getting high and just staying wrecked with her friends. Then one day she didn’t come home either. When her dealer came looking for money, I knew she was gone for good.”

Laurel’s expression shuttered and fell away. She shifted away from Jason and struggled to find something appropriate to say - I’m sorry? I know what it’s like to watch your parents drown and abandon you? I know what it’s like to be the one drowning? Instead, she asked, “Why? You know what I am; why would you want to be around that again?”

Her reaction surprised him. How could she not know? His hand shot out to one of her crossed legs
to stop her slow retreat. “Addiction isn’t what you are, it’s something that happened to you.” He cupped her chin in his hand, gently guiding her back to look at him. “My mother didn’t survive it, but you did. You’re doing more than surviving. You help people. You’re a hero. We don’t give up on people because they screwed up.”

Laurel let out a shaky breath and let herself enjoy the warmth of Jason’s fingers stroking along her jaw and cheek. She hadn’t let anyone touch her in comfort or affection since her father had gone missing. Not since the blow-out argument in the bunker when Jason forced the truth out.

“What’s your middle name?”

Jason relaxed at the playful gleam in Laurel’s eyes. “It’s Peter.”

“Jason Peter Todd.”

“That’s right,” he breathed a sigh of relief, letting his hand drop from her chin. “C’mon, keep ’em coming. I know you have more.”

Laurel knew what question she wanted to ask, but had never openly broached the subject with him before. Blush colored her cheeks and she cast her eyes to her lap shyly. “I didn’t think it was a secret or anything, but we never talked about it and you never said anything…”

Jason’s brows rose as she trailed off. He nodded his head, urging her to continue. “You and Constantine...were...a thing?”

He snorted and laughed. “I’m not sure one evening of angry sex really counts as a thing.”

Her face screwed up in consternation, making Jason laugh even harder. “So...you’re bisexual? But it wasn’t serious with him?”

“Laurel Lance, I had no idea you were such a prude.” Jason patted her knee. “And no, you can sleep soundly. John’s not coming after you to curse you for stealing my beautiful ass away.”

Laurel’s eyes narrowed in challenge. “My sister is bi, this is not new to me-”
“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jason waved a dismissive hand. “I’m the first man you know who is openly bi, that you know of,” he added as an afterthought. “Now you know two, and we are both equally incorrigible and insatiable.”

Nodding and pursing her lips, Laurel considered what he said. It wasn’t anything she didn’t already know, but having an open conversation was another matter. “So, you definitely have a type.”

“Blondes who can kick my ass, yes.”

“Hm,” Laurel pressed her lips together thoughtfully. “If you put the moves on Oliver, it’s gonna get super weird.”

Jason scoffed. “As if Oliver could kick my ass. In his dreams, sister.”

They slipped into a companionable silence. Jason slid off the end of the bed, kneeling in front of Laurel and taking her hands in his. “I’ve got my own battle coming here, but I’m going to help you every way that I can.” They shifted closer to each other, their grips tightening together. “I’m not going to lie to you or keep you in the dark about any of it.”

“Thank you,” Laurel breathed. Her thoughts began to swim in Jason’s sincere green eyes, becoming muddled in the pleasant haze of human contact after everything she’d been through. “I need to stay focused on taking down Darhk. Once we stop him, get the city secure, I can help Sara. She’ll need me. When she realizes we can’t get Dad back—” she stopped abruptly as tears rushed unbidden to her eyes and her throat closed.

Jason’s chest constricted with a sharp pang. She was right: he wanted to blame himself. He’d helped everyone lie to her about what Quentin had been doing. She’d been furious with him, enough to stop speaking to him any more than absolutely necessary, right up until she’d asked him for a ride back to Star City. Now he was kneeling at her feet, rubbing useless circles against the backs of her hands while she fought back an onslaught of emotion.

Apologizing felt wrong. She’d only turn it around and start trying to comfort him to ease his own guilt. He did the only thing he could think of. He leaned forward, gently cupping her cheek and pressing his lips to hers. The instant they made contact, his blood sang, but he reined himself back. She stillered, not quite returning the kiss, but not pushing him away.
His heart sank and he began to pull away, but Laurel’s hand anchored on his and her lips followed his retreat. She made a small sound, something like a plea, and Jason was already off his knees and on the bed, easing Laurel back without breaking contact.

It was Laurel who broke the kiss and came up for air. Jason’s face crumpled and he searched her for anger or even a head shake to tell him she didn’t want this. She was one of the few people he couldn’t always read.

“Laurel, I’m -” his voice cracked, lost.

She ran a hand down the side of his face, tracing his jaw. “I know. I know.” Her tears had already dried and the ghost of a smile quirked on her lips. Fondness lit her eyes. “You don’t even know, do you?”

“Know wha-?”

She pulled him back down into a deep, slow kiss before he could finish the question. All the anger, the grief, the fear, even the loneliness of the past weeks poured out in waves between them. Clothing came off and hit the floor in a flurry of rough, capable hands and quick, nimble fingers.

Once fully together, Laurel let herself get lost in everything Jason offered. His warm, earthy scent surrounded her, with just the faintest trace of gun cleaning oil that always followed him. Being in his arms again, feeling his hands, hands that could inflict so much violence, caressing her so gently, she was safe and warm and finally felt good. Had it only been a matter of weeks since she’d last felt this?

So much of her life had turned to struggle and pain in the last five years, moments like this were like brief flashes of light in the darkness. His lips were blazing from her mouth, down her neck, her collarbone, her breasts and lower, lighting a flame she wanted to grow and hold onto, even if it could only burn a little while.

His voice was raspy and hoarse in her ear - he missed her, she felt so good, he didn’t want to be anywhere else. Somewhere between the raw need in his voice, the electricity of his hands and the pressure and friction building between them, Laurel’s release rolled over her suddenly in crashing bursts that cleared all coherent thought from her brain.

She let the explosions roll through her until they gently faded, and only waited a breath before
crashing her lips against his, rocking her hips against him and starting again. Jason watched her, unsure, for a beat before giving into the sensations that threatened to drown him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew they were both putting off something inevitable, but for right now, as long as she felt good, then he felt good.

After a few hours, Jason came up for air long enough to call the front desk to extend their reservation another night.

Thea shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it haphazardly into her locker in the bunker. She stripped her flechettes and hidden knives from everywhere but the blades in her boots and stored them with more care next to her other weapons. Andy was busy on the other side of the bunker in a similar routine. He was taking an awfully long time to change over for someone who wore basic black utilities on missions.

“Don’t do that again,” his voice was cold and just inches from her back. She didn’t move, except for a slight tensing in her shoulders to betray her surprise.

She licked her lips and closed her locker door with a slow click. Thea slowly turned and crossed her arms, glaring at Andy through narrowed dark eyes. “Do what?”

Andy snorted, but there was no real humor in him. “You know what I mean. You clipped Helena. If you want to start taking them out, then take them out. This half-assed shit -”

“Is confusing them and slowing them down,” Thea interrupted. “It’s just confirming that I’m sick and off my game.”

“Yeah, well,” Andy mimicked Thea’s crossed arms, “your job isn’t to confuse the team. You’re here to help get the subjects distributed. Period. I’ll worry about slowing down Team Arrow,” the words dripped off his lips with disgust.

They stood, facing off in silence before Thea sighed. “Fine. Are we done? I’d like to get a workout in.”
It was hours after he left and Thea was still in the bunker, running through her katana forms again and again and again. Even with the blood on her hands, she had more energy than she knew what to do with. She barely slept anymore. She certainly wasn’t looking in the mirror. The thin, pale face with dark circles was not a woman she recognized. Her actions certainly weren’t things she’d ever imagined she’d be doing, even when she left Star City with Malcolm.

Her time on Corto Maltese seemed like a lifetime away. It was a time before masks and vigilantes and twisted loyalties, like a distant dream of someone else’s life.

Sweat dripped down her neck, soaking her choppy hair. Even her hands were damp around the weapon, but her pulse still thumped for that elusive more that had been singing to her since she came out of the Lazarus Pit.

“Ahem.” The low cough took her by surprise. Thea whirled around with her katana raised, searching for the intruder. Her heart stuttered when her eyes met Roy’s shy smile. She let the weapon clatter to the floor and rushed into his open arms.

“You’re here,” she breathed into his neck, inhaling his familiar scent. One of her hands found the back of his head, tangling into his now-shaggy hair.

He chuckled and rubbed his hands up and down her back. “I saw you flying on TV and thought I’d come get in on that action.” Roy pulled back just far enough to brush a sweaty lock of hair away from her face and cup her cheek. He squeezed her hip playfully, smirking, “You’re so small.”

Thea’s face scrunched up, still too shocked by his return to fully comprehend his strange comment. “Yeah, well, I think I’m past the growth spurt age, Harper. You saw me flying on TV? How did you even find this place?”

“Yeah, the thing at Iron Heights.” Roy took her by the hand and led her to one of the locker benches so they could sit and talk. “I sort of noticed when a cute brunette was flying through the air in a tornado while wearing my jacket. I told you it’d look good on you.”

Thea cupped his hand in hers and smiled at the memory of Vixen flying to catch her when they faced off against Mark Mardon. “Ok, but you didn’t answer my other question. How did you know about the bunker? Have you been in town long? Did Oliver just not tell me?”

Roy’s smile fell and he had the common sense to look appropriately abashed. “Eh, yeah, about
that. I got to town right around the time Laurel was demolishing a building, and then flew right to Central City. I came here as soon as I could.”

She took the answer in stride, more reasonably than she might have just a year ago. They stared at each other, wearing matching, dreamy expressions. Thea sighed, closed her eyes and leaned into him until their foreheads pressed together. “I’ve missed you.” She felt him nod against her. “So much has happened…”

“I know,” Roy said quickly and quietly. “Me too.”

The tears were unexpected. Thea’s throat choked and moisture clouded her eyes. She wanted to tell him everything, but didn’t know where to start, and, more importantly, where she needed to stop. His arms were so familiar and warm and safe. The fight eating at her soul might not be so bad with Roy around, but when she remembered her mission, his sudden arrival felt like a cruel trick. It was something she could taste but not keep.

“Let’s get out of here,” Roy was saying.

She would worry about not keeping him later. At least for tonight, she didn’t have to be a double agent or some kind of monster that needs to kill to survive.

The photos she’d taken on her phone of Andy’s gear and stray bits of paper that might add up to intel could wait. The information she’d need to pass along to Malcolm could wait.

“We can go to my place,” Thea murmured.

Tonight, she’d just let herself have this one thing.

Laurel checked her briefcase, then checked the mirror one more time. A scarf wasn’t the most original covering she could come up with, but at least it was seasonably cool and no one would question it. She didn’t know how she would explain to her civilian coworkers the small stitching at her neck, or the now-healing burns that wrapped around her throat where Damien’s hand had been.
Her cell phone had a series of messages from the DA’s office. First, they wanted to know where she was. Then Ronny, the new front desk clerk, had called to check on her after someone - probably Diggle - told them she’d been injured in the MacArthur building collapse. It wasn’t really a lie. Finally, Ronny called to tell her she’d been put on administrative leave until further notice. She’d have to come in to square away her open cases and fill out the leave paperwork with her supervisor.

The device was suspiciously devoid of any messages, even a text, from Thea. Her bed was made and the apartment had accumulated a fine layer of dust. If Laurel had any doubt that Thea hadn’t been home in days, the rotting leftovers in the fridge confirmed her absence. Thea never left Chinese to go bad.

Oliver insisted he would get Laurel up to speed on whatever had been going on with Thea, but they hadn’t spoken yet. Laurel pressed send on a third text message to Thea since arriving late the night before, then slipped the phone into her purse.

When she stepped into the hallway, she came up short at the three smiling faces waiting for her.

Diggle wrapped her in a hug and squeezed. It was only in their tight embrace that Laurel felt the faintest tremor in his skin. “You had us pretty worried, Laur.”

Laurel rubbed his back and gently removed herself, only to be met with a slightly less overwhelming hug from Lyla. Baby Sara grinned and cooed from her stroller. “It’s good to see you guys, too,” Laurel spoke with genuine happiness. She was still smiling, but shifted a look between the two adults. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s seven in the morning. What are you doing here?”

Lyla pursed her lips at her husband and replied, “Well, I needed to have a chat with you before you went into work, and John has been champing at the bit to see you ever since the accident. We decided to make it a family outing.”

The smile slowly fell from Laurel’s face. “What did you need to see me about?”

Lyla pushed the stroller and Diggle took a quiet lead in front of them. “Let’s walk and talk. There’s a good coffee cart down the road.”
Ten minutes and three hot lattes later, Lyla pulled a device out of her purse that Laurel might have mistaken for a cell phone if she didn’t know better. Lyla showed the screen to Diggle and he grunted his assent. No one was listening to them and no one had followed them.

“Alright, we only have a few minutes before they notice I’ve gone off grid,” Lyla got right down to brass tacks. “ARGUS isn’t really interested in stopping Darhk, but they are interested in that alien computer he has, so they’re looking into any connections to him they can exploit.” Lyla stopped to look Laurel and Diggle in the eye. “The DA’s office, the police department and multiple departments in the city government have been compromised by HIVE agents.”

Diggle and Laurel exchanged a dark look. Laurel swallowed and nodded gamely. “That makes sense, given what happened to my father.”

“And the visit Darhk paid to Oliver a few weeks ago,” Diggle added. “He bragged about having the city council in his pocket.”

“Alright,” Laurel took another sip of her latte, “I’ll see if I can sniff anything out today. I’m supposed to be on leave, but I’m sure they’ll want me back full time sooner rather than later.”

Lyla’s frowned in a way that only a concerned mother could. “Laurel, you have to assume they knew about your father, and maybe even you. It may not be safe for you back there, especially if they catch on that you’re looking for them.”

Laurel breathed a laugh. “I signed up for danger when I started defending people with CNRI. And then I signed up for more when I started wearing my sister’s jacket. This isn’t anything new.”

“But not alone,” Diggle added in a firm voice. “The election is only a few weeks away. Oliver needs to make the rounds with the different department heads. And we do have our helpful ARGUS insider,” he slid his free arm around Lyla’s shoulders, “to give Laurel a heads-up if ARGUS catches wind that things are going wrong.”

“Well then,” Laurel raised her cup with a small smile, “I guess I’ll get to work. Thanks for the tip.”

“Stay frosty, Laur,” Diggle called after her. He and Lyla exchanged a long look before turning in the opposite direction.
They all sensed the cold foreboding of being in the eye of a storm, just waiting for the next wave.

Laurel mentally rehearsed her answers one more time, then grimaced and reconsidered. What if no one at the department had realized Captain Lance was gone? What if he’d taken leave? What if they thought her not reporting his absence, then her own sudden absence from the city, was suspicious?

She hadn’t felt this flustered about an interview since her first days out of law school. There was no doubt in her mind that it was the subject matter that had her feeling so unsure. A few clerks and other staff members gave her curious looks as she made her way to her office, but no one even so much as said “hello,” let alone asked about her leave and missing father. The low chatter and general office noise continued as usual. Nothing had changed for anyone in her office, but she could feel them watching her, waiting for something.

A quiet intern whose name escaped Laurel at the moment popped his head around Laurel’s door before she had finished setting her briefcase down. “Ms. Lance, the DA asked that you come see her as soon as you came in.”

Her stomach tightened into knots. “Of course.” She forced a thin smile and nod, and the intern disappeared. Laurel hung her heavy coat on the rack, straightened her blazer and checked her appearance in the small mirror she kept in her desk. The silk scarf at her throat might seem like a little much indoors, but hopefully no one would question her fashion choices. Laurel could barely keep her story straight about her father; she didn’t know where to begin explaining that the only visible injury she’d sustained in the building collapse was a thin surgical scar at the base of her throat.

Susanna, the city’s District Attorney, looked up when Laurel tapped on her door. “Good, you’re here. Come in.” Susanna gestured to one of the empty chairs across from her desk and Laurel slid into the seat, her posture stiff. Susanna’s expression betrayed nothing - she was a trial lawyer to the core. “First of all, welcome back. We were all worried when Ms. Smoak informed us that you’d been injured in the MacArthur building disaster. How are you feeling?”

Laurel blinked. Of all the questions she’d prepped herself for, that wasn’t one of them. “I’m fine,” her voice cracked. “I’m doing better. Just a few bumps and scrapes.”
“Good,” Susanna’s voice was warm and genuine, but there was more. “I know it’s a lot, but after this, I’m going to need you to head over to the precinct to talk to Detective Warner about your father. I understand he’s been absent from work and no one’s been able to reach him?”

“He missed a dinner date with me right before the disaster,” Laurel spoke softly. At least she didn’t have to lie about this part.

Susanna’s eyes were sympathetic but grim. “I’m sure they’ll turn something up.” They wouldn’t. “As for our business here,” Susanna trailed off and folded her hands on her neatly organized desk, “I’ve decided to put you on a leave of absence.” Laurel opened her mouth to argue but closed it with a single look from her boss. “Your performance has been outstanding when you’ve actually been here. I understand that your family has had difficulties, and you in particular have had some close calls.”

Laurel slowly leaned back against her chair, deflating. She struggled to find something to say, some counterpoint, but there wasn’t one.

A soft hand reached out and took one of Laurel’s. “Listen, I think you can do a lot of good for this city, but not when you’re being pulled in fifty different directions. I need you healthy and focused. Take this time to rest, help the precinct find your father and get him back on his feet. This whole city is on the brink right now. We’re going to need our best and brightest.”

Best and brightest, right. Laurel nodded and stood, then turned back to Susanna before she walked out of the office. “Susanna, you, um, you’ve been sitting on the city council right? With my father?”

The older woman’s expression shuttered and she made herself busy with some documents. “Yes, but I haven’t seen him since our last meeting two weeks ago.”

Laurel watched her, then decided to test the water a little more. “Has anything else happened with the council? Like maybe other council members going missing?” *Like the two who were tied up next to my dad?*

The crack in Susanna’s composure was minute, but Laurel caught it. Susanna knew damn well her father’s disappearance had to do with Damien Darhk. She knew Damien Darhk.
“Not to my knowledge.” The answer was clipped. “I’m sure if there’s a connection, SCPD will find it.”

“Right,” Laurel nodded. The air between them went crisp. “Is there anything else…?”

“No,” Susanna spoke quickly. “Your active cases have already been reassigned. HR will call you within the next week to finalize the paperwork. Take care of yourself, Ms. Lance.”

The trip to the police station took longer than she remembered it ever taking. It felt strange knowing she wasn’t going to be working again. The last time this happened, she'd railed against it. She felt the failure in every fiber of her being. But right now she only felt relief. She could concentrate on helping the city as the Black Canary, and the way things were going, that might actually be better. The city leaders were compromised and from what Lyla had told her just a few hours ago, HIVE and Darhk had poisoned the whole well.

She steeled herself for whatever she was about to face in the station. If it was Laurel and the tables were turned, she’d try to find out what her enemy knew. As far as anyone working for HIVE was concerned, Laurel Lance was their enemy in more ways than one.

Laurel sat in her parked car, gripping her steering wheel and staring at nothing in particular. The litany of canned answers blurred into a mishmash of nonsense repeating over and over again: *I don’t know, he missed our dinner, he hasn’t been returning my calls.* The lies clashed with the visceral memories of his last moments. His eyes had locked onto her’s just moments before he disappeared. *No, he died,* she corrected herself. She took a deep breath against the wave of nausea and dizziness that washed over her.

*I don’t know, he missed our dinner, he hasn’t been returning my calls.* She repeated it all like a mantra as she made her way from the drizzling parking lot into the station, past the bustling desks and to the office the desk sergeant had indicated belonged to Detective Warner. The name placard read “Anti-Vigilante Task Force.” That didn’t bode well.

“Detective Warner?” She cautiously peeked into the office. Liza Warner lifted her dark eyes just long enough to grunt an acknowledgment and wave Laurel in.

Detective Warner couldn’t have been more different from Susanna, except they were both intensely interested in getting their respective jobs done. Liza pulled the case file Laurel assumed to be her father’s out from a deep drawer and opened it, perusing it quickly while Laurel settled across from her.
“When was the last time you heard from Captain Lance?” The detective didn’t look up from the file when she asked the question.

Laurel arched a brow. “You’re not going to record this in any way?”

Liza paused and shifted her gaze up to Laurel, then leaned back in her seat and crossed an ankle over her knee. “Do I need to record this, Ms. Lance?”

Laurel took the challenge. “I hope not, but of course my primary concern is doing whatever I can to help you find my father.”

“Right,” a humorless smile pulled at Liza’s full lips, “and do you have any particular reason to believe this needs to be investigated by our department?”

“You mean besides the fact that he was a captain in this department and hasn’t been seen or heard from in over a week?”

“Was?” Liza tilted her head. She let the question hang, unspoken.

Laurel swallowed and clenched her jaw. That was a rookie mistake. “You worked with him. I think you and I both know he’s had his demons. I checked his usual haunts, but no one has seen him.”

The detective reached across her desk and sifted through another case file. “I know you both had your demons, Lance. I’ve done my homework.”

She wouldn’t show it, but hearing a complete stranger casually inform her that she had studied on her and her father, and knew the most shameful parts of her history, stuck hard in her chest.

“Then you know,” Laurel gritted her teeth and pushed past the hurt, “that he’s most likely fallen off the wagon again, and we need to find him.”

Every word was like a shard of glass in her skin. Sitting across from this smug detective and
slander her own father, knowing he had died because he made a series of mistakes, but not because he had fallen off the wagon, ate at her.

“Are you so sure he fell off the wagon?” Liza fished a photo out of the file and pushed it across her desk. “I’m thinking he got mixed up with the vigilantes, as he has before, and one of them is responsible for his disappearance.”

The photo made Laurel’s stomach flip, but she fought hard to keep her face cool. In the age of cell phones, it wasn’t uncommon for people to get images and video of them when they hit the streets. This was a fairly clear photo of the Black Canary. Laurel picked up the photo, inspecting it with a thoughtful frown.

She set the photo back on the desk and sighed. “My father supported the vigilantes as much as anyone else in this town has, Detective.”

“Some of us more than others,” Warner countered. “Aren’t you curious as to why the captain of the Anti-Vigilante Task Force is the one looking into your father’s disappearance?”

“I would have assumed that SCPD put their best on looking for one of their own,” Laurel sniped back. The hostility bubbling under the surface in the cramped, harshly-lit office was a pleasant distraction that had Laurel back on her game. “But if you’re insinuating that my father or I were involved with the vigilantes and that has somehow lead to his disappearance, I might need to speak to the acting captain.”

Liza arched a sardonic brow and sucked her teeth. She was on her feet in a smooth motion, her hands braced on the desk, staring Laurel down. “You can play whatever games you want, Lance, but I know.” Her voice dropped dangerously low. “I know what your father was into and I am going to do everything in my power to get my people out of this mess in one piece. There’s nothing left in this town to clean up, so you and your little masked buddies can either help or get the hell out of the way.”

“Then I guess we’re done here,” Laurel replied, pushing back and out of her chair. She didn’t give the detective a second look as she left the office.

Making her way through the chaos of the station, Laurel slowed her pace. There was something distinctly off. It was louder than usual. She had to dodge around more people. Phones were ringing incessantly. Voices were shouting over each other. Prisoners, witnesses and citizens were all intermingled at various desks. The place was packed like a full moon on Halloween.
No one paid her any extra attention, either because as an assistant DA she usually had official business there, or because the station was a madhouse. Laurel took a meandering, looping route back toward the front desk. Slowing to listen to interviews in progress, waiting for something that she didn’t know until she heard it. And then she did hear it.

“I told you! I don’t know who those guys were. I wasn’t working with the Ghosts!” A teenage voice was growing shrill from exhaustion and fear. Laurel made herself busy at a coffee table with her back to the desk where a sergeant was interviewing a petite brunette. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed that the tiny girl was in full manacles - hands and feet chained. A bit excessive for a kid.

“Listen, Sharp,” the sergeant drolled on, unimpressed with her distress, “When the officers arrived at the scene, you were clearly in charge of more than two dozen minors who all reported that they’d been taken by the Ghosts over the past three months. And then you tell us that the Ghosts just let you go and took off into the night, and you can’t remember anything distinctive about where you were kept. You cook up this cock-and-bull story about these guys snatching up your whole family overnight, but you don’t know anything useful. I want to help you out, I do, but you’re not doing yourself any favors.”

“I’m telling the truth,” the girl spat. Her dark eyes were glassy but burned with rage. “Have you even looked for my family?”

“Sergeant,” Laurel barked in the voice she’d learned at a young age from her father, eliciting an immediate snap-to from the officer, “are you interviewing a minor without a guardian or legal representative present?”

The fleshy man paled a little but recovered himself. “No, ma’am, this one is 18 and properly Miranda’ed.”

“And what exactly is she being accused of?” Laurel crossed her arms and scowled down at the man.

“Aiding and abetting human tra-”

“That’s enough, Sergeant,” Warner’s voice cut in. “ADA Lance is on a leave of absence.” Warner stood over the officer’s shoulder, scowling right back at Laurel. “She has no business here. Sergeant, take the prisoner back to holding and interview her again when one of the interrogation
rooms is available."

“Yes, ma’am,” the sergeant heaved himself up and guided the young woman away.

Laurel stayed by the desk, eyeballing the open case file the officer had carelessly left out, but Liza Warner stayed where she was, her face hard. “Am I going to have to escort you out of here?”

Laurel didn’t respond, she simply walked away. In her mind, she repeated the name again and again.

Evelyn Crawford Sharp.

Felicity, Helena and Laurel stood in a circle on the main platform in the bunker.

“You guys are sure about...all this?” Felicity winced and gestured vaguely from the computers to Laurel’s new Black Canary suit.

Up on the main computer monitors were photos and background data on Evelyn Crawford Sharp.
18. Competitive gymnast on her way to the national team. Homeschooled. Salesman father, stay-at-home mother, oldest of two. All immediate family members all reported missing.

“That’s the one,” Helena nodded confidently. “She was the girl who helped with the other kids Andy and I set free. She’s definitely not working for HIVE.”

“The police have it wrong,” Laurel agreed.

“Or if they have it right, we’re better equipped to follow her back to HIVE. Or the police just want to keep her in jail because they’re in league with HIVE and Darhk wants to exact his own vengeance on this girl. Or-”
“We get the idea,” Helena cut Felicity’s train of thought off. “Whatever the reason, we’re all better off with her close to us.”

“Right,” Felicity assented. She turned back to the computers to pull up schematics on the police station. “Green Arrow and Spartan are going in with you to recon anything they can get on the officers ARGUS has identified and get me a direct line into the PD’s server. You two,” she paused to point at Laurel and Helena, “are going straight for the holding cells, grabbing our unsuspecting new friend, and getting out. I can get a window of about two minutes before the officers on duty respond to the distress call from the station.”

Laurel nodded, then tugged at the high collar of her new suit. It wasn’t uncomfortable, just unfamiliar. “Simple enough.”

“So we should only plan for three or four disasters?” Helena arched a brow and smirked. “You sure about this?”

Laurel nodded again. No mask. Cisco and Iris had fabricated one, but since leaving Central City, she kept thinking about the need for it. After her day today, the esoteric feeling solidified. She wasn’t going to wear the mask.

She had told Sara after being reborn that she no longer needed to hide behind a mask. Laurel had worked so hard to help people through the law, and when that fell short, she took up a mask of her own. Now she was reborn herself - and she did feel reborn. It was a feeling she hadn’t been able to shake - and everything she’d worked for in Star City was adding up to nothing. People working the shadows made it impossible for her to make a real difference in the city as a lawyer.

It felt like the time for her to stop hiding behind a mask, too.

The new costume was everything Cisco and Iris had promised and more. The material was more breathable and flexible than leather, and Cisco had assured her it was flame retardant, and woven to work like chain mail against projectiles and blades. The weaving pattern was more visible on her legs and arms, giving the faintest appearance of blue fishnet. The bodice from her bottom up to her neck had lightweight but impact-absorbing armor at all the important places, and even featured a harness subtly sewn into the material for grappling and special hooks and pockets for her weapons.

“Look at you,” Diggle’s voice broke into Laurel’s thoughts. “New outfit?”
Diggle and Oliver strode into the bunker and set to changing over.

“Yeah, a little gift from our friends at STAR Labs.”

Diggle poked his head around his locker to purse his lips and nod his approval. Oliver reappeared almost as quickly as he’d disappeared in his Green Arrow trousers and undershirt.

“No mask?”

Laurel studied his face. She expected to find the disapproval and judgment that had become so natural for him whenever he looked at her over the past four years, but she saw only curiosity laced with concern.

“Decided it was time for a change,” she breathed and turned her attention back to the plans Felicity had pulled up.

“It looks good,” Oliver spoke softly behind her. She startled a bit; she hadn’t heard him approach. “The blue and gold, it looks good. So, we’re all clear on the mission?” He cleared his throat and raised his voice to be heard by everyone.

Laurel felt herself blushing. She had been happier than she expected to be when she saw the outfit that replaced her old leathers. The black bodice was detailed with gold overlaid on the armor pieces in her shoulders, along her core and across her chest. She wouldn’t have thought the dark blue woven material at her arms and legs to go so well with the black and gold bodice, forearm guards and boots, but it all blended together. Iris certainly had an eye for design, if she ever gave up on journalism.

“Got everything?” Oliver was looking at her with question all over his face.

Laurel blinked twice then realized she’d zoned out again while he had been repeating the plan. “Yes, good.”

The corners of his eyes narrowed just enough that Laurel knew he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t argue or press the issue. He didn’t say anything until Helena and Diggle went to their respective vehicles and he and Laurel were out the door. As soon as the door clicked shut, he checked to ensure that his throat mic was off, then gently stopped Laurel with a hand on her elbow. “No mask,
“Are you sure about this?”

Her first instinct was to go on the defensive, but one look at Oliver, even behind the Green Arrow mask, and she knew he wasn’t attacking her. “I know, I just... putting the mask on doesn’t feel right anymore. I know what I’m giving up and I know it doesn’t make sense, but…”

“Go with your gut,” Oliver finished for her.

The air rushed out of Laurel’s lungs and she felt like she was seeing Oliver for the first time in years, or maybe that he was seeing her. “Thank you,” was all she managed to get out.

“You have good instincts, Laurel,” he added, giving her elbow a squeeze before he let his arm fall back to his side. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Laurel watched him go, letting herself revel in the strange warmth of having Oliver’s friendship back, or maybe for the first time ever. One droll comment about Laurel taking her time from Helena over her radio and Laurel shoved the feelings back down and jogging to her motorcycle. Work now, over think things later.

Evelyn pulled her knees up to her chest on the cold bench. The minors she’d been with had already been hustled off by protective services. She had been left at the station, now alone in a jail cell.

At least she was alone in her cell. It was eerie, but the entire holding facility was empty except for her. A few prisoners had come in, been held for a few hours in adjacent cells, then removed by an officer.

Her only respite had come with the repeated interrogations. She rolled her eyes and snarled at the memory of the questions.

They intended to charge her if she didn’t cough up more information, information she didn’t even have. No wonder wackos kept trying to destroy this city. It was full of morons.
Evelyn narrowed her honey-colored eyes at the officer on duty. His thin shoulders were slumped forward and the glow of his computer gave his pale skin a sickly pallor. He hadn’t acknowledged her except with a superior harrumph before he sat himself in the duty desk and hadn’t moved since. Someone always brought him coffee and all he had to do was turn a key on the switchboard to let people in and out of the holding area.

“Hey!” she barked. The guard flinched, but didn’t look up. “Hey, bacon-breath! Don’t I get a phone call?”

The officer sighed and deigned to lift his sleepy eyes to Evelyn. “Who would you even call? Didn’t your parents ditch you?”

Evelyn snarled again and leapt from her bench, slamming her hands against the bars with a frustrated cry. The guard just laughed and returned his attention to his computer. Her hands and wrists ached from the impact against the cold metal and tears stung her eyes, but the anger was too much to ignore. Her fingers wrapped around the bars and pulled uselessly until her whole body shook. She shoved away from the bars and paced first one direction, then in another, all with the same result: she was still furious. And scared.

And then the fluorescent lights flickered out.

“Okay, what the hell?” The officer groaned. Evelyn thought she heard the scraping of his chair legs against the concrete floor. A few beeps rang through the darkness. “Front desk, this is Jim-bo, where’s the generator?” Only static replied. “Front desk?” More static.

“Jim-bo” grumbled and adjusted his belt, at least that’s what the jangling and thumping sounded like.

“Stay put,” he called through the darkness. Even though he couldn’t possibly see her reaction, Evelyn still rolled her eyes.

Jimbo didn’t get very far.

A high-pitched boom reverberated through the building. The door to the holding area flew open with a bang. A shadowed figure came through the darkness and smoke before the officer could react, punching him first in the gut, then in the head. Just that easily, he slumped to the ground with a defeated grunt. The figure fished his keys off his belt, then made its way through the inner iron-
barred gate.

Evelyn’s eyes adjusted just enough to the blackness to make out the dark-clad form of Huntress smirking at her.

“You know, kid, when you said you had things under control, getting arrested is not actually you having control.”

Evelyn rushed to the bars, grinning madly. “It’s you!”

Huntress turned her attention to the switchboard and scowled. “Hey Overwatch, I’ve only ever been on the receiving end of this place. Can you give me a hand?”

Evelyn didn’t hear the response, but the gate to her cell opened with a thunk. She rushed forward but Huntress stopped her with a steadying hand. She tapped her ear radio and frowned again. Another high-pitched boom cracked through the building and then Huntress turned back to Evelyn, “Stay low and stay behind me.”

Her blood thrummed. From the darkness and smoke, gunshots, thuds and shouts rang out through the station. Huntress kept the younger woman shielded, but in her excitement, all Evelyn wanted to do was rush headlong into the melee.

They made a crouched dash across an open hallway, Huntress firing crossbow bolts as they went, and slid behind a heavy metal desk for cover. A blonde in a black and blue costume Evelyn didn’t recognize dove and rolled to join them. Evelyn could just make out the one called Spartan on the other side of the room covering an open closet door and firing into the line of barricaded police officers.

“GA needs about 90 more seconds in the server room,” the blonde shouted over the noise. She poked her head over their place of cover just enough to get a fresh gauge of their situation. As Huntress fired a few more bolts, the blonde twisted to a low squat, braced her hands and then popped up, unleashing a sonic scream unlike anything Evelyn had ever heard. Any glass that wasn’t already broken exploded around the room. The fire coming from the officers immediately stopped as they dove to cover their ears, or were simply knocked off their feet.

“Holy shit, you’re the Black Canary!” Evelyn gazed up at her in awe. Laurel looked down at her and couldn’t help the tug at her lips in her response. The smile fell away as the officers recovered
“Hit the meta!” rang out across the station moments before a B.O.O.T. collar shot from one of the barricaded officers narrowly missed Black Canary. She ducked back down and shared a dark look with Huntress.

A scuffle of footsteps and scraping furniture told them that the officers were moving from their positions, closing in on the last ground the three women held. Whatever Black Canary and Huntress exchanged in a single look evaded Evelyn, but a moment later both women were spinning from their hiding spaces. Huntress holstered her crossbows in favor of the bo staff, while Black Canary pulled a pair of telescoping tonfas from their hooks on her belt, diving into close quarters combat.

Less than a dozen officers had been in the building when the assault started, but they still outnumbered the vigilantes, even with a few of their numbers already unconscious. Huntress barked another order for Evelyn to stay put as she spun and knocked first one officer, and then another, back away from their position.

Black Canary faced three officers. She hauled her leg back and kicked the officer rushing her from behind, then cracked the next closest officer with the arm of her tonfa. She stepped past the man as he fell and blocked the downward stroke of the next officer’s baton with her other tonfa braced against her forearm.

As they locked together, Laurel caught the furious glare of Liza Warner staring back at her. “I knew it,” Warner growled and shoved Laurel backward. “I knew you were hiding something when –”

“Do I look like I’m hiding?” Black Canary cut her off and lunged forward, punching into Liza’s core with the short end of her tonfa, then following with another tonfa-braced forearm strike that caught Liza high on her bicep. Liza took the hit to step out of Black Canary’s reach, just long and far enough to pull her taser and fire it. The prongs sunk into Laurel’s suit, but no deeper.

Laurel could feel a faint tingling, but the suit absorbed the shock. She grinned menacingly at Liza, whose face was wrinkling in confusion and fear. “Thank you, Team Flash,” Black Canary quipped to no one in particular. She ripped the prongs out of her suit and took a step forward, but was knocked clean off her feet before she got closer to Warner.

Huntress shouted a curse, but was too engaged fighting other officers to rush to Black Canary’s side. Evelyn slid from her hiding place to where Laurel lay prone, clawing at the B.O.O.T. collar.
that had locked squarely around her throat and now had her tethered to the floor. Evelyn’s small hands joined Laurel’s, pulling uselessly at the solid device. Evelyn became more frantic as Black Canary began making choking noises and a ringing started buzzing in her ears.

“Get back!” Detective Warner barked at Evelyn, gun drawn on Evelyn. She raised her hands and pushed away from the Canary, still unwilling to abandon the hero who had come to her aid. “Get back!” Warner snapped again, using the gun for more emphasis.

“You first,” a deep voice growled from behind Evelyn. A pair of large, heavy legs stepped around the Black Canary and Evelyn looked up to see Spartan taking his position on the other side of Black Canary. In her periphery stood a figure who could only have been the Green Arrow. Both men had their respective weapons drawn on Warner and the remaining officers still standing. The cops that had been engaged with Huntress had backed off, bringing the bulk of the fighting to a standoff.

The ringing noise was getting louder and Black Canary was still choking and gasping as the collar kept her grounded and continuously sent volts of electricity through the exposed skin above the collar of her suit.

Green Arrow’s eyes flickered from the Canary back to Warner and the other officers. “Get that thing off her!”

They answered him with clicks of pistol hammers and shifting their positions, getting ready to re-start the fight.

The noise was getting louder, enough to start to hurt. The vigilantes were sharing panicked looks and Green Arrow even lowered his bow. “She can’t help it, she is going to bring the building down. Get that damn thing off her!”

Warner only raised her weapon again, adjusting her grip to be more secure. She was wincing, though, and her eyes flickered and snapped away from the vigilantes at her feet. The noise was getting unbearable.

“Earmuffs earmuffs earmuffs!” Felicity shouted over all channels. Green Arrow’s breath hitched and he fished the special ear plugs from one of his pockets. How long had Overwatch been talking and he hadn’t even heard her? The vigilantes had at least moderate protection against the sound, but the officers and the teenager were out of luck.
He touched a hand to the collar around Laurel’s throat, then pulled away with a sharp hiss. The damn thing was scalding. Laurel couldn’t speak, but Oliver knew her better than he knew himself. Her eyes were screaming at him to run. Her sonic scream had exploded at least once before at STAR Labs. They thought she was dangerous enough to keep her on lockdown.

“Spartan, Huntress,” Green Arrow barked over his throat mic, gathering his thoughts, “get everyone out of here. Overwatch, do what you can to evacuate the buildings next door.”

“Already on it,” Overwatch replied. Her measured voice and Spartan and Huntress’s instant move to action let Oliver focus his attention on freeing Laurel before her newly-acquired meta power went rogue.

The officers exchanged questioning looks before they surrendered to the impulse to flee the growing high-pitched noise. They began holstering their weapons and following the vigilantes’ lead out the nearest exit. Huntress rushed back to collect Evelyn, who followed after a brief exchange of backtalk.

It was left to just the three in the police station.

“Release it,” Green Arrow growled up at Warner. She shook her head. “She can’t control it, she’ll bring the building down on all of us!”

Liza’s eyes flashed cold and hard. With her pistol still trained on Green Arrow, she began taking slow steps backward. “Good. You’re the reason all this shit is happening.”

Maybe it had been the adrenaline of the fight, or the sudden claustrophobia of being thrown and clamped to the floor by a solid metal collar around her neck. The mind-numbing electricity the collar shot through Laurel’s throat definitely didn’t help, but at least that had stopped. Laurel was afraid. She felt the same helpless, crushing panic as she’d watched her father disappear into the void.

Like a seizure, the implant in her throat had whirred to life on its own accord the moment the B.O.O.T. collar made contact. She could feel the energy growing stronger and stronger, keeping pace with her mounting terror. This was it. This was the out-of-control destruction that Jay Garrick and Dr. Wells were so afraid of.

A strong hand pushed hers away from the collar and she was reminded that she wasn’t alone.
Oliver was shouting something over her that Laurel couldn’t quite make out. Whether the noise was louder to her because she was making it or she was just that loud, she couldn’t say. Laurel caught a glimpse of Liza holstering her pistol and hightailing it out of the station, then jerked with a start when Oliver brought a large knife down hard on the anchor point of the collar.

His face screwed up with effort as he twisted and pulled, trying to pry the device loose. The Green Arrow got the tip of the blade under some part of the collar and put all his weight into forcing it free, only to let out a roar of frustration as the blade snapped off the handle. Laurel’s heart was still pounding and her throat was on fire, but her thoughts stilled and focused on Oliver. She reached up and shook him by the shoulder, then began waving frantically toward the exit. She instinctively knew that any attempt at opening her mouth and speaking would result in blasting her friend in the face with a sonic scream.

It took Oliver a beat to realize what Laurel was trying to tell him. When he did, he took one of her waving hands in his and smiled sadly down at her. “There’s no window to toss me out of this time, Pretty Bird. I’m not leaving you.”

“Black Canary, Green Arrow, are your radios still working? Can you hear me?” Felicity’s voice rang out with a shrill note of urgency.

Black Canary gave a quick nod. “Yeah, we hear you. What do you have?” Green Arrow responded, still clutching Laurel’s hand.

“Okay, based on your GPS and the schematics of the building, I think if Black Canary can focus the sound straight up, as narrow as possible, she’ll miss all the major infrastructure. I mean, she’s still going to blow a hole through the roof but--“

“But no total collapse?” Oliver squeezed Laurel’s hand a little tighter. “Think you can do that?”

Laurel nodded as much as she could against her restraint and focused her attention on the gray ceiling tiles overhead. The few practice sessions she’d had with Jason had been successful, and during her time using the modified device before her encounter with Darhk she had gotten progressively better at directing the energy and channeling it. She just had to repeat that process now. While nailed to the floor. And having an anxiety attack. And still not sure of the full extent of her new abilities.

No problem.
Green Arrow wanted to be patient with her, but between the grating noise and the blood slowly dripping from Laurel’s nose and ears, he knew they were running out of time. “Laurel, do it!”

She held his gaze for a moment, taking the last measure of reassurance he offered and turned her face back toward the ceiling. When she saw his green hood duck next to her, she inhaled sharply through her nose and opened her mouth with an explosion of sound. The collar shattered and she sat up, channeling all her strength to her diaphragm and throat in an effort to focus the energy. A shock wave rolled through the floor, shaking the desks and chairs scattered throughout the office. As predicted, Black Canary could vaguely make out the night sky past layers of ceiling tiles, drywall, insulation and brick. Other pieces of the ceiling were falling or splintering, but Felicity had been right. She hadn’t hit a single piece of critical infrastructure.

The scream faded into silence. The dust from vaporized drywall and insulation drifted down like snow, and slowly the wail of sirens called out through the new hole in the SCPD roof.

Black Canary was sitting up, huffing and puffing. Her throat was raw. She swiped a hand at the moisture under her nose and winced when she saw blood. She nearly jumped out of her skin when another hand gently rested on her shoulder. In her daze, she had forgotten she wasn’t alone.

Oliver pulled his hood back and his mask down to hang around his neck, then pocketed his earplugs. He looked up through the hole in the ceiling and then back at Laurel. His face darkened with concern and he drew a hand to her cheek, turning her head just enough to confirm that she had blood on both ears, in addition to her under her nose. “Jesus, Laurel, we need to get you to the-“

“What were you thinking?” she croaked and pulled away from his touch. “I could have killed both of us.”

She rose to her feet quickly, shaking off the faint dizzy spell that threatened to embarrass her, and Oliver followed. He stopped her with a hand on each shoulder, forcing her to look at him. “You are my,” he ground his teeth, searching for the right word, “you are my best friend. I would never leave you in a situation like that.”

He pulled her into a hug before she could protest, cupping her head against his chest in his hand. After a beat, the sirens grew too loud to ignore and they pulled apart. Laurel wiped moisture from the corners of her eyes - she told herself she was just over tired and physically spent from using her sonic cry like that - and then offered a small smile up at Oliver. “You really need to make more friends, Ollie.”

Oliver chuckled, pulled his mask back up and his hood over his head. “Smartass.”
The clicking of the front door to the campaign office caught in Oliver’s ears, but he didn’t lift his eyes from the mountain of work he had to catch up on.

“Alex,” he called, “I thought I told you to go home and leave the insomnia to the professionals.”

“That’s cute,” a voice that didn’t belong to Alex chuckled from Oliver’s office door. “Mayor-to-be Mr. Queen taking the brunt of the work where lesser men would have thrown everything to their poorly-paid staffers.”

Oliver’s blood ran cold and the muscles in his jaw involuntarily tightened and flexed. He raised his eyes to see Damien Darhk leaning in his doorway, smiling ghoulishly back at him.

“But we both know you’re not lesser men,” Damien continued. “For a guy who’s running a campaign against no one, you are making this look hard. So much volunteer work, and press conferences and meetings. Couldn’t you just, you know, put your name on the ticket and call it a day?”

“Well, I’m not a lesser man.” Oliver pushed back from his desk and folded his hands together. “What can I do for you, Mr. Darhk?”

Damien’s eyes twinkled, but they held no hint of playfulness. He started to pace back and forth in front of Oliver’s desk, his face working through a series of mad smiles and crinkles in the corners of his eyes. “You know, I was younger than you,” he paused long enough to point at Oliver, in case there was any confusion in the small office about whom he referred, “I was even younger than you were when you first landed on Lian Yu when I learned the most important lesson a man can learn.”

Damien stopped and raised his brows expectantly at Oliver, who sighed and gave in. “And what lesson was that?”

“There are two kinds of people in this world, Mr. Queen,” Damien beamed. “The strong, and the conquered. The strong survive. They thrive. They get all the food. Their children survive. They get the best houses. They aren’t left to freeze or starve to death in the snow.” Damien stopped talking and pacing. He stared sightlessly through the window that connected Oliver’s office to the rest of
A muscle in Damien’s cheek twitched. “No, but my family was. You can learn so much from an experience like that.” Damien centered himself across from Oliver, and took on an intensity of purpose Oliver had never seen from him before. “We need strong people, Mr. Queen. And not just us, not just Star City. The world.”

Oliver’s face shifted and his eyes narrowed. Damien only rolled his eyes and pushed away, resuming his facade of casual condescension.

“C’mon, Oliver, you have to know by now that the only reason I haven’t outed you and your band of merry men - and women - is because I need you. The world needs you, I’m not blind to that.”

“So,” Oliver slowly stood out of his chair, “what part of your ‘join me’ pitch included attacking us, trying to kill us, killing my best friend’s father and nearly killing her?”

Damien shrugged and waved a dismissive hand. “The past is in the past. I’m not going to hold a grudge for all the damage you people have done to me. I wouldn’t mind the same courtesy. Besides, based on what I saw on the news last night, I’m pretty sure I turned your little banshee friend into a full-blown meta, so, you’re welcome. The point is we both want the same thing, and we will be stronger together.”

Stronger together. The words echoed through Oliver’s brain. The hair along the back of his neck stood on end, like individual pinpricks screaming a warning. “You really think you’re saving the world, Damien?”

“Oh come on,” Damien let out a groan of disgust. “Metas are popping up all over the planet. It’s not about that dark matter thing in Central City. They’re everywhere. A little bit of magic, a little bit of tech, some genetics. Whole races of superhumans have lived among us in secret for eons, and they are coming out of hiding. A new generation of Titans has awoken, and they know. They’re coming. This planet won’t stand a chance unless we unite.”

Oliver shook his head, trying to sift through the mess Damien Darhk was unloading. “I don’t...you want us to work with you? Against what?”
“Everyone!” Damien barked. “Thanagar, Apokolips, the Dominators, they’re all coming! And if
we do not unite the strongest and the best of us, our whole world will fall. Join me, help me. I can
save us from total annihilation, and you can be part of it.”

“Or what?”

The cool predatory gleam returned to Damien’s gaze and he resumed his composure. “Or you’ll
join the other 6 billion or so that make up the dead weight on this planet. You, your team, you little
girlfriend, your sister, your other girlfriend, your buddy, you’ll join Quentin Lance.”

Oliver crossed his arms over his chest and let out a slow breath. “So, that’s your big plan to save
the world? By killing 90% of the population? And you expect me to be on board with this? That
doesn’t sound like saving the world to me.”

“War is hell.” Damien straightened his clean black blazer. “The planet will suffer, but it will
survive on the backs of the best and brightest of our species. Hang up your hood. Tell the people of
this city that the Green Arrow left town. Get your team on board. Get the chosen people of this city
on board. Help me turn this world into a defensible stronghold.”

Memories flooded through Oliver’s mind. He saw the faces of people he’d killed in the name of
survival, in the name of his father, in the name of revenge. He saw his father, his mother, Sara,
Laurel. He could feel Thea’s cold, limp body in his arms. Triumph glowed in Damien’s eyes as he
watched Oliver slowly breaking.

“You know I’m right.” Damien pressed. He knew better than anyone how to push a deal. “You can
save them. You can…”

Oliver looked up and blinked in confusion as Damien trailed off, his face folding up in pain. He
brought a hand up to his chest and took a staggering step backward, then another, and another,
slowly backing out of the office. “What…?” he managed to croak out.

Then Oliver heard him: Constantine strode out of the shadows of the main office, with a dagger in
one hand and a book in the other. He was chanting something short and repetitive in a language
Oliver didn’t recognize. Damien snarled and dragged his feet against the force of whatever spell
Constantine was casting.

Constantine kept chanting, his lips curling up in a smirk. He dropped his book and took the knife to
his hand, never breaking the chant even as he sliced a deep cut across his palm.

“You...half-rate...circus act…” Damien managed to spit.

Constantine squeezed his cut hand in a tight fist until blood dripped freely. Once the first drop hit the floor, a rush of wind and energy sent Damien out the front door without further comment or struggle. Only when the door slammed shut on its own did John stop the chanting.

He fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it around his wound. “That one’s a right ass.”

Oliver let out a puff of air, a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “What the hell was that?”

“A little warding spell. He won’t get in here again, at least not easily.”

The oxygen returned to the room and Oliver slumped back into his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “You know, he was telling me valuable information.”

Constantine rolled his eyes behind the cigarette he tipped into his mouth. “I heard, giving you the hard sell. I figure we heard enough. Can’t make it too easy for him, now can we?”

A chill ran across Oliver’s skin, though it felt uncomfortably warm in the old building. Your team, your little girlfriend, your sister, your other girlfriend, your buddy, Damien’s words recycled in Oliver’s mind.

He spared Constantine a dark look before pulling out his cellphone and punching out a quick message to Alex.

He had to take decisive action.
Camera flashes strobed and clicked, but Oliver was now well seasoned to these formal press conferences. They were a far cry from his youthful days being hounded by the local paparazzi, but he was still surrounded by cameras and phones and microphones and digital recorders and voices all shouting over each other to be the one he heard. Now, though, he was in a suit. He had called them here. He wasn’t drunk and stumbling out of a nightclub.

He had a cold sweat on his brow and his stomach twisted in sickening knots like he’d been competing with Tommy to see who could put back the most hard liquor. Alex had at first been eager to organize a quick press conference, the election was only days away, but he’d picked up on Oliver’s mood almost as soon as both men were in the same room. Worry lined Alex’s young face. As he was less accustomed to hiding his emotions than Oliver, Alex looked like a raw mirror of the tension clawing through Oliver’s system.

The crowd quieted down as Oliver stepped up to the podium. He shuffled through his notes. His hands weren’t trembling, that was something he’d long mastered, but a damp sweat marked the papers. He didn’t need notes, but Alex insisted it made him look more prepared.

Oliver cleared his throat. A pair of icy blue eyes watched Oliver from the back of the room, just enough to ensure Oliver knew he was there.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming out on such short notice,” Oliver started and the chatter died, replaced by the shuffle of journalists jockeying for a better position in the crush. “We all know the election is in five days, and I’d like to take this opportunity to address the citizens of Star City directly.” He turned his attention to the small cluster of live cameras. “I know we’ve had a rough year. That’s an understatement,” he paused as the reporters chuckled and murmured amongst themselves. “We have survived so much. Every time we take a hit, we get back up. People have risen up, to fight for us. They’ve taken up jobs as first responders, police officers, volunteers, city workers who keep things running even when it looks like everything's falling apart.” Oliver swallowed and held Damien’s hard stare for a moment. “They’ve risen up in masks and taken the law into their own hands.”

“Do you endorse the vigilantes, Mr. Queen?” A voice cut over the crowd. Oliver raised a hand to still the sudden clamor of interest.

Oliver gave Damien one last look before turning his attention back to the cameras. “We all want to do what’s best, for our families and our loved ones. That has led a lot of us in different directions. The Ghost problem is no secret, nor is it a secret that our city government is in crisis. There are some,” Oliver felt his heart thumping steadily faster in his chest, “that want me to tell you I’m going to put a stop to the vigilantes. They want me to tell you the Green Arrow is no more, and he and all the others will be forced to hand up their masks or face persecution.”
Silence finally hung in the crowded room. Photographers lowered their cameras and watched him intently.

With the smallest determined headshake, Oliver continued, “I’m not going to say that. I believe in the people who want to fight for us. I believe that we are fundamentally good, and every life in this city is worth fighting for. Take care of each other. Next Tuesday, vote, but only if you feel like it’s the right thing to do. We are at a crossroads that is so much bigger than an election. I’m here to say that I stand with the people of Star City, and for everyone who can’t stand for themselves. I believe I am not alone in this. Thank you.”

Oliver nodded, collected his unused notes, and walked away from the immediate flurry of shouted questions and flashing cameras without looking back.

“Not that I’m a big fan of therapy,” Helena huffed for air between alternately blocking and striking with her bo staff, “but are you sure you don’t want to just talk about it?”

Laurel’s tonfas cracked against the bo staff with enough force to send impact tremors vibrating up Helena’s arms. Both women were drenched in sweat and struggling for breath, but Laurel wasn’t slowing down. If anything, the speed and force of her attacks only increased, keeping Helena on the defense. Laurel only grunted and renewed her attack. She flipped her tonfas so she held each by its shaft. Helena met her series of quick strikes, but lost her grip on her own weapon when Laurel hooked the handles of her tonfas around the bo staff, twisted and sent the staff clattering to the padded sparring area floor.

Helena bent at the waist with her hands on her knees, huffing and puffing. “I’m out. You want me to call one of the others?”

Laurel paced restlessly, spinning one of the tonfas by its handle. She shook her head and gave a noise that Helena interpreted as a negative response. Helena went for her water bottle while Laurel cracked her tonfas together and then started a fresh assault on a wooden sparring dummy in the corner.

She had maintained a wall of silence about the police station incident, with everyone except Oliver and Jason. Oliver knew because he was a witness, and she had grudgingly told Jason after some serious wheedling on his part. Otherwise, their questions about her out-of-control meta power met a cold shoulder and a quick deflection.
For reasons no one on the team had yet figured out, Liza Warner had yet to out Laurel as the Black Canary. The attack on the precinct was still a top news event for the city. Journalists and citizens debated on camera whether there was a new meta in town, or if this was the same Canary they’d seen since the Siege.

That didn’t mean her identity wouldn’t be revealed soon enough. The process of packing her apartment had been a dismal affair. As it turned out, she owned very few objects that held any meaning. She didn’t object to Jason, Roy, Helena and Thea packing things she’d tossed into the Goodwill pile, but those boxes remained untouched in a storage closet in Jason’s place. Laurel didn’t know if she should feel relieved or angry that she had so few pictures and mementos of her father. Mostly she just felt numb and restless.

Her restive energy and abrupt lack of employment drove her to spend most of her days training in the bunker. In the few days since the attack on the police station, Thea and Jason had been the only sparring partners she didn’t leave in an exhausted heap. She’d even caught Oliver making an excuse about needing to call their session off for a meeting, and hiding a limp for the rest of the afternoon.

Neither Laurel nor Helena looked up when the side door to the bunker opened. The only sounds were Laurel’s tonfas beating against the wooden dummy and Helena still wheezing for air between gulping water. A small voice coughed. Helena turned to face the person, then nearly choked on the water still making its way down her throat. Laurel stopped mid-swing to investigate what had surprised her partner, then sighed and tossed her tonfas to the mat.

“How in the hell…?” Helena raised a hand out in question to Evelyn Sharp, who was assessing their bunker with undisguised awe.

Laurel crossed her arms and smirked - the first hint of a smile Helena had seen in days. “I think your new roommate has been following you to work.”

“I told you to stay in the apartment!” Helena snapped. With nowhere to go, Helena had agreed to let Evelyn stay with her, at least until they could find a better living arrangement.

Evelyn shrugged, then crossed her own arms and jutted out her chin. “I got bored. Besides, you can’t just keep me locked up in there forever. You don’t even have wifi and the only food you keep around are canned peaches.”
Helena marched forward and grabbed the younger woman by her arm, eliciting a small yelp of protest. “You. Cannot. Be here.” She started to drag Evelyn back the way she’d come in, but Evelyn wrenched away and held her ground with surprising strength.

“I want to do what you do!” Evelyn spat, then snapped her mouth shut, glancing nervously toward Laurel. Her outrage dropped away, leaving a bundle of raw nerves in its place. “I can train. I can help you guys.”

Helena shot Laurel a dark look, but Laurel only raised her brows and pursed her lips. “She did already find our secret hideout.”

“No,” Helena ground out. “She’s a kid. After we take care of Darhk,” she turned her attention back to Evelyn, “I’m personally escorting you to your nearest living relatives.”

“I’m 18!” Evelyn’s voice wavered. Her eyes shot around the bunker, desperate and anguished, until she saw Helena’s practice staff. She snatched it up and jogged to the training mat, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Try me. I was on the short list for the US gymnastics team to go to World’s. I’m strong, and I’m fast, and I’m a quick learner, and-“

“And this isn’t Bring It On,” Helena cut her off. “I’m sure you’ve got a great layout, but what we do is more complicated than a floor routine.”

Laurel watched the younger woman carefully. She was brimming with so much energy - anger, frustration, fear, grief - she was shaking. She danced from foot to foot like a boxer. Her hold on the practice staff was inexperienced, but she was strong enough to break Helena’s grip. Evelyn kept looking between Helena and Laurel, pleading.

The back door opened again, admitting a rush of cold night air and two jovial male voices. Roy clapped Jason on his shoulder, nearly in tears from laughter. “Dude,” he struggled for the breath to speak, “the scream, when he turned around and ran right into your chest. It was like stepping on a dog’s tail. And then, BAM, he hits the deck.”

Jason puffed his chest. “What can I say? Sometimes they just scream and then knock themselves out.” Their laughter died when they realized they were being watched by three sets of increasingly severe eyes. Jason hummed and set his helmet down without looking away from the training mats. “Picking up strays?”
“No,” Helena answered quickly.

“I can train!” Evelyn shouted over Helena. Her hands flexed on the practice staff, still shifting from foot to foot like a nervous horse. “I just want a chance. I have nowhere else to go.”

None of them had a response to that. Helena let her eyes fall to the floor, but her teeth stayed firmly clenched together, unwilling to budge.

Jason remained impassive, but he studied the stranger in their midst carefully. Before Laurel could put two and two together, Jason had a batarang in his hand and flung it at Evelyn. Laurel opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Evelyn was as quick as she claimed. She brought the staff up in a small arc just in time to knock the bladed weapon off its trajectory and into the mat with a single crack.

Helena’s jaw dropped open and Roy let out an impressed harrumph. Even Evelyn’s eyes had gone wide and she remained stock still with the staff held up defensively. “He just threw that at my head…”

“I threw it near your head. Good reflexes, though.” Jason put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “She’s got my vote.”

“She’s just a kid,” Helena repeated, but with decidedly less wind in her sails.

Evelyn dropped the staff and her shoulders fell. Her eyes turned glassy and she tried one final appeal. “They took my whole family.” Her voice broke. Laurel felt a pain twisting in her chest. “The Ghosts took everyone. They said I was the only one who passed. They killed my whole family. I know they’re gone.” Tears spilled over and her shoulders started to shake. She tried to hide it, certain that this display of weakness would only prove to them that she was just a kid.

No one spoke. Jason’s expression turned grim. Helena’s arms fell to her sides and Roy tried to look anywhere but at the crying teenager.

“Oh,” Laurel’s voice, soft but firm, sent all four heads whipping in her direction. She stood a little taller under the surprised scrutiny. “We’ll train you.”

Despair gave way to anguished doubt, but the tears had slowed. “Really?”
“Damien Darhk took someone from me, too.” Laurel stopped speaking and clamped her mouth shut before her voice could crack against the fresh wave of grief and anger. “But, there are conditions to this.”

Evelyn’s eyes were still puffy, but her tears had dried. When she nodded gamely, Laurel took a deep breath. She looked to her compatriots, expecting one of them to jump in, but they all wore matching expressions of passive expectation, waiting for Laurel to define the new rules.

“First, you do exactly what we tell you to do.” Evelyn nodded along with Laurel’s strict commands. “That means if we tell you to stay here or stay out of a fight, you do it. Second, you don’t come anywhere with us until we all agree you’re ready.”

“Third,” Helena spoke up, “no more sneaking out and following us. If we tell you to stay behind, and you don’t do it, I am reserving the right to lock you up in the Flash’s metahuman prison until this is over.”

Evelyn was nodding eagerly until her face scrunched in confusion. “The Flash has a prison? You guys know the Flash?”

Roy cleared his throat and raised his hand like a kid at school. “Uh, am I the only one here who has no idea who she is?”

“She is one of the kids,” Helena emphasized her point, “we busted out from HIVE, and the reason we were in the police station the other night.”

“Everyone pretty much just calls me Ev.”

Roy stepped forward and stuck his hand out. Evelyn took it after a beat and didn’t wince against the firm shake. “Well in that case, welcome to Team…are we still Team Arrow?” Roy queried the group at large.

Helena shrugged, Laurel’s brow crinkled in thought and Jason scoffed outright. “I will be dead and buried in the cold ground, again, before I call myself a member of Team Arrow.”
“I’m not sure we’re Team Arrow,” Laurel added, still frowning.

“We’re certainly not O-T-A,” Helena drug out the letters, dripping with sarcasm.

“What in the hell is O-T-A?” Jason called from the locker space he had claimed. It was right next to Roy’s.

“It’s what Felicity calls her, Diggle and Oliver, because they were the first official team,” Laurel answered.

Roy snickered as he removed his hat and mask. Jason reeled away from his open locker door, his eyes wide with disbelief. “They do not,” his voice rose with doubt, but no one countered him. He slammed his locker door closed. “God damn, let Nightwing say some crap like that to me. I’ll break off one of his stupid little sticks and feed it to him.” Everyone watched him with varying degrees of amusement, though Evelyn looked markedly unsure what to say. Jason let out an uncomfortable chuckle. “Wow, I’m physically angry over an imagined scenario. We’re not calling ourselves O-T-A. Team Violent Felons?” He held up a hand for a high five that garnered only a disguised laugh and head shake from Roy.

“You guys know Nightwing, too?” Ev whispered, primarily to herself.

“If you and Speedy form a team, you can be Team YOLO,” Helena offered with a sly smile. Jason narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to retort, but Laurel spoke before he could come up with a response.

“I was kinda thinking we might be the Renegades.”
Episode 11

Chapter Summary

The Renegades are working, and they're working well.

But for how long?

Jason still has his own goals to pursue, the same ones he came to Star City for. Will he still be a team player when he gets a one-in-a-million shot at revenge?

Everyone is pulling in different directions, and the fabric of their team can only stand up to so much. They have all begun to suspect there's a traitor amongst them, but who? New faces arrive, fresh from Jason's past. Laurel slips into her role as the Renegades leader, burying herself in training and patrolling. Evelyn makes her debut as a full-fledged vigilante.

Star City is falling apart, turning into a city under siege.

Something has to break to move forward, but the breaking always hurts.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading and sticking with me! I know updates are slow, but in the words of the almighty Chuck, "writing is hard."

I anticipate wrapping this up within the next 2-3 chapters and I am SO EXCITED about getting there. I've had the end of this story in mind since I started, so finally seeing it coming to fruition is beyond satisfying.

As always, I appreciate comments, suggestions, and if you have questions/notice something inconsistent or confusing, I love to hear it! You can also contact me directly via redcanary-renegades.tumblr.com.

In honor of my MCU fan reader, I've been calling this episode, "TURN, TURN, TURN."

“Again!” Oliver’s voice rose when Helena and Ev pushed away from each other, lowering their practice staffs, panting and dripping with sweat.

Ev’s shoulders slumped and Helena rolled her eyes and placed a hand on her cocked hip. “Dude, we’ve been at this for an hour. She’s tired and getting sloppy.”
“Hey!” Ev managed to sound convincingly offended, but she was bracing her weight against the bo staff and struggling to catch her breath. Her hands and arms bore angry red marks from Helena’s staff, proof of her steadily decreasing reaction times.

Laurel bit back a smile. She had overseen the first half of Ev’s training that morning before handing the reins over to Helena. Evelyn thus far proved to be everything she said she was and more. She was used to punishing physical training schedules, and had even graduated high school early to concentrate on gymnastics. She was picking up the bo and escrima stick katas easily. She even had Jason crowing about her marksmanship and unexpected aptitude for throwing knives and batarangs.

“Maybe,” Laurel cleared her throat, “everyone could go for a little break.” On cue, Jason and Roy clambered into the bunker, joking and laughing. Laurel nodded in their direction. “And I’m pretty sure Jason mentioned something about more marksmanship training tonight.”

Roy shoveled his gear haphazardly into his locker and came back with a shiny apple. He took a bite and grinned at Ev. “You should just be glad you’re not slapping water.”

Oliver rolled his eyes and shook his head, but that didn’t hide the tiny uptick at the corners of his lips.

“Slapping water?” Ev’s face scrunched and she shot her confused gaze around the room, though Helena and Roy only laughed, and Laurel looked just as perplexed.

“That was,” Oliver started and stopped with a dramatic sigh. “That was years ago. And it was what I knew, so…”

“So you inflicted some bizarre training ritual on Roy?” Laurel finished helpfully.

Roy crunched away at his apple and nodded vigorously. “Oh yeah. Did you know that after just 20 minutes of water slapping, you pretty much lose feeling in your palm?”

Ev responded with a skeptically raised brow. She shrugged out of her loose sweatshirt and slid to sit on top of one of Felicity’s desks, swinging her legs. Jason hopped up to the platform with a compact firearm Ev didn’t recognize, and a whole belt of … where those grenades?
“This,” Jason started, holding up the weapon, then stopped, squinting at her. “Is that a tattoo?”

Ev recoiled at his critical inspection, then shifted to look at the black ink of feathered wings on her shoulder, then back up at Jason. “Uh, yeah, all these training sessions and you didn’t notice?”

Jason dropped the belt and weapon next to Ev, then stood in front of her with his arms crossed. “No, you’re always wearing that ugly sweatshirt. You got a Harley to go with that thing? What is it?” He leaned closer to get a better look. “A bird?”

Ev swung off the desk to escape the inspection. She shot a helpless look to Helena who chuckled and shook her head. “Oh no, little one, you have to tell this story on your own.”

“That good, huh?” Jason grinned and Helena nodded eagerly.

“It was a team thing,” Ev snapped and pouted. “All the seniors got it. Our team name was the Soaring Starlings. I’m gonna get it covered up.”

Jason’s eyes and grin widened. “You were the Starling Starlings? And you got that tattooed on you?”

“It got a lot less lame when the city changed its name,” Ev conceded, Jason’s infectious smile taking hold.

Even Oliver smirked. Jason was explaining the single-shot grenade launcher he’d be instructing Ev on this evening, along with her new best friend: a heavy bandoleer of 40mm grenade rounds she had to learn to move - more specifically free run, flip and fight - while wearing. “We don’t all carry our big gun on the inside as a superpower,” Jason explained, shooting an arch look to Laurel.

A grenade launcher would be good. It would certainly help Oliver feel better about the de facto team of Laurel, Helena and now Ev. He trusted them completely, but he still battled the urge to go with them every time they went out into the city.

Especially now.
The election came and went with little fanfare. There wasn’t much of a city left to give fanfare. He won the election with the lowest voter turnout in city history. He was honestly surprised anyone came out at all. Damien Darhk had yet to follow through on his threats, but that didn’t mean something wasn’t brewing.

His work with John and Andy was turning up more corruption than he thought possible. If civil servants weren’t working directly for HIVE, they were up to their necks in bribery and turning a blind eye to anything that might draw HIVE’s attention. Star City was crumbling faster than a team of vigilantes and the few good first responders and civil servants left could manage. Just the night before, he and John helped a skeleton crew of firefighters evacuate a decrepit apartment block. Once the people were out, the crew sat back and let the place burn. They just didn’t have the resources to risk lives battling a blaze in a structure that would be condemned regardless.

And people were hungry. He knew it as the Green Arrow, but as Mayor Queen he saw the hard numbers in black and white. Robberies were through the roof, and grocery retailers were no longer stocking fresh produce or meats. After enough truck robberies, none of the suppliers would cross the city limits. Dry goods flew off the shelves, and slowly but surely, stores were closing their doors and not reopening. A handful remained, stocked and protected by ARGUS agents under the guise of the private security. Oliver had to hand it to them, it was a smart way to keep track of the citizens. They all had to shop in the same places.

Waller was keeping Lyla on administrative duties. Lyla wouldn’t give up her intel on Team Arrow, and Waller valued her skills too much to alienate a good agent. Every day she and John had the same argument about sending Sara to her grandparents’ in Coast City.

He leaned on one of the 5-foot weight lifting bars, testing its familiar roughened surface in his hands. His eyes drifted up to Laurel, who remained alone on the practice mats. She was quietly twirling her tonfas, going through the motions of one of her more complicated katas. Without work, and fueled by anger and grief, she was getting better every day. He didn’t know whether to stop her or encourage her.

He opened his mouth to say something to her, but the elevator doors opened, ushering in a whirlwind of Felicity, all blonde hair and bright clothes, clacking high heels and armfuls of messy binders. She dumped the binders on her desk with a huff. “Man, all the servers at Palmer Tech and this,” she gestured to the mountain of printed documents and handwritten notes organized into color-coded binders, “is still the best way to review progress reports?”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed into a scowl and he muttered, “Nice to see you, too.”

Felicity didn’t look up, but her fingers stuttered on her keyboard. “Some of us have a company to run and world-changing energy breakthroughs to fine tune.” She was hitting the keys harder than
necessary. “We can’t all stay out all night every night in a costume because our day job is a token position in a failed government.”

The air in the bunker was taut with silence.

Jason cleared his throat and tossed a hoodie at Ev. “C’mon, there’s a Big Belly Burger still cooking down the road. We’ll stuff our faces and then go blow stuff up.” He ushered Ev through the back door, followed by Roy with a duffel bag of weapons and ammunition slung over his shoulders. Roy turned and shot Oliver a helpless cringe before disappearing into the alley.

Felicity stopped typing and closed her eyes. Her lips silently formed the numbers as she slowly counted to ten. When she opened her eyes and spoke again, she kept her attention firmly on her computer screens. Her words came out stilted and quiet. “We are all busy…working on very important jobs.”

The muscles in Oliver’s cheek twitched. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a wet hand towel gently landed against his face. He turned, bewildered, to the source. Laurel was holding out a practice staff for him with a knowing, tight-lipped smile. He accepted the staff and silent invitation to spar.

The cracking of the staff against Laurel’s practice tonfas echoed through the nearly silent bunker. Soon, the clacking of Felicity’s keyboard joined the noise. Helena had safely tucked herself out of sight to stretch and change. Felicity’s nose wrinkled and her lips pursed with the stream of angry thought running through her mind.

She had plenty to do without worrying about Oliver’s moods. Her recent re-dedication to work with Palmer Tech was showing her just how much of a difference she could make in the world as Felicity Smoak, CEO. Curtis Holt’s battery project might be the long-term solution Star City needs, and getting it off the ground was requiring more of her time and effort. It needed more time away from her duties as Overwatch. She didn’t know what Oliver was so cranky over. It wasn’t like they couldn’t get along just fine without her. Diggle knew how to work her system almost - almost - as well as she did, and Oracle seemed to always be ready to answer 9-1-1 calls from the team. It was Oliver’s choice to patrol all night, and spend all day doing God-knows-what at the mayor’s office. What could he possibly be so busy with? There was hardly a government left to administer.

“Man, I envy that,” Andy’s voice over Felicity’s shoulder made her jump and clutch a startled hand to her chest.

She let out a deep breath and then followed his gaze. He was standing behind her chair, arms
crossed, watching Oliver and Laurel trade blows. Felicity’s brow furrowed. “I’m pretty sure you can jump in there anytime, Andy.” She went back to her work with a set to her shoulders.

“Nah,” Andy leaned a hip against her desk, “it’s not that. You know, I used to be so jealous of John, what he has with Lyla.”

Felicity’s fingers paused, but she pressed on, refusing to look up even as Andy made himself more comfortable in her space.

“I loved Carly,” he went on, “but she never got it, you know? She didn’t understand the Army; why I wanted to be there. And then I see John and Lyla and I think to myself, ‘Damn, I could have that,’” he shook his head with a rueful smile.

Felicity licked her lips. Her eyes flickered to the training mats. Laurel and Oliver were still trading hits and blocks, and they seemed to be talking despite the physical exertion.

“You can’t put a price on having a partner. A full-time, shoulder-to-shoulder partner.”

Andy pushed away from the desk and walked away, disappearing as quietly as he’d materialized. He left Felicity wondering if he’d appeared just to be unpleasant.

She tried to concentrate on her work. Her Overwatch chore list was getting out of hand, but something dark and heavy was settling into the pit of her stomach.

Once more she let her eyes wander to the training mats.

Oliver was smiling.

Cold water splashed up the back of Laurel’s leggings as her feet struck the pavement in a steady rhythm. Her breath came in and out with her steps. It had taken a while, but she finally found a sense of peace jogging without music. The city still sounded mostly the same: cars, honking, a stray siren in the distance, a dog barking, muffled conversation from pedestrians. There were fewer pedestrians and cars every day.
She stepped high to avoid a mess of broken glass and the remnants of a wood pallet. Her breathing stayed even and regular. Her runs were progressively getting longer. Yesterday she ran all the way out to the harbor and back. Today, as she made her return from the harbor, she felt the rush of energy that told her to keep going. Her mind was clear, her heart was beating and she could run a few blocks north of Jason’s place, and do a half-mile loop to return.

Another pair of steps were following her, a faster and heavier pace than her own. Her lips twitched upward. She could recognize his steps without turning around. Jason’s bulky frame was alongside her within a few beats. They jogged in companionable silence until Jason could no longer resist.

“Laurel,” he heaved a breath, “I know jogging keeps you healthy, but my God, at what cost?” He said it with such conviction, Laurel lost her rhythm and laughed loudly. “What is this, anyway?” he pressed on. “Mile 8? 9?”

“It’ll be 9.5 on an 8-minute pace,” Laurel took a deep breath to re-regulate her lungs.

Jason cocked his head. “You’re kinda plateauing.” Laurel’s head jerked so hard, her nostrils flaring, Jason snorted. “C’mon, let’s step this up.” He increased his pace, then took a sharp turn down an alley. Her eyes narrowed but her smile rose at the challenge. She pivoted and followed his lead, dodging around trash cans and debris, leaping high and only pausing when he nimbly - a sight in itself for such a large man - kicked off the corner of one wall, then its 90-degree counterpart and caught the high rung of a fire escape.

In a quick assessment, she took a leap onto the rim of a dumpster then jumped, catching the other side of the fire escape, higher than he had. She paused just long enough to stick her tongue out at his stunned expression, then continued her ascent. The metal framework of the ladder-cum-stairs rattled against their combined weight, leaping and pulling and leaping up again. If Jason stayed behind her, it was only because he enjoyed the view. It was definitely not because Laurel’s training had her muscling her way up the fire escape faster than him.

They made it to the roof simultaneously, pausing long enough to gauge each other and wordlessly agree on a direction. They darted off toward the western edge of the building and hurtled off of it. Jason dove into a somersault to cushion his landing on the next roof, and Laurel did the same, bouncing back to her feet before he could. They went on like this, leapfrogging from roof to roof for another five buildings, until Laurel slowed her pace, then finally stopped. Jason joined her where she stood, hands on her hips, gasping for breath, staring out at the overcast skyline. A few light droplets of rain hit his forehead. Loose strands of hair were plastered at odd angles against Laurel’s head and neck.
“Do you think she’s ready?” Laurel didn’t specify whom she meant, but Jason already knew. She was a common subject of debate between them and Helena.

“Do you think she’s ready?” Laurel frowned and sighed impatiently at his response. Jason held his hands up plaintively. “You’ve kinda taken the lead on a lot of this stuff. I think it’s gonna be your opinion that decides when we debut the Starling.” He grinned at that.

Laurel’s lips pulled into an exaggerated wince. “She is not going to like that code name.”

“Oh ho,” Jason rocked on his heels, “she is so stuck with it anyway. That tattoo doomed her.”

“Anyway,” Laurel rolled her eyes, “I asked you because you have more experience than any of us, and you know what it’s like to be the teenage sidekick…”

“You’re asking for my professional opinion?” Laurel nodded impatiently. “I think I’ve been where Ev is and you couldn’t stop her from hitting the streets with a grudge to beat if you wanted to. She’s damn near a prodigy with trigger weapons. She’s picked up boxing and ground fighting. She was already strong as hell and springy enough to give Nightwing a run for his money. Laurel, you’re not going to get a neon sign telling you when she’s ready.”

Laurel crossed her arms and her expression softened. “I think I know why Ollie was so mad at me when I first started going out. I’m so scared that I’m going to say yes to this, she’s going to get hurt, or killed, and it’s going to be because she was following me.”

“You’re a good a leader, but she’s not following you.” Laurel turned her face up to his. “Ev needs this. She’s one of us. If she was in Gotham, Bruce would have adopted her by now. She needs this the way you needed it. Oliver being a dick didn’t stop you. She’s going out there one way or another, and she’ll be a hell of a lot safer with you and Helena looking out for her, training her, teaching her what you know.”

Laurel’s hands slid into his. She smiled shyly up at him. “Thank you.”

Jason pressed his lips into her damp forehead. “No need. If I didn’t think she had it, I’d tell you.”

“I know. I just-”
A shrill scream cut through the morning air, followed by a chorus of laughing and shouting in the alley below. They rushed to the building’s edge. Jason’s hand on her stomach stopped Laurel from simply pitching herself down the side of the building’s windows and gutters. He was right. Stop. Gauge. There were six young men of varying heights and builds. One young woman with bags of groceries in each hand, cornered.

“Whatchya got?”

“There’s a tax for neighborhood watch,” another man laughed, snatching a can out of the woman’s bag and tossed it from hand to hand.

Laurel looked at Jason. Now? He nodded.

The men were making so much noise, jeering and laughing, Jason and Laurel didn’t have to hide the noise of their descent. They weren’t aware that their party was about to be broken up until Jason’s foot and all of his weight slammed into the chest of the man standing closest to the fire escape.

A man - no older than twenty - in a hoodie had his hand on one of the woman’s arms wrenched away then pulled across Laurel’s body until she flipped him onto his back over her hip. Another rushed forward, but she brought her knee into his gut, then her elbow across his face. A final brave “neighborhood watchman” swung at Jason.

Jason caught the man’s fist in his hand and the other two thugs froze in place. Jason kept his grip, tightening down until the young man, wearing the remnants of a Starling High varsity soccer jacket, fell to his knees in pain.

“This is my neighborhood,” Jason barked out. “I hear about this again,” he growled slowly, taking the time to look each man in the eye, “you won’t walk away.”

As soon as he released, the pack gathered themselves and scrambled out of the alley. The woman who had been their victim, let out a strangled sob. She had remained silent and frozen, terrified, during Laurel and Jason’s intervention.

“Thank you!” she burst, sniffling and shaking. “Thank you, I…”
Laurel took one of the heavy paper bags from the woman. “It’s okay. You’re okay,” she spoke gently. “Where do you live? Can we walk you home?” Jason was still watching the mouth of the alley, seething.

The woman shrugged sheepishly. “Here,” she nodded to the building behind Laurel. “I almost made it to my door when they caught up to me and chased me back here.”

Jason stayed silent as they shepherded the woman into her building. It didn’t look like people were living there, but the barred security door had a lock and there was electricity still illuminating the the barren hallway. Back on the street, the Pacific Northwest winter gloom complemented the vacant feeling of the city block.

“This is a problem,” Laurel stated. “There aren’t enough cops patrolling, and food shortages have people acting like…”

“Like this is a city under siege?” Jason finished. “That’s what we’re here for.” He pulled her into the next alley they came to, and in a breath he spun so his back was against the rough brick wall and she was in his arms. Their lips met in a clash, tongues and teeth, pulling and nipping at each other. As he was pulling, she was pressing herself closer, hip to hip, hands reaching and grasping.

Only when she felt like her heart my burst from lack of steady oxygen did Laurel break her lips away. They stayed close, foreheads pressed together, breathing each other's air.

“That was bracing.” Jason’s voice rumbled.

“Which part?” Laurel breathed back.

“Oh, all of it,” Jason nodded eagerly. “I like the way you elbow strike, girl.”

Laurel grinned and sank her hands into Jason’s hooded sweatshirt. “We’re only a few blocks from home.” She pulled him down for another deep, stomach-flipping kiss. “Let’s get you out of these wet clothes.”

She pushed away, whirled and jogged back out of the alley. Jason waited a beat to let her get a
good head start on him. He liked chasing her.

“I think this one is a bust.” Roy kicked an old beer can, sending it clattering across the otherwise silent warehouse. Jason’s lip curled, but he couldn’t argue. HIVE had gotten very good at closing shop in a building as quickly as they set up. Roy picked up a discarded piece of paper, inspected it, then returned it to the floor. Just trash. “Are you sure we’re at the right place?”

Jason groaned. “Yeah, Arsenal. I think I can follow a GPS. The tracker on Palette pinged him here at least seven times over the past three days.”

It had been a damn good piece of detective work, if Jason could say so himself. Bringing in Palette, implanting the tiny device under the guise of a casual torture session, then giving him just enough leeway to make it look like Jason had underestimated him. That little bug had lit up a delightful map of Star City marking all of Palette’s travels, giving Jason - and now Roy - an easy trail to follow.

The most frequented stops were supply sites and human storage. The supply facilities started off as easy targets. They were lightly guarded and blowing up ordnance was a lot more simple than herding sick and scared people to safety. After they had hit two such locations, HIVE started guarding their property a bit better. A bit.

They left the other sites under heavy surveillance. Although Jason didn’t particularly care for the big team jobs, he wasn’t stupid. It was tactically better to share his work with the others and let more of them help.

This evening had started with quiet surveillance, but once they had determined the building was empty, they agreed to do a walk-through and look for anything, any evidence left behind that might help the group get a hit in against HIVE.

It was empty, cold and dark. Jason thought he detected notes of gun cleaning lubricant and gasoline, but he couldn’t be sure. His helmet was recording everything he could see and hear. Maybe Oracle would see something he missed.

“So,” Roy’s voice echoed off the metal walls, “you and Laurel, huh?” Roy couldn’t see Jason’s expression, but he smirked at his new friend’s stuttered step, and ever-so-subtle rolling of his shoulders.
“If you’re gonna threaten me,” Jason’s voice dropped, and he didn’t turn to face Arsenal, he just kept his slow inspection of the debris at his feet, “you’re going to have to get in line. I’m pretty sure Sara and Nyssa have first dibs. After that, it’s probably Thea and John.”

Arsenal snorted and grinned. “No, it’s cool. She was in a pretty bad place for a long time. She’s holding up better this time around. Don’t get me wrong, Oliver is a brother to me, but he’s not always the most supportive. She’s not alone on this, I can see it in her face. It’s, you know, good.”

Jason straightened, sighed, then shook his head. “‘It’s, you know, good?’” he parroted back at Roy. He was about to continue mocking Arsenal, who just kept grinning and chuckling to himself when he heard it. Something scraped, like a rock caught in a shoe tread, then a sharp intake of breath. Jason raised a hand without saying anything, and Roy immediately fell into serious silence, his bow with an arrow already nocked and ready.

Following the sound, Jason took slow, measured steps toward a battered door. It was open just enough that he could see the blackness inside the room. With a quick adjustment to his helmet, a human shaped-heat signature lit up in the darkness. The person didn’t know he’d been spotted yet. Jason drew a pistol - there was already a round in the chamber - and motioned for Roy to approach the door from the other side.

Once Arsenal was in position, Red Hood waited a breath. The person was huddled near the back of the room, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Between beats, when the person was off balance, Jason yanked the door open the rest of the way, his gun aimed in front of him, balanced by Arsenal’s bow filling the doorway. The man winced and held up his gloved hands, shouting a barely coherent string of words that Jason surmised translated to “Please, don’t hurt me.”

The man stumbled to his feet, hands outstretched, his yelling now mixed with shouted “No”s and “Stay back!” from Jason and Roy, weapons still drawn but shaking with emphasis. He pitched forward. Arsenal stepped backward out of the doorway, but the confined space was tricky. Red Hood wasn’t as fast, and, frankly, he wasn’t particularly concerned about a hysterical homeless person. In retrospect, it was dumb. Really dumb.

Jason realized his mistake the moment the man’s gloved hands - gloves that were, upon closer inspection, gauntlets lined with some kind of copper wire and definitely not meant for chilly fingers - landed on his chest. Every muscle in his body seized and he became aware only of the searing pain roaring from his chest through his limbs. The electricity hit him like a bolt of lightning. Jason’s teeth locked together and amid the burning, some part of his brain picked up the faint scent of smoke.
It only took a second, but a second was too long for Arsenal to realize Jason was being
electrocuted. He loosed his arrow, but Red Hood’s bulky frame was frozen, gripped by the
electricity surging through him, blocking a clean shot. It went high, just knicking the man’s
temple. It was enough to elicit an angry shout and release Red Hood, who slumped to his knees,
then to his side, in a smoking heap.

The man reared back up, sneering. He nodded at Jason’s groaning form. “That’s 50,000 volts in
your friend. You next, short guy?”

Arsenal scoffed and nocked another arrow. “Short?” His fingers loosened on the bow string, but
not before their opponent shot his hands out, unleashing wild bolts of electricity, hitting Arsenal
with enough force to send him flipping onto his back. Roy was coughing and clutching his stomach
when Jason dragged himself to his side.

“Not a homeless guy,” Red Hood croaked out, “definitely not a homeless guy.”

“You overlooked me when I busted out of Iron Heights,” their attacker drawled, “but HIVE
didn’t.”

Jason staggered to his feet, pulling Roy up with him, both still struggling for breath. Jason lifted
his eyes warily up: Ghosts had appeared, a lot of them, with an array of rifles and LIGHT guns
pointed at their quarry. He sighed.

“You can call me Electro-”

“The Electrolux, yeah,” Jason dismissed him with a callous hand wave. He was officially more
concerned about the HIVE welcoming party. Remembering something, vague and fragmented and
mostly a blur of dead mooks, Jason momentarily forgot he was still sizzling and turned his
attention to his shocking new friend. “Didn’t I kill you the last time I took over Gotham?”

“My partner,” the man lost his sneer. “I won’t be as easy to kill as Lester. I-”

“Okay, whatever,” Jason muttered, leaving the man he mentally deemed Electrocutioner-lite
sputtering and impotent. Arsenal and Red Hood exchanged a look, then raised their hands in
surrender. They were good. They weren’t two-against-twenty-with-weapons-already-drawn good.
“I think we’re in trouble, buddy.”
Two Ghosts were already manhandling Arsenal’s arms behind his back as others did the same to Red Hood. “You don’t say?” Arsenal ground out.

They were forced out to a van, where Ghosts flex cuffed their feet in addition to their hands. Their weapons were stripped, they even snatched Jason’s helmet from his head. As the vehicles started to roll out, Jason chuckled. The Ghosts didn’t react, so he laughed louder. One of them finally punched him in the stomach. He coughed and gasped, and let out a wheezing guffaw. “C’mon. You guys have to know we’re being tracked. In the next 60 seconds, Black Canary and Spartan and Huntress and all their little friends are gonna blow the doors off this thing and when I get loose, I’m gonna beat nine shades of hell out of you.”

The van bumped along the road unimpeded. The Ghosts stared at Arsenal and Red Hood, blinking.

“Any second now.” Jason gritted his teeth. He didn’t look to Roy, but he could feel the younger man’s annoyance rolling off him. The van continued forward at a steady clip. Every time it turned, Jason and Roy rolled and collided on the floor, muttering curses at each other and their captors. The Electrocutioner had hopped in one of the other vehicles. Red Hood’s forehead wrinkled in thought. He and Roy had had their pick of no less than five sites to investigate that evening. How did Electro-lite - Jason snickered at his own joke - and the gang know they’d come to this warehouse on this patrol?

There was a fox in their bunker-hen house.

Jason sighed loudly. “The conversation is sorta lacking back here,” he directed his complaint to the driver and Ghost in the front passenger seat, who diligently ignored him. “Maybe we could get some music? Something to lighten the mood? Beyonce? Outkast? Do the kids still listen to Outkast—”

A boom exploded from the front of the van and in the next moment they were flipping and tossed wildly as the van rolled over and over again. It was neither Jason nor Roy’s first time getting barrel rolled, but tied up and mixed with half a dozen Ghosts and their weapons, the experience was extra painful. The van finally lost momentum, sliding to a stop on its roof.

Arsenal grunted and cursed, wriggling out from the tangle of Ghosts and Red Hood and weapons. “Get…off…”

Red Hood snarled as a heavy boot pushed off from his cheek, but the wrecked van was too much of a mess to determine if it belonged to Roy or a Ghost. The van doors yanked open, but the Ghosts were either too unconscious or couldn’t get control of their weapons in the mess. Heavily armed,
black-clad operators snatched one Ghost by his ankle, then another, expeditiously clearing out the van until on Red Hood and Arsenal remained.

A pair of operators stood at the open doors, silent, hands on the pistol grips of their weapons. Whatever happened to the Ghosts, neither Jason nor Roy could say. They both pushed awkwardly up to sitting or kneeling.

When the operators didn’t speak, Arsenal fidgeted. “Um, Red Hood, um…”

“Shut up,” Jason hissed back.

The operators stepped aside at a quick command spoken in Farsi. A much smaller figure filled in the space, illuminated only by the remaining dash light on the van. Arsenal didn’t react, but Red Hood audibly gulped.

“I come to this town,” her voice lilted over the words with an accent Roy vaguely recognized, “to take care of my family’s business, and sure as the sun rises every day, Jason Todd is at the center of it. And needs my help.” She smirked playfully.

Jason schooled the shock off his expression, to meet her gaze directly.

“Hello, Talia.”

Felicity’s eyes were wide behind her glasses. She leaned to her left to whisper from the corner of her mouth to Laurel, “She is all cheekbones and lips.”

“I think it runs in the family,” Laurel whispered back.

Talia al Ghul ran a petulant finger over the shafts of Oliver’s arrows. Her cheeks were tight and her lips pulled down. Her nose wrinkled. She turned to Oliver, who was glowering down at the smaller woman.
“So, you are the man my father shunted aside his own daughter for?” Her eyes traced up and down his form and she made a small noise of disbelief in her throat. “Nyssa was doing quite well when I left. And yet he chose you, a stranger, over his own blood. And then,” her voice rose with mockery, “you handed his legacy over to the Magician, rather than his blood heir.”

Oliver inhaled slowly through his nose and closed his eyes before speaking. “It’s not that simp-”

“Nyssa has asked me not to kill you. Please tell me why I shouldn’t.”

Jason sighed loudly. Roy and Diggle exchanged arched-brow looks. Felicity snorted. “Um, no offense, I’m sure you’re a great assassin, but you’re kind of outnumbered.”

Jason ran a hand down his face and Laurel had to bite her cheeks to keep from smiling. Helena and Andy’s eyes bugged. Andy was pacing, his fingers flexing into fists. Only Helena took note of it from her periphery.

Talia’s full lips curled up and she turned her attention on Felicity, who instantly shrank by a visible measure. “Is that what you think?”

“Okay,” Laurel pushed off the desk edge before Felicity, Jason or Oliver could retort. “Nyssa,” she held up her phone in evidence for all, “said she’s a few minutes away with…” she squinted and frowned at the screen, “I’m not sure what this means.”

Talia leaned around Laurel’s shoulder, her black hair cascading in sharp contrast to Laurel’s west coast lightness. The screen read, Tell Talia her demon insisted on supervising me. Talia nodded her approval. “My sister will be here, with a few others. We can discuss this matter further.”

Felicity raised her hand. “I’m sorry, you mean the matter where you kill Oliver? Because…”

“She’s not going to kill me,” Oliver finally spoke for himself. He was met with varying degrees of doubtful looks from around the bunker. Even Diggle bent his head and shrugged.

Talia continued her silent inspection of the bunker. Helena joined Laurel at her side and waited for low chatter to resume before she spoke, only loud enough for Laurel to hear. “Look at Andy.”
Laurel let her eyes flash to Andy just long enough to take in his appearance and then she went back to fiddling with her phone. Andy was making a good impression of casual interest, but he couldn’t stop rubbing and then fisting his fingers. A thin sheen of sweat dotted around his neck. Laurel opened her notebook app and punched in, *What do you think?*

Helena responded with a tiny shrug and head shake. She fetched a discarded, half-drunk water bottle off the desk and polished it off. Laurel set her phone down on the desk so that Helena could read it as she guzzled room temperature water. *We’ll watch him. I’ll talk to Lyla.*

It wasn’t enough. Helena couldn’t say what would be enough, but she knew this wasn’t it. Talia’s presence made her nervous, too, but even Oliver wasn’t getting sweaty and twitchy.

Diggle cleared his throat. “What are the odds this means you’re going to help us with HIVE?”

Talia considered his question. For the first time since Jason and Roy had brought her into the bunker, she didn’t respond with snide amusement. She gauged Diggle fully, at least to his face. She’d gotten the measure of everyone the moment she walked through the doors. “We are here to take back what belongs to me and set the League back to rights.” She looked between Oliver and Jason. “I’m sorry, but your fight is not League business.”

“We could use some L-O-A muscle on our side,” Diggle pressed. Talia’s dark eyes considered him again. Despite herself, she smiled, just a little.

She shot another look to Jason, who already knew what she would say. “The best thing I can do for you is remove the League from this problem. Once we have the Magician and his followers, HIVE will be crippled. I know Darhk. He relies on the Magician’s followers more than he’d care to admit.”

“Well, that,” Oliver ventured, “it’s still not that-”

“Simple. You keep saying that,” Talia interrupted. “I don’t really care. Get out of our way, and we will get out of yours.”

Oliver looked to Laurel for help, but she had nothing to offer. They couldn’t say anything without outing Thea.
“I already know about Merlyn’s daughter, the sister.” Talia arched a brow at Oliver. “I hope you’re confident she’s on your side.”

Oliver’s shoulders rose and fell with his too-even breath. “And if she’s not?”

“Then I think things will get even messier around here for you.”

The two faced off silently. The muscles under Oliver’s skin jumped and twitched. Talia’s chin rose with the corners of her lips. Her eyes danced with challenge - no, the desire for a challenge.

The alarm to the alley door squealed, breaking the standoff and drawing everyone’s attention to either the door or Felicity’s computer bank. With a few keystrokes, she pulled up the security camera. Nyssa was staring directly into it with so much impatience Felicity could swear she saw the woman’s foot tapping off screen.

Felicity entered a few more keystrokes, releasing the locks. Laurel was making her way toward the door, suddenly more anxious to see Nyssa than she’d anticipated. Her heart fluttered a bit when Nyssa breezed in, and Nyssa’s eyes searched then stopped and brightened when she saw Laurel.

A whirl of dark robes, no taller than Nyssa’s hips, emerged from behind her, drawing Laurel up short. Dark hair, a sullen scowl and lips that marked him as an immediate relation to Nyssa and Talia, he stalked up to Talia, who crossed her arms and narrowed her gaze down at him.

“I told you to stay at the safe house.”

Laurel’s gaze followed the exchanged as she gave Nyssa an absentminded hug. Jason’s mouth fell open like a fish.

“The guards are idiots,” the boy snapped, utterly heedless of the entire room watching the exchange.

“He has a point,” Nyssa remarked. She pulled Laurel in for a genuine hug, to Laurel’s surprise. “It’s good to see you, sister,” she spoke against Laurel’s hair.
The boy and Talia were bickering quietly until Talia said something sharp in Farsi, silencing him. He turned so she could place her hands on his shoulders. “I apologize, my son is being rude. Damian, this Jason,” she nodded at him, still open mouth staring, “and the rest of the team.”

Damian’s dark, narrowed eyes shifted from person to person, looking less impressed with each person. His eyes lingered on Andy, still fidgeting, then on Jason. He nodded. Talia squeezed his shoulder. He had done as much as could be expected.

“Talia,” Jason forced her name off his lips, “can I talk to you? Privately?” He shot a quick look to Laurel, who was visibly biting her cheeks to stop from laughing. Talia responded with a lingering look, bright with amusement, and a quick nod. She followed Jason out the alley door, leaving Damian to meet the team on his own.

Before the full weight of the uncomfortable silence could truly fall, the elevator door dinged and opened.

“Whew,” Felicity whirled in her seat to greet Thea, who’s face shifted from harried discomfort to confusion then finally settling on regret. “You got here just in time.”

Thea paused just out of the elevator doorway, eyes wide, lips pursed. Nyssa didn’t react. Unsure of herself, she turned to Oliver. “Uh…you said I should come down for this?”

“That’s not what…never mind,” Oliver shook his head. “Nyssa is here, with her sister,” he nodded in Nyssa’s direction, “and this just got a whole lot more complicated, Speedy. You should lay low. Stay with Jason and Laurel.”

“Easier said than done,” she trailed off, attention turned to Damian. “Nyssa, you have a sister? Who brought the kid?”

Diggle snorted. Nyssa sighed.

“Seriously, Thea,” Oliver tried again, “you need to lay low.”

Laurel studied Thea. She wasn’t as pale as the last time she’d seen her. Thea stood straight and tall, with her former confidence. She had killed again. It was plain as day, but seeing Thea healthy was such a relief, Laurel found herself hard-pressed to think of a reason why it was such a bad thing.
“Indeed,” Nyssa interjected. “Talia knows about you, and your father. We’re here for him and his followers. You do not want to get in the middle of this.”

Laurel’s heart stammered and something dark flashed across both Oliver and Diggle’s faces. Thea remained stoic. “Malcolm might be my father,” Thea’s voice was flat, “but I’m Team Arrow. Or Renegades. Whatever we’re calling ourselves now.”

“Did we really decide we’re not Team Arrow anymore? Is there still O-T-A?” Felicity frowned.

Damian visibly bristled and put his hand on the hilt of the short sword at his hip. He turned to Nyssa, his cheeks reddening. “This is the usurper’s bastard?”

The entire room balked. Laurel choked, Helena sputtered the sip of water she’d been in the middle of, Diggle had to turn and walk out of sight. Felicity pushed back from her keyboard to address the boy directly. “Easy, mini-Joffrey; lay off the Game of Thrones. She’s with us.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed even further. “I don’t play games.”

“Nyssa,” Laurel spoke up, a shade too brightly, “maybe Helena and I,” behind her, Helena’s eyes widened and she mutely shook her head, “could take your nephew for fries and milkshakes while the rest of you talk this out?”

Nyssa cast a doubtful glance down to Damian, then back to Laurel. “If you think you can handle him, I would be most grateful.”

“I am not a thing to be handled,” Damian snapped to his aunt. His nose wrinkled and he lost some of his outrage. “And french fries and milkshakes sound revolting. American garbage food.”

Helena shrugged into her zippered hoodie, surrendering to the argument with Laurel before it even started. “The phrase is ‘junk food.’ You don’t know what you’re missing, kid. Leave the sword.” She and Laurel waited. He watched them, and Nyssa, in a silent debate until he surrendered. He unbuckled his sword belt and passed the weapon to his aunt, who gave him a firm nod of approval.

He patted his boot. “I still have blades.”
“Of course you do.” Nyssa’s eyes warmed. “And you know the laws of the League.”

Damian’s chest puffed out. “Yes, Aunt Nyssa.”

Nyssa winked at Laurel as the boy turned and headed toward the elevator with her and Helena.

“Seriously, kid, this is gonna blow your mind,” Helena tried again as they entered the elevator.

As the door slid shut, Nyssa just caught Damian’s quiet, controlled correction. “I am not a kid.”

Outside, Jason paced. Jason paced and Talia sighed the long-suffering sigh of a woman who is tired of the conversation before it starts.

Jason stopped, hands on his hips, then ran a hand across his scruffy jaw. He started to speak, grunted and shook his head, and resumed his pacing.

“Are you going to keep me out here all night so I can watch you have some sort of mental breakdown?” Talia folded her arms across her chest. “Nyssa and I have important matters to discuss with your team.”

Jason turned back to her and pointed to the closed, hidden door. “Who is that?”

Talia arched a thick, dark eyebrow. “I believe that’s your team. I would expect you to know them.”

“The kid, Talia. Who is that?” His finger shook, still pointing at the door as if it might clarify his question.

“I believe I answered that when I introduced him. Damian is my son.”

“How old is he?” Jason resumed his pacing, stalking back and forth, watching Talia.
Talia’s eyes hardened. “He turned ten this past August.” She watched the information flicker across Jason’s face. “I know what you’re thinking, and you really need to stop flattering yourself.”

“Why does he look like me?” Jason exploded. His chest shook. “Why…why does he look like me?”

Talia scoffed and rolled her eyes. “He looks like me. As if you are the only dark-haired man I’ve ever taken to bed. Please.”

“After I came back to the League, you didn’t feel the need to tell me you’d had a kid?”

She shrugged. “Dami is none of your business.”

Jason shook his head. He’d latched onto the idea and couldn’t let it go. “No, no, that night, before I left for Gotham-”

“Stop,” Talia snapped, eyes flaring. “Drop it. My child is the Heir to the Demon. I would no sooner carry your seed as I would a clown’s.”

Jason blinked and recoiled. “A clown? Really?” She smirked and lowered her gaze. Jason pressed his clenched fist to his mouth in a useless bid to keep his emotions in. “Why wouldn’t you tell me? What is the point of keeping him a secret from me? I don’t give a shit how you dance around it, Damian looks like me.”

“He certainly shares your absolute conviction that he always the smartest person in the room, regardless of all evidence to the contrary. Jason,” her voice softened and she placed a hand on his forearm, instantly stilling his near-frantic pacing, “please let it go. He is not yours, and that’s all you need to know.”

Jason swallowed. He swallowed his questions, his shock at seeing Talia again after so many years, and the warm tingling at his arm where her hand rested. He let her back inside the bunker with a mumbled excuse that he needed a cigarette.

Three cigarettes later, seated on a stack of discarded wooden palettes, the light bulb went on over
Jason’s head.

There was only one reason why Talia would keep her child a secret from him, if it wasn’t his child.

And only one reason why that belligerent little monster was so familiar.

The cigarette fell out of Jason’s slackened mouth.

*Holy shit.*

“I want you to stay here.”

Helena’s eyes snapped up to Laurel. “Are you kidding me?”

Laurel pulled her gloves on and kept her eyes focused on getting her gear ready. “It’s been three days. He’s been messaging someone on a burner phone. Thea’s been out-of-pocket since they showed up. She missed Oliver’s meeting with the city council today. I just,” Laurel paused and took a deep breath. Her eyes flashed around the bunker, lingering on Lyla and John. They were settling Sara into a pack-and-play, talking quietly to each other. Andy was making himself busy next to Felicity, but he kept tilting his head to better hear his brother and Lyla’s conversation. “I need you here.”

Helena crossed her arms and frowned. She was getting good at that face. Ev was pulling a small, military-style ballistic vest over her tank top while Felicity chattered about the latest and greatest updates Palmer Tech was testing on the material. Jason was on her other side, directing the best places for her to place spare magazine pouches. They had agreed a full bandoleer of 40mm rounds might be excessive, and settled on a smaller belt around her left thigh, and another four - smoke and flash-bangs - placed on the flak vest. Jason handed her his AG36 single shot 40mm launcher. With a .45 in both shoulder holsters, the AG36 clipped at her waist, and covered in ammunition, Ev looked ready for war. Even Helena had to admit the girl was ready. But she was still so *small.*

“It’s just a patrol.” Laurel read her thoughts. “And we’re patrolling with Jason and Roy, which probably constitutes overkill. We’ll be fine. She’ll do great.”
“Okay,” Helena grudgingly conceded. “I’ll keep an eye on things here tonight.” Lyla kissed her husband and disappeared out the side door. John returned to Sara’s playpen. She cooed up at him, eliciting an unguarded smile before he settled into one of Felicity’s workstations. He was running investigations on people he and Oliver were slowly weeding out from the HIVE agents. Andy settled next to him, quietly asking questions and providing his input.

“How do I look?” Evelyn appeared before Laurel and Helena in her completed ensemble.

Helena nodded her approval. Laurel turned to her locker and fished a black leather jacket out. She handed it to Ev. “You look like you’re going to be cold.”

Ev took the jacket and started to put in on, then paused when she saw the familiar details at the shoulders. “Is this…your old jacket?”

“No,” Laurel shook her head. “They cut that one off me. This was my sister’s. You’re smaller than she is, so it should still fit over the vest.”

The jacket in Ev’s hands suddenly felt heavier. “Oh,” was all she managed to respond.

Laurel put a hand on Ev’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I think it’ll look good on you.”

Evelyn slid the jacket on, then looked back to Laurel and Helena for approval.

“It’s a good look,” Helena confirmed with a serious nod. Evelyn beamed.

“Alright ramblers,” Jason called. “Let’s get ramblin’.”

“Arsenal, boost!” Ev sprinted at Roy who only had a split-second to react. He dropped his weight and cupped his hands just in time for her boot to make contact. He pushed up with his legs and steady arms in rhythm with Ev’s jump, sending her flipping over his head. She came down perfectly in time to catch the perp’s head with the heel of her boot.
He went down and Ev stuck the landing, then dove under a wide-swinging bat and came up with her AG36, striking the next perp under the chin. The third and final thug who’d thought she and Arsenal looked like easy targets was running away. She leveled her weapon at him and pressed - not squeezed, as Jason taught her - the trigger. A 40mm smoke round launched and hit the man in the back, sending him tumbling to the asphalt in a cloud of gray smoke.

Ev returned the weapon to its clip at her hip and Arsenal joined her, crossing his arms and nodding appreciatively at the three would-be muggers moaning on the ground. He held up a fist. “Nicely done, Starling.”

Ev bounced her fist off his but wrinkled her nose. “Are we really going with Starling?”

Arsenal chuckled. “Oh yeah, that’s not going anywhere.”

“If you two are done congratulating each other, finish up and get back on the roof,” Red Hood came over their radios. “We still have more ground to cover tonight. These kids are forming packs.”

Up on the roof above, Black Canary was fighting the smile. Red Hood pulled his helmet off and leaned over the edge to watch Starling and Arsenal continue to banter while they zip tied the teens and took their weapons. He straightened and slid an arm around Canary’s shoulders, sighing wistfully. “Our vigilante daughter is beautiful and strong.” Laurel audibly sighed and opened her mouth, but could only scoff. “Can we adopt her?” Jason turned to her hopefully.

“Jason Todd, you are so weird.”

They continued their patrol, jumping or grappling from roof to roof. Jason periodically stopped to quiz Starling on what she’d seen, how well she was assessing her surroundings, how well she could remember the face of the old woman walking her dog, how many cars they’d passed, when she last saw a patrol car and what direction it was heading, and so on.

Then he stopped and tapped two fingers against the side of his helmet. He was getting something. He turned to the left and ran for the other side of the roof, the rest of the group right behind him. “There,” he pointed. The lights of a line of vehicles were coming down the road, but at least half a mile off. “Arsenal, my Palette-tracker is going berserk. That many vehicles…that’s not just Palette.”
“You think it’s her?” Roy squinted. He could make out heavy-duty SUV’s and trucks taking up the lead and follow on the convoy. Trucks with weapons mounted in their beds, and men manning them.

“Driving a convoy with tacticals through Star City at 2 a.m.? Yeah, I think that’s Mommy Dearest.”

A dark shadow crossed Arsenal’s face. “This place is reminding me more and more of Syria. Since when are they mounting tacticals?” He directed the incredulous question to Black Canary, who was studying the convoy with growing dread.

“New to me,” she answered quietly. “You think that’s Mother? It could be Damien.”

“Damien likes limos,” Red Hood responded. “Mother likes up-armored SUV’s. She’s practical.” He looked ready to move again, but winced and shook his head. “Listen up,” he held up a finger to the group, “she’s out in the open and we’re already here. If I miss this, I may not get another chance. Give me the A-G.” He held out his hand to Starling.

“Yeah, right,” Starling shifted so her hip was further out of his reach, not that that would really stop him. “I’m going down there, too.”

“Starling,” Canary’s voice held an admonishing edge, “Jason, this is crazy. There are four of us. I can see at least eight vehicles, two of which have some pretty crazy machine guns, and that’s probably not all of their support. We fall back. Call for back up. Tail them until the rest of the team-”

“No, now,” Jason cut her off. She couldn’t see his face, but under his jacket, every muscle was tense. Laurel clamped her mouth shut. Red Hood turned to Arsenal. “You in?”

Roy’s eyes lingered on Laurel for a minute before snapping to Red Hood. “Like Flynn. Whatever that means.”

Canary shook her head and swore under her breath. “Fine. Roy, I’m with you. I can stop the convoy from the front. Jason, Starling is with you.” He turned to move but she grabbed his shoulder and forced him to look at her. “Jason, Starling is with you.”
Jason lifted his hand to Laurel’s bicep, gave it a gentle squeeze and a nod. “C’mon, Starling. You ready to go use the big boy rounds I gave ya?”

Starling loaded one of the explosive 40mm rounds and grinned. “Let’s do this.”

Keeping up with Red Hood was a bit more strenuous than she’d ever admit, but she never stayed more than a few paces behind him, until he decided on a good place to drop. He took her by the waist and grappled down from the rooftop for efficiency. “Next time you can throw yourself off the building,” he assured her.

They crouched out of sight in the alley as the vehicles rolled past. “We have to create a blockade. Once they’re all in this block, Black Canary hits them up front and we hit ‘em from behind. Nowhere to go.” Evelyn shifted on the balls of her feet, watching the vehicles anxiously. Taking on some wannabe thugs was one thing. These were Ghosts. These were Mother’s personal guard. Jason stilled her as he had with Laurel. “Listen to me.” He snapped his fingers when she didn’t immediately turn her attention to him. “Listen. If it looks bad, you run.” She started to argue but he cut her off with a sharp knife hand. “Ah, no. You run. Period. If you think for even a split second you’re in trouble, you call for me. And for fuck’s sake, if I tell you to run, drop, do the goddamn hokey pokey, you better do it. Do you understand me?” Starling nodded solemnly. “Good.” Red Hood straightened and pulled his Saiga 12 from the sling across his back. He did love that freaking shotgun. “Let’s do this,” he spoke into the radio.

Black Canary’s scream boomed through the air, breaking glass, setting off car alarms, and sending the convoy to a series of swerving stops. Starling was glad they were still tucked away in the alley, but only long enough for the cry to die down. When Red Hood stepped out, she followed, darting around him until she had a solid position on the opposite side of the street. He was already pumping shotgun rounds at the truck that held the rear position in the convoy. The men on the .50cal were quickly recovering themselves. Some at the center were disabled from hitting each other, but the truck was already revving back to life.

“Starling!” Red Hood barked.

She pressed the trigger. A thunk and a moment later, the truck - Jason called it a tactical - exploded. Bye-bye, machine gun. It was safe to assume the lead tactical had been similarly obliterated by Black Canary’s cry. Red Hood didn’t stop to properly appreciate the destruction. He was already moving and issuing a quick series of commands over his comms. Starling stayed close behind him, loading a fresh 40mm round as she moved. This is what they had practiced for. He had drilled these moves over and over and over again until she could speed-load any weapon in their current arsenal while clearing an obstacle course.

Ghosts were pouring out of the wrecked or blocked vehicles.
“Looks like they brought their clown cars tonight,” Arsenal’s voice crackled in Starling’s ear.

Red Hood took cover behind a dumpster, shielding Starling behind him. He poked his head around the safety of the metal box and replied, “Only the best for Mommy Dearest.”

Up at the other end of the mess, Black Canary was in a similar position, scowling. “We need to fall back,” she said to Arsenal without touching her radio. “We are way outnumbered and every Ghost out there has a LIGHT gun. They don’t even need to hit us.”

Roy shot a quick look around the carcass of someone’s wrecked car. He squatted low and ran a hand up to the bill of his hat, working it between his fingers while his nose wrinkled. “I don’t like it either, but I get the funny feeling if we dip out, Jason is gonna stay. And die. Again.”

“Stubborn ass.” Laurel twisted to a crouch and sucked in her breath. “That means there is only one choice.” Roy pursed his lips and his eyes crinkled behind his mask. He evencocked his head to one side. Laurel could have laughed out loud. He was a masked, trucker-hat-wearing puppy. “You might want to get behind me again.”

His face lit with understanding. He scrambled behind her just in time for another deafening blast, this time she went far and wide, directing the sound to as wide an area as possible. The Ghosts closest to them were falling, dropping their weapons and clutching their ears, but she was only just stunning most of them. Jason and Ev were on the other side of that sonic scream. From behind her, red arrows whipped through the sky, quick red missiles, one after the other, disabling more Ghosts.

It was good, but not good enough. From two different directions, first a LIGHT gun blast knocked Black Canary and Arsenal off their feet, then a poorly-aimed B.O.O.T. managed to catch Canary’s wrist as she was struggling back to her feet, latching her back to the asphalt. Before she could direct her scream against the device, another LIGHT blast knocked her out cold.

Starling was feeling good. No, she was feeling great. She was working with Red Hood - Red Hood! - as seamlessly as if they’d been partners for years. Some more cognizant part of her brain knew that it was more likely that Jason Todd was simply an excellent fighter and knew how to read partners, but in the moment, she felt like the baddest bitch on the block. When he went high, she went low. When he needed to reload, she was laying down covering fire. They even did the “Captain-America-Bring-It-On boost thing” again, launching Starling at an unprepared Ghost like a particularly violent brunette cannon ball.
“I am so not a Captain America,” he called to her, casually flipping a Ghost over his shoulder into another Ghost. “I’m totally a Black Widow type. Way more limber, and deadly.”

Starling didn’t find casual speaking quite as easy in this scenario as he did, but she grinned and clocked another Ghost with the muzzle of one of her pistols. “C’mon, if you’re the base, and you’re throwing me into the stunt, then you’re Captain America.” Starling ducked, then dove into a somersault to avoid another attack. She used her momentum to jump back to her feet, driving her fist under the next Ghost’s chin. “Accept the spandex and patriotism!”

Canary’s cry reverberated past them. Even at this distance, both Starling and Red Hood winced. Something else caught Red Hood’s attention, something discordant even against Black Canary’s scream. Engine noises.

This time, they weren’t in sync. Jason tried to get Ev under his arm and safely behind him, but she was too quick. She’d heard the noise, too, and reacted as fast as he had. Four more tacticals were appearing in their little kill zone, two from each alley and two just straight down the road, bold as you please. Starling was moving before they opened fire, ducking for cover between the vehicles. Red Hood cursed. She was trapped in there. He’d at least made it to a disabled vehicle near the sidewalk. There was one more alley way marking the next block up, where Black Canary and Arsenal were holding the line. He had to get to Starling, get her back here and on a grapple up to the roof and out of this mess.

But then he saw it. The one black SUV with even more armor than the others. The one with 360-degree coverage from ten Ghosts. That was the one with Mother inside. This was it. This was his shot to grab her and get gone. He spared a final look for Starling. She could handle herself. He’d seen to that. Hell, all the Renegades had seen to that. She was blocked in, but also safely hidden from view. “Stay put, Starling,” he gave her one last order before making his move.

Stay put, Starling. Was he serious? Another sonic scream boomed, joined by a small explosion, bursts of machine gun fire and blinding white flashes from the LIGHT guns the team had been so keen on warning her about. Maybe staying put wasn’t such a bad idea. The longer she stayed huddled behind the tire of one of the SUVs, the more the idea rankled at her. The asphalt, broken glass, and debris crunched beneath her boots and padded knees. Stay put, my ass.

She watched the booted feet moving away, toward the sound of the fight at the front of the convoy. When she didn’t see any more, she rolled out from the safety of her cover. She stayed low, running close to the vehicles, trying to find the cleanest way out of the deathtrap she was currently in. Starling saw her way out: one Ghost was guarding the small gap between the vehicles. She could take on one Ghost, right?

Right.
Laurel came to almost as quickly as she’d gone down. Roy had his arms under hers, pulling her to her feet and dragging her to cover. The charred and mangled remnants of the B.O.O.T. collar dropped from her wrist. She let her forehead rest against the cool metal of a disabled vehicle and pressed her finger to her radio. “Overwatch, Oracle, if anyone is listening, we could use some backup.”

“Already on it, Black Canary,” Diggle replied. Laurel’s shoulders sagged and she heaved a sigh of relief. “Just hold the line a little while longer.”

Laurel nodded and forcibly swallowed the hazy, painful fog those damn guns caused. Arsenal was already back to business at her side. He fired off three arrows, then lowered his bow. He was staring at something about 50 yards into the mess. “What. The fuck.”

Black Canary followed his gaze, then cocked her head. “Huh.” Watching Red Hood in action against that many guns and Ghosts never failed to amaze. Her brow furrowed and panic swelled in her chest when she saw what was missing. “Where’s Starling?” She pressed her radio again. “Starling?”

Ev’s breathy voice came back. “I’m. Here.” There was a distinct gunshot, then a sound that could only be gunmetal cracking against bone. “I. Might. Need. Help.”

Laurel and Roy exchanged a dark look. “I’m gonna kill him,” she said. Roy was already leaping over their cover and launching arrows.

In the midst of a sea of Ghosts, Jason had the common sense to know he might - might - be in over his head. There would be time to worry about that later. He dodged the prongs of a taser and rolled out of the way, using his momentum to bring his knee up into the next Ghost’s face. He would never admit it, but he was tired. These guys didn’t go down like your average goon, and he was just a tad outnumbered.

A sonic scream exploded just past him, sending an entire defensive line flying. Red arrows followed, sailing into the men still standing. Jason had to smile inside his helmet: he was working with some real pros. Speaking of pros, he belatedly remembered the less-pro Ev. A twisting in his gut nagged at him. Others might call the sensation “guilt.” He spared a look over his shoulder in the direction he’d left her. His gut twisted tighter when he saw the tiny Starling fighting off three Ghosts. That explained the sudden Black Canary intervention.
He was more than a little proud, too. His instinct told him to drop it, forget his proximity to Mother, and help her, but she was handling not one but three Ghosts.

With his own opponents out of the way, Black Canary was brute-forcing her way efficiently through the melee with Arsenal at her heels, narrowly avoiding the tacticals and back up that had swept in after their initial attack. No. This was his chance. Only Palette was here to slow him down, but another booming Canary Cry dropped the giant before he could make a mess of things for Jason. He could reach out and touch the armored SUV. He tossed a small grenade that rolled and stopped at the back driver’s side tire before it blew, sending the vehicle a few feet up in the air before it crashed back to the asphalt in a broken heap.

Engine noises rumbled in the night. More were coming, and he might soon lose this opportunity. Red Hood pulled out his grappling gun and fired it at the damaged rear passenger door. He anchored the wire under his bicep and twisted with his whole body, ripping the door right off its hinges.

The other person left in the vehicle was the feeble-looking old woman. She was thin, frail, and so gray. She had blood matted and dripping down her face. She moaned and her eyes fluttered, but she was only barely conscious. Behind him, Arsenal and Black Canary were keeping her armed guards too busy to intervene.

Jason merely had to lean into the open space, cut away her seat belt, and pull her out in his arms.

Laurel saw it happening. She saw it all happening: Ev still struggling with a small cohort of Ghosts, and Jason carrying the well-dressed and shockingly small woman away from the vehicle he’d just blown up. As if he could sense her, his red helmet turned back to her and in her ear, she heard, “Sorry, Laurel. Gotta run.”

He turned his back to her, threw the limp woman over his shoulder and raised his grappling gun. She dropped her opponent with a vicious tonfa strike to his head, though she was only half-aware of the fight at all. Her whole focus turned to Jason. He was leaving. He was leaving with Mother. In the middle of a fight. Starling still needed them. The city still needed them to mop this up, and his feet were already leaving the pavement.

She lurched forward and screamed, “JASON,” but he was gone.

Evelyn heard the scream but didn’t have the time or energy to investigate or even wonder. She was fading fast. Her grand plan to kick ass until she rejoined the others wasn’t the best idea she ever had.
A blast from a LIGHT gun was the final straw. It came from her left side, launching her clear off her feet, spinning until she crashed back down. Asphalt and broken glass dug into her exposed skin. In a daze, she gave a moment to think about how she’d have to thank Laurel for the use of the Canary’s jacket.

With a grunt of effort, she pushed until she was on her back. With another burst, she propped herself up on her elbows, gasping for breath and forcing her eyes to focus on the two Ghosts approaching her slowly. Her heart thudded, echoing in her ears. She needed to get her feet under herself. She needed to stand. She had run out of .45 rounds. She was vaguely aware that she still had a few smoke and flash-bang 40mm rounds on her belt, but the idea of pulling the AG36 off her hip and loading, then aiming and firing, was too much. She still couldn’t stand.

Fear tickled at the base of her spine. They were getting closer. They weren’t in a hurry. She was no longer a threat. Something coppery dripped from her nose onto her lips. All she could hear was her own roaring pulse. Everything that wasn’t the two Ghosts blurred in her periphery. Something high pitched rumbled around her, but the Ghosts didn’t change their pace. They didn’t even look away from her.

There was no one coming.

Her feet tried to plant but the asphalt moved and slipped. Rocks and glass dug into her fingers until she couldn’t put weight on them anymore. She patted her pockets and the MOLLE vest pouches until her stinging palm landed on something solid: a spring-loaded pocket knife. It felt heavy in her hand, but she released the blade and gripped it tight.

The booted feet stopped next to her. The barrel of a LIGHT gun slowly trained on her face. Evelyn swallowed and forced her eyes up to the man wielding the weapon. She’d be damned if she was going to die cowering and unarmed.

A gunshot blasted. Ev jerked and winced, but the Ghost stumbled and fell. Starling’s head whipped over her shoulder and she saw heavily-armored SWAT officers pouring around a tactical that no longer had shooters. One officer was in the lead, marching right for Starling, covered by a helmet, goggles, and ski mask, pumping non-lethal shotgun rounds into the Ghosts that had been just moments from executing Starling.

Ev collapsed and let out the breath she’d been holding in a sob. Gooseflesh prickled across her skin and tears threatened to fall. She struggled for breath and to keep from breaking down. Her entire body started to shake.
“Hey, hey,” a female voice came out of the officer, who took a padded knee next to Starling. She pulled her goggles up to her helmet and her ski mask down. Detective Liza Warner slung her shotgun and took Evelyn by a hand and shoulder, pulling her back up. “You’re okay, it’s okay now.”

Liza’s eyes were warm and steady enough to ease Ev’s shaking. She let the older woman pull her to her feet. She almost collapsed into Liza’s arms when she saw her eyes go wide and her free arm reaching for the shotgun. Before Liza could draw, Black Canary dove off the roof of the nearest vehicle, blasting a sonic scream at the Ghost who had managed to recover himself. Liza and Starling winced, but the scream missed them.

Laurel grabbed Ev into a bone-crushing hug. She was whispering apologies when Liza addressed her. “Is this your idea of looking out for the kids in this city?”

Laurel’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t let Ev go. “What are you doing here?”

“Spartan called us,” Liza replied, nodding in the direction of her small team of officers cleaning up the remaining Ghosts with Arsenal.

“You’re the people he’s been recruiting?”

Liza scoffed quietly and removed her helmet. She winced and stretched her facial muscles after the confines of such tight head-wear. “You know, some of us take our oaths pretty seriously.”

Laurel’s grip on Starling relaxed a little, but Ev couldn’t find the energy or motivation to move. “Last time I saw you, you seemed pretty determined to get yours and get out.”

Liza exhaled slowly out her nose. She looked away, still watching her team. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure what kind of mom I’d be if I told my son to have honor and integrity but didn’t have any myself.” Liza returned her gaze to Ev, then back to Laurel. “Keep a sharper eye on her,” she ordered with a pointed finger.

“It won’t happen again,” Laurel answered.
The glaze of fear faded from Ev’s eyes. She looked up to Laurel and asked, “Where did Ja-Red Hood go?”

Laurel frowned and stared in the direction he’d gone. “I don’t know.” She pressed her lips to Ev’s forehead and whispered, “I’m so sorry, Ev, I shouldn’t have-”

“It’s fine.” Ev pushed away, nodding mostly to reassure herself. “It’s fine. I’m okay.”

“Evelyn,” Laurel started, but her radio crackled with interference.

“All channels, all channels,” Oracle’s voice came in clear, “I just got a 9-1-1 from Overwatch. You need to get back to the bunker now.”

The fear prickled at Ev all over again. Even Laurel couldn’t hide her fear. “Oracle, what’s happening?”

There was a pause before she replied, “I don’t know. It’s an automated call she and I set up. It would only send to me if she keyed it in and didn’t deactivate it.”

Arsenal was running back to them, eyes wild even behind his mask. Laurel had turned a particular shade of gray.

“Go,” Liza commanded. “I don’t know what I just heard, but I know that look. We got this.”

Laurel’s shoulders sagged, then straightened. She offered Liza her hand. Liza took it in a firm shake. “Thanks.”

They ran back to Black Canary and Arsenal’s bikes and took off in a race back to the bunker.

John rocked his giggling, cooing daughter in his arms, smiling and making the sounds right back at her bright little face. Felicity turned from her work and paused. She needed to tell him it was time for him to get to Overwatch duties, but in that moment he was unguarded and happy: a rare sight
for any member of O-T-A.

Whatever O-T-A was anymore. It there still was an O-T-A.

Her scowl darkened on Oliver’s uniform display. He was busy, yet again, with some manner of “mayor stuff.” He told her what it was, but she hadn’t really been listening. She stopped listening when he got that tone, the one that told her another excuse was coming. She’d made time for him and the team tonight, but he wouldn’t do the same for her.

The presence of the little demon-ninja baby managing to look down his nose at everyone simultaneously while he moved through a series of katana katas over and over and over did not help. What kind of kid wouldn’t have gotten bored by now? He made Andy jumpy. Helena watched him from the other side of the training mats, but Damian had already scoffed at her offer to train together. He’d nearly launched himself at Thea when she arrived. Only his mother’s ominous instructions to “be good and honorable” before she left with Nyssa quelled his tiny rage. Thea sat across from Felicity, sipping a silver flask with her legs propped indolently on the desk. Her eyes missed nothing.

“Glad to see you’re feeling better,” Felicity muttered without looking up from her work. She and Curtis were officially attached at the hip over his battery project, but the biggest problem was convincing the board to support her patent plan. She and Curtis could tinker into the space age, but it wouldn’t do anyone else any good if they kept their inventions stored on a shelf in the company basement.

Thea raised a dark eyebrow very, very slowly at Felicity. She took another small sip. “I am, thanks.”

“Does this mean you’ll be back to patrolling soon?” Felicity kept her eyes on her brightly-lit screen.

Thea removed her feet from the desk and stood from her chair. She started pacing the raised platform. She mumbled an excuse.

John carefully placed Sara back in her crib. He caught Helena’s eyes and she gave him a barely perceptible nod. Thea was pacing. Andy was pacing. He set his ear piece and caught himself up on the team’s evening patrol. It was mostly uneventful, but that was a good thing for Starling’s first night.
The one thing he still couldn’t quite wrap his mind around was Damian, Nyssa’s nephew. For all intents and purposes, he couldn’t imagine a child in their world being any different, but imaging and seeing were two different things. Once instructed by his mother to stay in the bunker, and behave “with honor,” he, well, did. John wracked his brain but couldn’t remember any time in his childhood when he or his brother exhibited Damian’s diligence and obedience to his mother’s orders.

His mind kept wandering to Thea: she looked rough. Rougher than she had when they first met Talia, like every second in the bunker was sucking the life out of her. Her hair hung limp and greasy. Her cheeks had sunken and were capped by dark bags under her eyes. Oliver begged him for trust, trust that he knew what he was doing with Thea, but the hard evidence was…hard. The devolution of Thea Queen seemed to happen overnight until John remembered just how little they’d seen of the girl in recent weeks. Somewhere out there was a magician working on helping her, and a whole ragtag family who wanted to support her, but that only meant so much if she wouldn’t let them in. Andy was living proof of that.

“I thought Sara would be with her mom tonight,” Andy’s voice cut into John’s thoughts right on cue. The smaller man materialized at his brother’s side, casting a frown toward Sara’s crib.

“Lyla got called into work,” John answered. He made a long show of adjusting the Overwatch monitoring suite to his liking.

“Maybe it’s about time to get them both out of town.” Andy cleared his throat and crossed his arms, still staring at Sara’s crib.

John pushed back from the desk and followed Andy’s gaze, then brought his attention back to Andy. His neck shown a glisten of sweat. “Waller won’t let Lyla dip out, and I think we’re safe together. Unless you know something we don’t?” The movement of Thea’s restless pacing continued unabated in John’s periphery.

Andy’s face crumpled in defeat. “You still think I’m playing both sides? After everything? I am your brother, Sara is my niece-”

“Andy,” John held up his hands in surrender, quelling the outburst before it could fully distract the others. “Yes, you are my brother. You also faked your own death to sign up with the worst gang since the League. You dropped your own wife and child. I love you, but you have got to give me time here, man.”

“Time, right.” Andy nodded. “I just…” he trailed off as the lights flickered.
Felicity sat bolt upright. “What?” she asked up to the ceiling. “What is happening?” The lights flickered again in time with the computer monitors, before everything blinked into darkness at once. “No, no, no, no,” Felicity’s voice came through the darkness.

“Power’s out?” Helena’s voice asked from the inky blackness.

“No, no,” Felicity responded, shrill, followed by a series of scrapes and thunks and “ow”s. “We’re on an independent power source.” Her voice came out strained and stretched.

John was already moving, his feet carrying him by memory through the darkness to his daughter’s crib. He reached with one hand for the crib and his other hand dropped to the weapon holstered at his hip. Felicity was still clumsily fussing with something on the ground and muttering with increasing frustration. “Shut up,” John hissed. Felicity stopped with mumbled dissent.

The bunker was silent. No one moved or spoke.

Then the door opened, just a crack. Light streamed in, blinding the team, followed by the distinctive hiss and clatter of smoke grenades lobbed into the bunker.

Time froze for John. His hands were already on the concealed pistol at his waist, but he couldn’t get his mouth or his feet to move. His mind ground to a halt like a faulty gear, locked between Sara at his back, and the intruders coming through the door. The smoke obscured the light filtering in through the door, leaving the attackers masked and blurred. Somewhere behind him, Felicity was coughing and shouting something. Helena and Andy were calling to him. He could hear them moving but he couldn’t see them. The smoke was familiar, but stung his eyes and nostrils, burning into his throat as he breathed. Where was Thea? He hadn’t heard her so much as breathe, let alone move or react. Damian was cursing up a storm in Farsi.

A tall figure in head-to-toe black materialized from the smoke within arm’s reach of John. At some point, he had drawn his weapon but his mind was still muddled and slow. The Ghost was already aiming a rifle in his face and John realized he still hadn’t pulled the trigger. Shadows were streaming past unhindered and he couldn’t make his finger press the trigger.

“John!” Andy barked in his ear, then fired his own weapon and the Ghost fell back, out of John’s sight. The explosion brought all the action rushing back in a high definition flood of sound and activity. Ghosts and Malcolm’s assassins seemed to be everywhere at once. John tracked the movement - they were steadily surrounding the computer platform - while firing at the closest
targets and trying to get back to Sara’s crib. Andy was already moving that direction, shouting orders to the others.

“Damian, crib!” Andy called over his shoulder. Damian let his confusion and annoyance show for a beat before ramming a sword into the foot of an assassin and flipping out of the way before the man could slam his fists down onto his head in a fit of pain-induced rage. Had Andy been that close to the door the whole time?

The lights flickered to life and amidst the insanity collapsing around him, John saw Thea. She was leaning over one of Felicity’s servers then stood straight to accept a bundle of dark cloth from the nearest assassin. She shook it out and threw it over her head: League robes. The man passed her a quiver, bow, and twin swords sheathed in a frog on her back.

Something crushed inside Diggle’s heart. He’d known, of course, he and Oliver had discussed the subject at length, that this moment was coming. They didn’t know when or how. They certainly never imagined it happening in such spectacular fashion, but they knew this would happen. Knowing and seeing are two different things, though. Her pale face was drawn and blank, empty. She went through the motions of holstering her League weaponry like a ghost. She responded to something the assassin said with a head nod.

The assassin turned but didn’t get far. Helena caught him across the cheek with a sneakered foot as she launched herself over the desks lining the platform. She didn’t bother to spare him a second look before squaring off with Thea, twisting her practice staff into its two parts.

“What are you doing?” Helena cocked her head. The question came out flat and cold, a perfect match to Thea’s expression. The two women began to slowly circle each other.

Thea reached back and unsheathed both blades, giving them a single, unnecessary flourish before dropping into a fighting stance. “Walk away, Helena.”

Helena’s eyes flashed over Thea’s shoulder. Felicity’s server bank was blinking busily, but the monitors were still off. Thea pivoted forcing Helena to counter her footwork and stay away from the servers. Helena’s voice turned icy. “Why? Is it because we’re such great friends?”

Thea’s haggard face hardened. “Fine.”

As they launched at each other in a flurry of sword and stick strikes, Felicity’s hands shook on her
tablet. Nothing was working except the lights and her server bank, rendering her tablet as little more than a very, very expensive paperweight. Next to her, not helping in any way, shape or form, Damian argued uselessly against Andy as he forcibly shoved a baby carrier onto the boy’s shoulders while Sara screamed and wailed in her crib.

“You have to go!”

“I can fight!” Damian’s lips curled in a snarl but, to his credit, he did nothing to stop Andy.

Andy slowed down just enough to snatch Damian by his tiny shoulders and give him a firm shake. “You take Sara, and you run.” Diggle could only do so much to hold the attackers off, while the others seemed content to guard the platform where Thea and Helena hacked at each other.

A calloused brown hand snapped in Felicity’s vision and Andy barked at her, “Listen! I’m going to cover you while you and Damian get to the elevator. Can you get the doors open?”

The sudden invasion of her space was enough to draw Felicity out of her spiral of confusion and panic. She blinked between Andy and the elevator doors: it looked like an impossibly long journey through armed men, but she knew she could hard-wire directly into the elevator’s system, with or without her wifi. She gulped a deep breath. “Yes. I can get the doors open.”

“Damian?” Andy didn’t finish the question.

The boy was done arguing. He straightened his shoulders and nodded with all the solemnity of a little boy being asked for too much. “I can get out with Sara.”

“And find your mom?”

Damian rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

“Good.”

Helena blocked a wide sword swing and spun across Thea’s outstretched arm, bringing her elbow up hard to the side of Thea’s face. The younger woman grunted and stumbled away, catching
herself on a desk.

“You’re looking a little slow,” Helena taunted. Thea slowly turned, glowering from behind her hair.

Thea straightened and wiped the blood from under her nose. “Didn’t want you to feel too bad when I finish this.”

Thea lunged forward in a flurry of tight, hard strikes. Helena was keeping up, countering as fast as she could with her separated bo staff sticks, but each time their weapons connected, the impact reverberated through her bones. She was slowing down fast. Thea’s pale, bedraggled appearance belied the fury of her blood lust. Every time Helena twisted and tried to push around Thea, Speedy, true to her nickname, pushed right back and kept herself between Helena and the server bank. In her periphery, Helena could see that half the Ghosts and assassins weren’t even bothering to engage the Diggle’s and Felicity or Damian. They were just posted, silent, creepy, and totally disinterested in the fighting, around the platform.

Helena pivoted out of Thea’s reach, giving herself just enough time to adjust her sweaty palms on the sticks before Thea closed the distance. Helena gritted her teeth and kept her arms and feet moving in spite of the burning of her tired muscles. What Helena could see across the bunker told her she had to keep this up, at least a little while longer. Diggle and Andy were covering Felicity as she dug into a hidden electric panel next to the elevator door, while Damian - with Sara in the carrier on his back, a sight Helena might never forget - snarled and criticized every move the group made.

The elevator doors opened with a discordant ding, bringing another volley of gunfire down on the beleaguered group. Felicity shrieked and ducked away from the panel before she could get the doors closed. Andy and John returned fire as Damian spiked a sword up at the elevator’s emergency hatch. With a jump, he caught the hilt of the sword and yanked it back down, taking the hatch with him. Damian launched himself up and out of the melee in a blur of pint-sized tactical black clothing.

Diggle spared a fraction of a second to nod at Helena, and she finally let her guard drop, giving into the exhaustion. Maybe it was all the practice sparring and the muscle memory of letting each other take breaks. Maybe they were really friends. Maybe it was just confusion, or condescension that Helena couldn’t keep up, but Thea paused her onslaught when Helena’s arms fell. The corners of her eyes crinkled. The confusion on her face lasted for barely a blink before her expression returned to stone.

Thea flipped her swords into the frog on her back, only to pull an arrow from her quiver, spinning it in her hand. “Are you done?”
Helena’s heart thundered. If there was ever a time when she thought she might actually have a heart attack, this was it. Keeping up with Thea after hours of drilling was too much. Sweat pooled and cooled down her neck and back, dampening her t-shirt. Bits of hair had come loose from her ponytail and now stuck to her forehead and the nape of her neck. Thea looked as dry and pale as she had when Helena confronted her, even while draped in the heavy cloth and leather League robe. Her arms shook, but Helena raised her sticks anyway. “Nope. You messed up, Speedy. What are you doing?”

Thea blinked once, twice, then sucked in a shuddering breath. The muscles in her jaw jumped, as if she might speak, but she shook the impulse away and darted into Helena’s guard even faster than before, bring her knee up to the taller woman’s stomach, then her fist crashing down across Helena’s cheek when the impact of Thea’s knee caused her to double over. Helena crashed to the ground in a spinning tumble, losing her practice staff pieces in the process. She tried to stand, but her arms and legs wouldn’t cooperate. Thea took her time, approaching slowly as Helena rolled to her back and pushed herself against a desk leg.

She was done.

Helena raised her eyes to Thea. It took far too much effort to keep Thea’s form in focus.

“It’s done,” one of the Ghosts announced, pulling a thumb drive from the server.

“Get them and clear out,” Thea responded without turning her eyes from Helena. She still held the arrow, twirling it this way and that. Faster than Helena’s fuzzy vision could track, Thea lunged forward, jamming the arrow into her flesh. She gasped as the pain brought sudden clarity. Thea still held onto the arrow and whispered in Helena’s ear, before she pulled back and punched her across her temple. Helena’s world went black before she could process Thea’s words.

John saw Thea stab Helena and for the second time in…was it hours? Seconds? Days? He froze. Time stood still as the girl he thought of as his own little sister left one of their own with an arrow in her chest. That was definitely not one of the possible scenarios he and Oliver had discussed.

Time came screaming back to speed when Andy’s body collided with his. Andy’s shouted “No!” was cut off by a sword in his gut, a sword that had been aimed at John’s back.

John caught his brother under his arms and they both slid to the floor. He could hear Felicity alternately crying and cursing her tablet somewhere behind him. He had to get back up. He had to
defend her. But his brother was in his arms, the warm stickiness of blood was pouring from him to John’s hands.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Andy choked out, shaking his head rapidly and squeezing John’s hand painfully tight. “My fault,” he said between gasping breaths. “My fault-”

“No, no,” John cut him off, shaking his head against Andy’s fevered insistence that this was somehow his fault. “Andy, it’s okay, it’s-” he stopped short when Andy’s eyes widened at something over John’s shoulder. That was the last thing John saw before a hard, blinding pain cracked against the back of his head and his world went black.

Felicity kept her eyes and her fingers flying on her tablet. She didn’t have time to think about what she’d seen, none of it. She had to get the power back on to get all her systems up and running. She had to get a message to Oliver, to Laurel, to Oracle, hell, Barry Allen would perfect right about now. With a few strokes, she initiated her fail-safe protocol that would go directly to Oracle. But would that be enough? Her fingers wouldn’t cooperate on the tablet, or maybe the tablet wouldn’t cooperate. A million possible solutions ran through her mind, but nothing stayed long enough to materialize into something tangible.

Tears streamed down her eyes despite her effort to ignore everything but finding a way to alert the others. An arrow flew into the tablet with a crack, sending it flying from her hands. Felicity shrieked and stumbled, trying to push herself backward but only finding the bunker wall at her back. Boots surrounded her, but the tiniest pair was what filled her vision. She looked up to see Thea pulling her hood up over her head and slinging her bow over her shoulder.

“Thea, wh-”

Felicity was unconscious before she could finish the question.

One week earlier

Laurel smiled as she came through the bunker door. Ever since they’d let Jason sync his phone to the speakers, the bunker was, more often than not, thumping vintage Britney, Beyonce and, at this moment, Ludacris. Evelyn hooted a laugh and Helena tried to bring her back with her own laughing, “Again, Miss Flips-a-Lot.”
Jason, Helena, Roy, and Ev were on the training mats, Jason observing as Evelyn went through a series of offensive strikes with a set of escrima sticks Laurel didn’t recognize. Helena countered with her own practice staff. Whatever they were trying to accomplish was lost as the trio dissolved into giggles when one of the sticks launched wildly out of Evelyn’s hand. Roy dropped the medicine ball he’d been bouncing off the wall and gave up trying to focus.

“Looks effective,” Laurel commented, kicking off her shoes before stepping onto the mats.

Jason grinned at her. “Those bad boys pack 65,000 volts a piece. You hit the right button, you can fling it however you want and take down just about anything.”

“65,000 volts?” Laurel picked the baton up between two fingers and held it away from her body. “Isn’t that a little…?”

“He stole them from Nightwing!” Ev grinned and snatched the baton back, twirling her new toys.

Jason held up a finger. “Ah, ah, no. Tactically acquired. We don’t steal.” He nodded meaningfully at Laurel for approval.

“We’ve been teaching her good stuff.” Roy winked at Laurel.

Laurel rolled her eyes, then stretched her neck and shook out her arms. “What are we working on?”

“Dance party,” Ev declared with a solemn nod, still flipping her decidedly more dangerous than Laurel previously estimated escrima sticks.

Laurel snickered, but Jason was already moving his hips and feet to the music. Roy was right behind him with comically pursed lips snapping his fingers and moving from foot to foot.

“C’mon, Laurel,” Ev tried again, joining the boys in their cheesy attempt at dancing.

She turned to Helena and raised her brow in question. Helena crossed her arms and had to visibly stop herself from smiling. With one more look between the group and Helena, Laurel joined in to a
chorus of “hell yeah”’s.

They moved in unison around Helena who held her ground and cast her eyes up to the ceiling.

“C’mon,” Laurel started to poke her in the arm to the beat of the song. Jason and Roy each took a place on either side of her.

“This is terrible.” Helena spoke in a flat voice, working very hard to not look at Jason or Roy. “This is the whitest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You know you want to.” Ev grinned, gyrating and bouncing next to Laurel.

“You’re getting a free Arsenal-Red Hood sandwich.” Roy turned, dropped his hands to his knees to grind his butt against Helena’s leg, earning a loud guffaw from Jason on the other side.

Without warning, Helena threw her arms over Laurel’s shoulders and pushed her back so they were free from the boys. “Who said I want that sweaty sandwich?” she called over her shoulder, already moving to the music with Laurel and Ev at her side. She turned her head just enough to stick her tongue out at the laughing Jason and Roy.

The only noise louder than the music reverberating through the bunker was the hooting and laughing as Helena finally gave into the dance party.

Right now

Laurel slid to her knees and grasped Helena’s still face between her shaking hands. The muscles in her throat threatened to strangle her and her heart seized. Helena wasn’t moving. Her eyes didn’t open.

“Helena,” Laurel choked out, pushing blood-matted hair from the other woman’s pale face. “Helena!” It came out as a sob. Behind her, Evelyn was standing stock still, mouth open, with silent tears running down her face. Roy was yelling something from the other side of the bunker, near the elevator, but Laurel couldn’t make sense of his words.
She had to do something, right? But what? First aid, but she couldn’t remember how to start. 9-1-1. She had to call 9-1-1. Would they even come? Were there still first responders? Oliver and Diggle had been talking about it, but everything they’d said was a hazy mess in her mind.

“**LAUREL.**” Oracle’s voice broke through the gridlock of Laurel’s brain. Her comms were still on. “Bleeding and breathing.” Oracle spoke in a firm, measured voice that brought Laurel back from the edge.

She blinked and tried to focus on Oracle’s voice. “Bleeding?”

“Check for arterial bleeding, dark, heavy or spurting. Is she bleeding?”

Laurel immediately went to the arrow jammed in Helena’s chest…no, on closer inspection, it was high. *Very* high. Over her collarbone. “There’s…blood under her. Her shoulder’s bleeding, but it’s not bad.”

“Okay, check her breathing.”

Laurel’s hands fluttered around Helena’s chest as if she was going to get a pulse or feel a steady rise and fall. As her efforts were unsuccessful, she got more agitated and pressed harder on Helena’s chest. The pressure must have radiated to Helena’s shoulder, because her eyes fluttered opened.

Laurel recoiled and Helena’s mouth opened in a strangled groan than grew into a cry. Her back arched and her feet kicked uselessly, pushing off the floor, but the movement only wrenched the arrow around in her shoulder. Helena’s eyes flew around the room, wide with fear. Her breathing immediately kicked into near-hyperventilating.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” Laurel came back, catching Helena’s good arm before she could grab the arrow and her cheek, forcing Helena to look at her. “Just breathe, you’re okay.” Laurel dropped to her bottom in a heap. “Holy shit.”

Helena opened her mouth, but all that came out was a disgruntled cry of pain that rumbled into a growl as she forced her breathing back under control. A small but strong body crashed into Laurel, wrapping her in a hug, shoulders wracking. Without looking, Laurel reached up to stroke Ev’s hair.
“So…she’s okay?” Oracle asked.

Laurel burst into a hysterical laugh, earning an even more disgruntled lip curl from Helena. “Yes. Stay here,” she patted Ev and disentangled herself. “I know what to do. Roy!”

As she got her first good look around the disaster zone that used to be the bunker, she saw Roy bent low over another body. He sat back on his haunches and his shoulders sagged. “He’s not breathing. No pulse.”

Laurel ran to him. Her hand flew to her mouth when she saw Andy in a pool of blood. She reached for Roy. When he didn’t respond to her hand on his shoulder, she looked down at him: his hands and mouth were red with blood. He’d been doing CPR. His eyes were glazed over, locked on Andy’s body.

“Oracle, it’s Andy. He’s…he’s gone.” Laurel closed her eyes to count to five, but another angry outburst from Helena called her back. “Roy, I need your help.” She kneeled in front him and, like she had with Helena, forced him to look at her. “I’m going to get the first aid get. I need you to get the bolt cutters, okay? Okay?” After a moment, his eyes cleared and he nodded at her. She stood and held out her hand, pulling him to his feet.

When they got back to Helena, Ev was tucked under her good arm, but her skin was ghastly pale and her breathing shallow. “You guys wanna give me a hand here?” Her eyes flickered to the arrow and back to them.

Roy still wasn’t talking, but he took a knee next to Helena and Laurel positioned herself in front. She put one hand where Ev’s head had just been resting and brought her other up, but paused. “You’re not going to like it.”

Helena’s lips tightened. She inhaled a deep breath and nodded. “Do it.” Her face screwed up in pain when Laurel’s hand grasped the arrow, keeping it steady while Roy worked as quickly as he could to clip off the arrowhead protruding from Helena’s trapezius. Her teeth clenched before a scream erupted as Laurel yanked the arrow shaft free. Ev’s arms tightened around her waist and Roy was ready with clean gauze. Together, he and Laurel staunched and wrapped both sides of the wound while Helena cursed, her good arm clenching around Ev.

They all breathed a collective sigh of relief once it was over. Helena was still a sickly white, but the sweat along her hairline was drying. She shot a quizzical look down at Ev, who sat up and
wiped tears from her cheeks. “What’s the matter, kid? Don’t tell me you were worried.”

“I’m fine,” Ev sniffled and stood, resolutely straightening her jacket. “I ju-”

The back door flew open. Oliver thundered it, with Talia hot on his heels, in direct competition to see who could win the “Most Angry and Concerned” award.

“Where’s Felicity? Diggle?” Oliver boomed, searching the bunker like a frantic hound. He came up short at Andy’s body and whirled back to Laurel, the color drained from his face. “Laurel, where-”

Laurel popped to her feet with her hands out pleadingly. “We just got here, Ollie, Felicity and Diggle weren’t here. Helena?”

Roy pulled Helena to her feet. Oliver, Talia, and now Nyssa and a small crew of assassins watched her with baited breath. She hesitated, teeth grinding together and her eyes fell away from Oliver. “I don’t know. They were up and kicking when Thea-”

“She’s been through a lot,” Laurel intervened. “She was unconscious and had an arrow in her shoulder when we got here.”

Talia audibly snarled. She pulled a leather canteen off her shoulder and shoved it at the nearest assassin. “Get him breathing.”
Her men moved without question, but Nyssa stepped forward with a quiet word for her sister. “This is not an appropriate use of our resources.”

Talia’s expression darkened. “I will have the truth from him, and then he will die at my hand,” she ground out between her teeth. “And you will not question me in front of others again, do you understand?”

Oliver’s voice rose to shouting at Roy, who remained catatonic. He demanded an answer from Roy or Helena, who only shouted back, as to what happened to Felicity and John. Talia’s cadre of assassins gathered around her where she crouched over Andy’s body, doing God-knows-what. Ev was nearly spitting at Oliver, trying to put herself between him and Helena, completely ignored.

In the midst of the storm, Laurel closed her eyes and slowly inhaled. Oracle’s voice trickled into her ear, low and steady. “Laurel, you need to get control or they’re going to kill each other. We do not have time for this.”

An ear-shattering, high-pitched whistle cut through the bunker, ending all arguing. As the sound settled, all eyes turned to Laurel. She put on her best take-no-shit-lawyer face and waited for the hands to drop from protecting ears. “We do not have time for this.” Even Talia didn’t argue. “Oliver, it’s time for Broken Arrow. Call Lyla.”

“I already did.”

“Good.” Laurel turned to the others. “Everyone else, grab your bug-out bags. We’re falling back to the fire station. The bunker’s compromised.”

“Can I assume ‘Broken Arrow’ does not apply to us and we may continue?” Talia’s voice dripped with venom. “The longer we wait, the harder it will be to revive him.”

Laurel dropped her gaze to Andy’s body but she didn’t respond. She couldn’t let Talia take him just to torture and kill him, he was John’s brother. She also couldn’t pass up an opportunity to save him, he was John’s brother.

Nyssa stepped close to Laurel, close enough that only she could hear. “I’ll make sure he stays alive.”
A fraction of the heaviness on Laurel’s chest lifted. She gave Nyssa’s arm a squeeze and whispered, “Thank you.” She steeled herself once more and faced the group at large. No one was moving. “Now. We have to go now.” Everyone scattered to their tasks like roaches when the light flickers on. “Roy,” she called and his head turned from his locker, eyes still glassy. “Do you think you can find Jason?” He nodded. “Get your stuff and find him. We need him. Ev,” Laurel continued, “help Helena.” Helena opened her mouth the argue but Laurel raised a hand. “Just deal with it. You’re no good to us more hurt than you are right now.”

“I’m going to get Sara, and I’ll send Lyla your way when we’re done.” Oliver’s voice, gentle but firm, pulled Laurel from the busy, organized chaos in the bunker. “Will you-”

“I’ll clean out your office,” Laurel offered and Oliver bent his head in thanks.

“And you remember-”

“I know how to set the charges.” Laurel couldn’t help but offer him a small smile and take his hand. “I got this. You take care of Sara, and when you get back…” She trailed off at Oliver’s stricken expression. “We’ll get them back.”

Oliver scrubbed a hand over his face. His scruff was turning into a beard. It suited him, but at the moment he just looked haggard. “Laurel, is this the right thing to do?”

“You know it is.” Oliver looked away, but Laurel just sidestepped back into his vision. “You know it is. We talked about this. We all agreed.”

His face crumpled. “She didn’t believe me. She didn’t think this would happen and she sure as hell didn’t think I’d stick to the plan. You know Felicity.”

“I know, and I don’t know what to do about that, but Oliver, we all knew this was a possibility and we all agreed on the plans.”

Oliver nodded. “Okay. Okay. I should, um, I should go. Sara’s with Talia’s people and Lyla…she sounded okay, but…”
“She’s a soldier, she’s good at that.”

“Yeah.” Before stepping away, Oliver pulled Laurel into a tight hug, cupping the back of her head to his shoulder. It was more for his comfort than hers, but she held on as long as he did.

Before he made it to the door, Helena limped to him. “Wait, before you go,” she reached out to stop him. “Thea said something before she knocked me out. It’s kinda fuzzy, with the concussion and all, but I think she told me to stay down.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it was sort of a stab,” Helena mimicked the gesture, “lean in, ‘stay down,’ and then she knocked me out.”

Oliver let the words sink in.

“I know it’s not much,” Helena went on, “but she could have killed me, and she didn’t.”

Her eyes were still dilating unnaturally, flickering. Her pallor was sickly and green. But she was standing, badly and favoring her wounded shoulder, but standing.

“Thank you, Helena.”

She breathed out a single chuckle. “Never thought I’d hear that from you.”

Oliver returned the sad laugh. “Get some rest. We’re not moving until I get back.”

Helena rolled her eyes but she was smiling. “And there’s the Oliver Queen I know.”

As Oliver made his way to his motorcycle, he took one last look at the building.
It was nice while it lasted.

Felicity’s arms and wrists ached. She didn’t know how long she’d been left in a cell with her arms flex cuffed behind her back. She sniffled. Her tears had long since dried on her cheeks. Her head throbbed with lightning bolts.

“Felicity, you still with me?” Diggle’s voice spoke from the cell next to hers.

“He’s gonna come,” she repeated. “He’s gonna be here any minute.”

Silence answered her. It stretched through the darkness outside her cell door.

“Please listen to me, Felicity,” John said in that voice, the one he used when trying to soothe or cajole a victim into acquiescence, “He’s not coming. He’s going to do exactly what we agreed he’d do. I need you to stay strong, for just a little while, so he can take care-”

“Of everyone but us?” Felicity bit back. “That’s not him, that’s not Oliver. Oliver loves me. And you. He won’t just leave us.”

She couldn’t see him, but Felicity could feel the sad resignation from the other cell. “You need to stay strong, and you need to comply. Whatever they ask for, just comply. They wanted us alive for a reason. Just do whatever they tell you to do.”

Felicity bit back a fresh round of tears, and began repeating her mantra. “He’s gonna come for me. He’ll be here. He wouldn’t leave me.”
Episode 12

Chapter Summary

With John and Felicity taken, Waller makes the team an offer to help retrieve them, but there's a very, very big catch.

Jason is still in the wind with Mother, and soon after Roy goes dark while trying to track Jason down. They can't get the ARGUS intel Waller is dangling unless they can also get Jason.

Jason has given Laurel so much, but she needs a sacrifice from him he may not be able to make. After it's Birds versus Outlaws, there may be too many selfish choices and too much bloodshed to keep the Renegades in one piece.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING:
This chapter delves into more violence than previous chapters, specifically (not sexual) violence against women.

I have spoiler-ish notes regarding Felicity in this chapter at the end.

Laurel sat on the edge of the sprawling king bed she shared with Jason. She came up here with the express intent of getting in at least a few hours of sleep while their world froze in purgatory. Without Oliver, they didn’t have the intel to move on Darhk and get Felicity and John back. Even with Oliver, they were going to need a solid cover story as to how exactly they’d gotten that intel, lest any blowback hit Thea. For now, they had to wait.

Her eyes ached and she had to make a conscious effort to keep them focused on one of the bricks in the opposite wall. She’d tried to lie down, but as soon as her head hit the pillow, her arm reached for Jason. The anger and fear she’d felt for Starling came rushing back, so white hot she’d immediately sat back up. Her skin crawled against the contact with those sheets.

Downstairs was silent. She’d gotten so used to hearing Helena, Ev, and Roy bickering, joking, shuffling around in the kitchen producing their own version of cooked food, arguing over the TV or music selection. The silence was eerie. They were all down there, but there wasn’t even a whisper or the soft creaking of someone turning over in one of the spare firehouse bunk beds.
Laurel knew she needed to do something, but for the life of her she couldn’t muster the energy to plant her feet and get off the damn bed. This was the part when the general has to rally her troops, reassure them that they were on the path to victory, that they would get the team reunited and win the day. Or just survive.

Yet there she sat, staring blindly at the wall, unable to lie down and too tired to stand. She closed her eyes and slowly counted to ten, silently mouthing the numbers. Maybe when she opened her eyes, this time, she would find herself back in her old apartment, with Sara sitting next to her and their dad in the sofa chair she’d picked out because she knew he’d be comfortable in it. Maybe this time Sara will have fixed the timeline and set her life back to where it should be. If anyone could fix this, it was Sara. God knew Laurel had bungled the job.

Maybe if she kept her eyes closed and pushed Sara, Sara, Sara out into the universe, Sara would hear her. Twins could do that, right? They were practically twins. Sara had to hear her.

_I thought I could make this right. I thought I could be strong, like you. I can’t even find the man who did this to us. I can’t keep our friends safe. I can’t do this._

Tears streamed in silence down her face from her tightly-shut eyes. She hadn’t heard any steps ascending the spiral staircase, but the weight on the bed shifted, and an arm looped around her shoulder, gently pulling her until her face found the crook of Helena’s shoulder. Once safely held, the dam broke. The sobs wracked her body, all while Helena murmured soothing words, telling her it would be okay, everything would be okay.

When the wave finally abated, Laurel sat up, sniffling and wiping the remaining tears from her cheeks.

“Any better?” Helena asked in a soft voice. Her other arm was still bandaged and secured in a sling. She had bruises on her cheeks and a distant purpling that would become a black eye by tomorrow.

Laurel’s face fell again. “I’m sorry.” She wiped at her nose with the edge of her sleeve. It was an old sweatshirt, anyway. “You almost died and now you have to be the one to comfort me.”

Helena snorted. “Whatever. Like I haven’t almost been killed before.” The corners of her lips turned up and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“We all trusted him,” Helena cut her off. “And, to be perfectly honest, it wasn’t that long ago that I would’ve done the exact same thing in his shoes.” Laurel looked to Helena with scrunched brows and a deep frown. “I’m serious. And for the record, Ev is downstairs right now. She’s fine. John got the backup you needed because he was doing his job for the team. This isn’t the Oliver Show anymore, and it’s not the Laurel Show. It was a close call, but we’re a team.”

Before Laurel could reply - not that she had any idea how to proceed - there was a loud knocking at the front door. Helena slid off the bed, staying Laurel with a quick gesture, and peered down the staircase. The murmur of conversation drifted up, followed by quick jogging steps up the stairs. Helena sighed and moved out of the way for Lyla. Everything about her was drawn as tight as a bow string. The tension betrayed her otherwise blank expression.

“Lyla, I’m-“ Laurel stood, her stomach in knots, but Lyla shook her head.

“It’s not your fault.” Laurel had to wonder how many times Lyla practiced those words. “ARGUS will help get John and Felicity back, but there’s a catch.”

“Of course there is,” Helena muttered.

Lyla spared Helena a side eyed glance before continuing. “Waller wants Jason Todd.”

“Of course she does,” Helena repeated, with more gusto.

Lyla kept her attention on Laurel, who only shook her head. “He’s not here. I was going to look for him, but…”

“Roy told me. He’s leaving now.” Lyla relaxed by a barely discernible measure. “If we give Waller Todd, she’ll read me in on everything she has on Darhk. She also gave me the authority to put together my own team and use all available ARGUS assets to move when we have the target.”

“Okay,” Laurel crossed her arms. She frowned at the wide window. The sun was coming up, just the first tips of orange battling the hazy gray darkness. Was it really already dawn? “Can you give
“Yes.” Lyla hesitated and stalled from leaving right then and there. “Oliver should be back before this evening. What’s Andy’s status?”

Laurel grimaced, then wiped the expression before turning back to Lyla. Lyla needed direct confirmation. She needed time to prepare an answer for John. “He’s alive.” Laurel tracked the visible loosening of Lyla, just another small measure more. “But, Talia al Ghul has him. Nyssa has assured me he will stay alive,” Laurel answered the question before Lyla could ask.

“He was playing both sides,” Lyla stated.

“It looks that way.” Laurel nodded.

“Okay,” Lyla was already moving, like standing still for this conversation had stalled a freight train. “I’ll let you know when Oliver gets back.” At Laurel’s confused face, Lyla explained, “He’s under strict instructions to tell me the moment he hands my daughter to my parents and when he’s gotten past the barricades going into the city.”

“Of course he is,” Helena piped up, continuing to be helpful.

Laurel turned back to the window to hide her smirk. The city was rumbling to life before her eyes. The sunlight slowly pouring over the buildings brought with it the motion of citizens starting their day. There were still people in this town going to work, school, going on about their lives in the face of everything.

If they could do it, then dammit, so could Laurel Lance.

Oliver rubbed a hand down his face. If he didn’t watch it, he’d have a full beard soon, but who had time to shave? How Roy kept a clean shave in almost any scenario continued to be a mystery to Oliver. For that matter, Jason’s ability to keep his facial hair within the particular parameters that qualified as rakish as opposed to unkempt, was downright infuriating.
The AM radio chatter confirmed and consolidated the information Oliver could observe, and it was exhausting. He felt an irrational impulse to close his fist and punch the machine into silence. The constant hum of a radio had evolved into a tinny ringing that rarely left his ears anymore.

He issued crisp instructions to one of the few remaining city government employees and closed the door to his temporary office. After the destruction of the main SCPD station and his office-cum-bunker, both the police and central government had consolidated into one of the old Federal buildings. City Hall wasn’t big enough for both, and it made sense to pool city resources. Not very long ago, this building had housed IRS offices, immigration, and other sundry Federal agencies that had all since shut down or relocated to a newer, better facility. It was crumbling, asbestos ridden, the pipes leaked, the air conditioning ran only with great, groaning protest, and it would do.

“…Adams is certainly doing more than our illustrious mayor.”

“Oh, of course, of course. Where the hell is Oliver Queen, anyway?”

“Well, he wasn’t out distributing clean water and food this afternoon, that’s for damn sure.”

“Maybe he was arming up his SWAT team. You know he’s got these cops and God only knows who else patrolling the streets like we’re in Baghdad. The Adams guys-“

“The Patriots.”

“Yeah, the Patriots, they don’t need body armor and machine guns. They’re just guys and gals helping people get home safe. Queen has armed thugs attacking the Patriots. It’s true, people are posting and Tweeting and calling in all day long. I wouldn’t put it past him to cut off internet access like we’re in damn North Korea.”

“Well, we are the only radio show left to call.”

“It’s called cornering the market, Jimmy.”

“They call us cockroaches for a reason,” the DJ laughed.
Oliver hit the knob on his radio harder than necessary. His bare office was bathed in blessed silence.

Adams. Patriots. It was enough to give him a migraine. He had to hand it to Damien: re-branding himself after a Founding Father and sending his souped-up army of drones out for goodwill missions was genius. They were doing a bang up job of making Oliver look inept and callous.

Joke’s on you, Darhk. I don’t need anyone’s help to look like an insensitive dick.

Darhk was winning hearts and minds. He didn’t need magic or an international terrorist famous for her brainwashing skills. Not that anyone would give any consideration to the fact that they needed help getting fresh water and food as a direct result of Darhk, oh no. First he made sure they were cut off, then he graciously distributed small quantities of necessities, like a Tooth Fairy who punches you in the mouth and then leaves a quarter under your pillow. Damien Adams was a regular fucking saint, who also happened to be holding Oliver’s best friend and girlfriend hostage. He could barely even think about his sister without spiraling.

A gentle throat-clearing at his doorway startled him. He looked up to see Laurel shrugging out of her coat. “Hey.”

Oliver’s face pinched. “How’d you know I was back?”

“Lyla.”

Right. He stood up from his desk. The ancient chair scraped painfully against the linoleum tile. Why did he feel the need to stand because Laurel walked into the room? He pushed the question down and moved around his desk to lean on it as casually as possible. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Laurel responded quickly. “I mean, aside from the obvious. I actually came to ask you the same question. How was Little Sara?”

“Oh, she was fine.” He thought for a moment then snickered. “I wouldn’t recommend anyone else driving a dirt bike off-road with a baby, though.”

Laurel pursed her lips and smirked. “I think that’s generally good advice. Where’d you get the dirt bike?”
At this, Oliver beamed. “Jason left it unattended outside the bunker.” Laurel’s face fell at the mention of Jason. Oliver sobered up. He’d have to revel in that victory in private. It was one of few he’d had lately. “You guys track him down yet?”

“No.” Laurel’s jaw tightened. “He’s slipped past Oracle and I haven’t heard from Roy since the last time he checked in around noon.”

“Any update on Andy?”

“No, but I trust Nyssa to not let Talia kill him.”

“I’m sure…” Oliver trailed off when he caught sight of his bedraggled, too-young assistant - now Chief of Staff, yikes - hovering near the door. With nothing more than an eyebrow raise, he signaled the young man to speak.

“I’m sorry Mr. Queen,” the man - maybe 22, skinny, and wearing the remnants of what might have been a passable grey suit, but now sweat and dust stained - gave an apologetic nod to Laurel. He didn’t recognize her. Oliver mentally filed that information away. Just a few months ago, Laurel was well-known, at least in the city government sector. “Um, we’re looking for the coffee maker, and we can’t find it. They’re getting restless.”

“Ah, right. Good call; they will riot without coffee.” He stepped past Laurel and down the hallway. He had made sure to bring one of the big coffee makers from his old office, and he had stowed it safely…here. He pushed open the door to one of the many unused offices and ushered his assistant in to get the machine.

“Who’s gonna riot?” Laurel appeared behind him. She was getting good at that.

“Oh, um,” he made himself busy collecting the other coffee accouterments: grounds, the big filters, Styrofoam cups, dry creamer, sugar packets. He paused and handed Laurel a box of dry creamer packets to carry. “I may as well just show you. C’mon.”

She followed behind him down the neon-lit hall. The air smelled stale and more than one bulb flickered. Oliver reminded himself that it could be worse. When they reached the large room - perhaps filled with cubicles in a previous life, but now just a wide empty space with a circle of chairs and a folding table for the coffee - Laurel slowed. A handwritten schedule was posted on the
door with acronyms and names Laurel recognized. After setting the heavy-duty coffee maker on the table, Oliver turned to see Laurel reading the schedule with dawning understanding. She might even recognize some of the people here tonight.

Oliver joined her at the door and stood back to make sure his assistant and group leader had everything they needed. He took the creamer from her hands and set it absentmindedly on one of the chairs at the edge of the room.

“Is this…?” She didn’t even seem to notice that her hands were now empty.

“Yeah.” Oliver nodded slowly. It was an AA meeting. The schedule on the door listed biweekly AA meetings, a women’s only survivor group, a grief group, and a generalized addiction group. “There are still people here, and I thought it would be important.”

Laurel struggled to speak. Her eyes glassed over, watching the group gather. They backed out and closed the door, and Laurel took one of Oliver’s hands. “Thank you.”

Oliver squeezed her hand and shrugged bashfully. “It’s nothing. It’s my job.”

Her head cocked with that look Oliver knew so well: Ollie, you’re full of crap, but I love you anyway. “It’s not your job. With everything you have to do, I can’t believe you even thought of it.”

He pulled her arm to loop it into his as he led her away. She didn’t fight it. In fact, she let herself sidle against him, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked back to his office. “I know how helpful these services are, so I want them to continue running as long as possible.”

Laurel stopped him just outside his office. A lump was forming in her throat, painful and choking, from trying to hold back the tears. Oliver’s expression turned to distress, and he looked so pained Laurel had to laugh despite her fight to stop crying. “I’m sorry,” she sniffled, “I just miss my dad.” Laurel chewed her lower lip for a beat before she giggled once, then again. Then she was doubled over with laughter, leaving Oliver even more panic-stricken than before.

Oliver reached for her but pulled back, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, I don’t…what…?”

Laurel straightened and did her level best to swallow the laughter and tears. Her cheeks hurt from
smiling so much. Oliver’s pained and lost expression only made her laugh harder. “I miss my dad,” she got the words out in between giggle fits. “An AA meeting makes me miss my dad.” The laughter bubbled up again.

Oliver recoiled, stunned, then his shock gave way to understanding and finally he smiled. He joined her laughter while drawing her into a tight hug. “This is really messed up.” He grinned into her hair, letting the soft, familiar scent of her shampoo wash over him.

Her shoulders shook with laughter. “This is so screwed up.” Their laughter faded and they pulled away, still holding each other’s arms. She brushed tears off her cheeks. “I’m sorry. We have much bigger things to worry about and I’m still crying about my dad.”

“No,” Oliver gently contradicted her. “We’re going to get Felicity, and John, and Thea back. I don’t know how I know that, but I am certain we are going to get them back and stop Darhk. It is scary right now, but that does not mean you don’t get to grieve.”

“I’ll get Jason.” Laurel pushed the feelings down and set to business. “If we move with ARGUS, Darhk and Malcolm will have no reason to believe Thea isn’t on their side. She’ll be safe.”

Oliver’s lips quirked in the ghost of a smile. “I know. I know.”

Even with his exhaustion-induced stubble - so long it was closer to a beard - and dark circles under eyes, Oliver believed what he was saying. He stood straight and his blue eyes held a light Laurel hadn’t seen in a long time. If they could keep this up, he might just be right.

“Thank God you’re here,” Helena grumbled under her breath. Laurel frowned until she saw Nyssa pacing the cleared vehicle bay in Jason’s firehouse, like a caged tiger. Starling was cleaning the handguns without taking her eyes off Nyssa’s silent, tense path around the area they used for training. “She’s been here for 45 minutes and won’t say why. She is freaking me out.”

When Nyssa saw Laurel come through the door, she halted her rounds and, to Helena and Ev’s surprise, actually smiled. “Hello, sister.”

Dread crept up Laurel’s spine. “What’s wrong? Is Andy okay?”
Nyssa resumed her typical deadly-serious countenance. “He’s fine, for now.”

“For now?” Laurel crossed her arms.

“Talia’s interrogation is ongoing, but he has not disclosed much. He did admit to colluding with Thea and Hive in the kidnappings of Felicity and John.”

Laurel ignored the sharp look from Helena and buried the knot that formed in her stomach at Nyssa’s words. “So, now what?”

The corners of Nyssa’s eyes wrinkled. It was a micro-expression of pride Laurel had identified when they trained together. “Talia has no interest in Hive, or the interpersonal conflicts of your team. She is, however, interested in the most direct path to Merlyn. I came to warn you that once she is through with the younger Diggle, she will kill him, and then she will most likely come for Thea.”

“Like you did when you poisoned me and kidnapped my mother to get Sara? Or when you kidnapped Thea to get at Malcolm?” Laurel didn’t hide the sarcasm dripping from her words.

“This thinking runs in our family.” Nyssa’s eyes twinkled. “I also came to tell you that I’ve located Jason Todd.”

This was met with a chorus of “What?”’s from the suddenly involved Helena and Ev.

“He’s using an old League safe house on the other side of the harbor. He has redirected the nearest cell and radio towers. No one would have found him without already knowing where to look.”

“Why did you look?” Helena asked, keeping a safe distance from Nyssa.

Nyssa’s dark eyes flickered between the two women, before she answered to Laurel. “It is in all of our best interests to resolve this situation in its entirety. Your team taking down Hive will only make it easier for us to finish Merlyn. My sister has let her emotions distract her. Torturing Andy is not only a waste of time, but it will only further serve Hive’s interests.”
All three vigilantes balked at this. “How?” Laurel asked.

Nyssa removed a bit of paper from a pocket somewhere in her League robes and held it out to Laurel. “His purpose here was to sow discord and destabilize your team. I assumed that by now that would have become clear. If my estimation is right, John Diggle will never forgive you or Oliver for allowing Andy to be tortured and executed by Talia, especially after he sacrificed himself defending his niece. My sister allowed herself to play right into HIVE’s goal. If he had simply died, he would become a martyr to his brother and nothing more. Only John can assert a claim for his brother’s life. If you allow Talia to kill Andy, believe me when I say there will be far-reaching consequences. With any luck, you can spare Thea from my sister’s wrath.”

Laurel took the paper. She didn’t look at it; she didn’t have to to know it held the information about Jason’s location. “Thank you.”

Nyssa pulled her hood up over her glossy black hair. “My absence will raise concerns if I am gone much longer.”

“What, that’s it?” Helena finally put herself, injured arm and all, between Nyssa and the door. “You know she can’t go after Jason alone. You’re just going to dump this on her and leave?”

Nyssa’s head cocked and behind her veil, Helena could have sworn the woman was smirking at her. “She’s not alone.” Nyssa fished a small leather flask from yet another deep pocket and pressed it into Helena’s good hand. She shifted her dark eyes back around the room before returning to Helena. “Have a drink, relax.”

Without waiting for response, Nyssa breezed out of the firehouse. Helena’s jaw dropped. She inspected the flask in her hand with incredulous shock. “Well that was informative and really insensitive.”

Her comment fell on deaf ears as Laurel was already digging into her gear locker, followed by Ev. “C’mon, you can’t go alone!”

She tossed her blue and gold suit onto one of the benches in the locker area - Jason really had picked out one hell of a building to squat in - and didn’t slow down to look at Ev when she responded. “It’s fine. It’s Jason. And probably Roy. I just need to talk to him.”
“But I’ve been training with all of you, especially him.” Ev’s voice teetered on pleading. “I held my ground against three Ghosts last night and I’m fine. You can’t go alone.”

Laurel still didn’t pause as she stripped and tugged the suit up over her legs and onto her arms. “You,” she paused as she searched for the internal zipper pull, “almost got killed by three Ghosts last night and only lived because Liza Warner is a good person and Diggle knows how to pick ‘em.” Laurel pulled her boots on, and then did a quick check of her tonfas before collapsing and stowing them on the built-in magnetic belt around her hips.

Ev stood back and crossed her arms, taking a wide-legged stance. “If you’re not worried, then why are you going as the Canary?”

From where she watched the exchange, Helena only arched a brow. Laurel finally stopped and shot Helena a help me look, but Helena only shrugged. “The kid has a point.”

“Enough.” Laurel slammed her locker closed. “It’s not up for discussion. Helena, you’re hurt and Ev, I’m sorry, but if, for some insane reason, this goes south, I don’t want to have to worry about you.” She stopped before leaving the building. “For the record, it’s not Jason I’m worried about.”

“No, it’s that he has Mother, which means you might be walking into a scene from SAW or Custer’s Last Stand.” Helena pursed her lips. “Or both. Probably both. Tell me again why we aren’t calling Oliver for backup?”

Laurel’s hand froze on the door handle and she turned back to Helena with deep resignation. “You know damn well that Oliver is gasoline on the fire that is Jason.”

“Maybe this situation could use a little gasoline.” Helena’s voice dropped low.

Laurel studied her for a moment before swinging the door open. “If I’m not back in an hour, call Green Arrow.”

Before the door shut, Ev was stomping to her bunk, muttering about not being a kid anymore. Helena let her go. They both needed to cool down. She bent to sit on the couch, hoping for some form of distraction via television, but something square and uncomfortable dug into her back pocket: it was the flask Nyssa shoved at her. She fished it out and turned up her nose at it. She hadn’t pegged Nyssa as a “drink to deal with your problems” type, but to each their own. She tossed the flask aside and picked up the remote, then paused.
The firehouse was quiet. It was too quiet. It was the kind of quiet that tells parents their children are up to something.

“Ev?” she called. All that replied was the steady hum of the furnace, and maybe a leaky pipe. “Evelyn?” She swung her feet off the couch and stood. As she stood, she hissed at the sharp pain in her shoulder. Any movement seemed to tug and wrench at the wound, but she stoutly pushed past the initial pain and her body went on high alert. She ripped the sheet-cum-curtain Evelyn had erected to give herself some privacy in her bunk, only to find an empty bunk. A quick inspection of Ev’s locker confirmed exactly what Helena expected: Ev had gone after Laurel.

“Shit.”

Felicity worked her hands against the painfully tight plastic flex cuffs keeping them bound behind the back of her metal folding chair. She’d been in this chair for at least three hours - an estimate she based off the rhythm of her captors’ comings and goings. If she made it out of this alive, she would never sit in a cheap metal folding chair ever again. They’d be banished from Palmer Tech first thing. Who knew that just sitting in a chair, too restrained to move, could be so painful? Her butt was screaming, her legs were pulsating, and her shoulders and wrists ached in a way that she couldn’t describe.

Since being taken from her cell by some less-than-gentle Ghosts, they’d only returned to first remove the rough canvas bag from her head, check her restraints, and one particularly unnerving visit where the small troop filed into the poorly-lit, mildew-ridden concrete room and stood along the walls, watching her, before filing back out without a word. One visit per hour, just enough to make sure she stayed conscious and afraid.

“C’mon,” she moaned, letting her head loll back uselessly, “aren’t you guys gonna like, put some really weird music on repeat until I crack and tell you everything I know? If so, I’d like to request *Party in the USA*. Early Miley really gets me.”

The single bare bulb hanging over her head flickered, but that was the only response she got.

“This is so cliché.” Grumbling to herself wasn’t new, but in her current situation she felt particularly crazed. “I thought a guy who calls himself ‘Damien Darhk’ would have a more original take on the dramatic.”

At least no one had taken her glasses. Adding a splitting headache from blurred vision would really be the cherry on top of this shit sandwich.
She went over her mental checklist of what she knew: her bound hands were chained to the equally uncomfortable bindings at her feet, which would make escape impossible. Unless she could get on her side and inchworm her way out, a feat she highly doubted. She couldn’t see any cameras or microphones in the room, but that didn’t mean there weren’t any. In one corner of the room was an air conditioning vent. Since there were no windows and only one solid metal door, it stood to reason that surveillance equipment would be in the vent. The vent was far too small for even her to squeeze through, so that was out. She hadn’t seen where she was going when they marched her with the bag over her head, but they’d walked for at least a few minutes, up and down stairs, turning this way and that. She was either deep inside a rat maze, or they had walked her deliberately wonky to ensure she couldn’t get back to John. They had both been in captivity since Thea -Thea - orchestrated her brutal attack. It was almost impossible to determine exactly how long they’d been prisoners. There was no way to determine how long either of them had been unconscious, or how long they slept during brief exhaustion-induced blackouts. Not to mention the fact that wherever they were was underground. Without the steady reliability of sunlight, they couldn’t even determine if it was day or night.

John was being absolutely no help, and in the darkest corners of her mind, she knew he was right. He kept insisting that Oliver, the whole team, wouldn’t be coming for them, at least not anytime soon. She and Oliver had had a conversation once, maybe a month ago, in which he danced around the topic of the worst case scenario.

“Darhk collects people, Felicity,” he said. “He wants useful people. You are useful.”

Felicity waved a dismissive hand, not even looking up from her workstation. “I’m surrounded by security all day long and when I’m not, I’m surrounded by you guys.”

Oliver’s face pinched in that way it always did when he didn’t think someone was taking him seriously. “This is dangerous.”

“We’re all in danger.” She kept her attention on her monitor, but she was only half-paying attention to her work now.

“You know Thea is in a tricky spot. All I’m saying is-“

“I know,” she snapped. “I kinda got the picture when you gave yourself up to Ra’s al Ghul for her.”
Oliver’s mouth clamped shut. That stupid muscle in his jaw twitched.

“I get it,” Felicity said, reining her tone back from the biting anger. “You have a lot to worry about it and I’m not always going to come first.”

“Felicity,” his shoulders slumped, “it’s not like that…”

“I know exactly what it’s like, Oliver.”

Felicity croaked out a humorless laugh. Well, he did try to tell me. And John told me. Repeatedly. Her verbal insistence that Oliver would shuck all that to the side and come for her like Tarzan after Jane died on her lips hours ago. He’s not coming. This was one thing she couldn’t bring herself to say out loud yet, but she thought it. A lot.

She had nothing but time to think, and for a woman with Felicity Smoak’s brain, that was a very, very dangerous thing.

“Stay alive, Felicity,” John said as the Ghosts shoved that nasty bag over her head. “Whatever they ask for, whatever they want to know, you just do it. Stay alive.”

Easy for him to say. She already knew what Darhk would want, and giving it to him was the last thing she was going to do.

On cue, the metal door scraped open, ushering in a Ghost, followed by the man himself. He graced her with a lupine grin, rubbing his hands together in excitement. “Ms. Smoak! Thank you so much for your patience, I had to take care of a few things before we had this little chat.” With a snap of his fingers, another Ghost placed a chair behind Darhk and he sat in it so comfortably, Felicity cringed.

“Well I figured I could pencil you in.” Felicity sneered, earning a deep-throated laugh. He was genuinely amused by this whole situation and it made her even more angry than she already was.

“I take it you already know why you’re here?” Felicity only lifted her chin in defiance of his question, making him grin even harder. “Of course you do! Did you know you are one of the smartest people on the entire western seaboard?”
If Felicity could move her arms more, she would have shrugged. “I think I might be one of the smartest in the world, so yeah,” she pursed her lips and nodded, “I guess I sorta knew that one already.”

“Confidence!” Darhk sat forward, elbows on his knees like they were having an engaging chat. “I like that in a partner.”

“I am not your partner.”

“You will be.” He snapped his fingers again and a Ghost handed him a tablet. Darhk swiped through a few things before lighting up happily when he found what he was looking for. He held the tablet up so she could see it. It was her proposal for the clean energy battery she and Curtis Holt had been working on. “I think that you and I are of similar minds. I see here,” he swiped to scroll down a few pages, “that you intend on actually giving these things away to qualifying NGO’s. Hm,” he frowned, scrolling more, “you’ll be charging a pretty exorbitant cost for private companies, but that’s capitalism for ya.”

“I’m not really sure how that makes us similar, but whatever floats your boat.”

He leaned back in the chair and handed the tablet back to one of the Ghosts without looking away from Felicity’s eyes. “We both want to help people. We both want to give this planet the fighting chance it deserves.”

“Your habit of kidnapping and murder sorta suggests otherwise.”

“That,” he raised his index finger, “is where you and I are a shade different. This is a battle, Ms. Smoak. The war to save humanity has started, and sacrifices will be made.”

“Sacrifices?” she choked out. “You killed Quentin Lance, you almost killed Laurel, and god knows how many kids-“

“You don’t have to tell me,” he cut her off, the grin falling from his lips. “You and your costumed weirdo friends can turn your noses up at my methods all you want, but you know, I know you know, that everything I’ve done and will do is necessary for the survival of humanity. Big picture, Ms. Smoak.” He sat up straight, hands fist on his knees before he took a deep breath, straightened his tie, and resumed that creepy smile. He snapped his fingers again and the Ghost
closest to the door opened it, ushering in yet more Ghosts, and John.

Damien rose from his seat and let his men slam John into it. As the restrained him, Damien continued talking. “I’m going to make this very simple: you agree to work for me. You give me your battery design and continue developing renewable resources for me. Together, we can make this planet defensible and sustainable. Does that sound fair?”

They ripped the bag off John’s head. His entire face was knitted in concern, trying to piece together what Darhk was saying. Felicity’s heart thudded against her ribs as she instantly understood why they brought him into the room. John’s face darkened. He understood it, too.

“What we’re gonna do,” Damien clapped his hands together, “is I’m gonna ask you a question, Ms. Smoak, and if you get it wrong, Mr. Diggle is going to pay the price. That work for ya?”

Felicity’s lips curled into a snarl. “Screw you, you American Psycho wannabe-“

“Wrong!” Damien practically cheered. One of the Ghosts stepped up to John and jabbed him in the arm with a cattle prod. Felicity screamed a protest as John tensed and ground out a wail of shock and pain. It only lasted a second, but when it stopped, Diggle’s entire body shuddered and seemed to deflate. Smoke rose up from the burn on his arm. The smell of cooked flesh crashed against Felicity’s horror, twisted her stomach into painful, sickening knots. “So…are you going to play along?”

“Yes.” The word came out in a breathy whisper. Her lips were quivering and goose flesh sprouted all along her arms despite the humidity of the room.

It went on for hours. Every time Felicity refused or lied, they concocted some new horror to inflict on John. And each time, John would look her in the eye and nod to tell her it was alright. Sweat dripping down his face turned to blood. After a few direct strikes, his cheeks swelled with unnatural red lumps, one so large it nearly obscured his eye. Before long, he could no longer lift his head, so his comfort came in the form of muttered and slurred “s’okay”’s.

When Felicity thought she couldn’t take it anymore, that she’d finally surrender to Darhk to spare John further torment, Darhk snapped his fingers.

“You’re a tough little nut, Ms. Smoak.” As he spoke, the Ghosts dragged John, chair and all, from the room. “You’re so cold, I’m a little chilly.” Through the open door, a Ghost lead in a group of
five people, all with their hands bound behind their backs and sacks over their heads. “Let’s up the ante, shall we? We’re going to play a new game. Since you are so callous about your good friend John and don’t seem to care about the fate of millions of human lives that you could help right now, I want to see how you do when you’re face-to-face with the people you condemn.”

Felicity’s blood froze in her veins. She recognized a pair of well-worn red Chuck Taylors on one prisoner, and the ridiculous “Three Grumpy Cat Moon” t-shirt on another. This was her R&D team. The Ghosts ripped the bags from their prisoners’ heads and forced each of them to kneel, facing Felicity. They all wore matching expressions of terror, pain, and confusion.

“Felicity, what the he-“ Curtis didn’t finish his question before a Ghost cracked a heavy baton across his shoulders. He cried out and shrank away, but there was nowhere to go.

“You’ve done an excellent job keeping secrets,” Darhk said. “No single person at Palmer Tech knows the exact schematics of the…what were you calling it, the Holt Battery? Except you, of course. No one can rush out and make a quick billion selling the patent before you make it public. Smart, except they’re all expendable.” Darhk took a handgun from one of the Ghosts, pulled the slide back to confirm it was loaded, then stood behind the first hostage - Chris, her newest hire to the R&D team - with the barrel pointed at the back of his head. “Now, you say the magic words I want to hear, and you, and heck, your whole team can join me in making the world a better place.”

She was crying now. Tears ran down her face like heavy rain on a window. Her stomach twisted and wrenched, vomit threatened to crawl up her throat. She didn’t answer fast enough. It was hard to say what happened first: the gunshot or the screaming. It was so loud in the small cement room. Ringing and echoes drowned out all other noise, even physical sensation. She could see her team members yelling, screaming, crying, begging her to do something.

She had been about to say yes. Her mouth opened and closed uselessly. All she could see was Chris’s dead body sprawled at her feet. She became slowly aware of the warm liquid and gooey matter on her skin and clothes and realized she was covered in the gore of Chris’s exit wound. She wasn’t fast enough. She hadn’t played her cards right, and now this man was dead, and it was her fault.

The faces of her team were coming into focus, all shouting for some kind of action. Felicity swallowed the bile in her throat, blinked back her tears and lifted her head to face Darhk.

“I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever you want.”
Laurel peered up at the darkened brownstone. More windows were broken than not. The fire escape on the alley was missing entire floors, reduced to individual levels and ladders secured in a broken line from the roof to the asphalt. A few windows still featured dim orange light, but they were so dirty or obscured by plywood, it was impossible to say if there was any life here.

The entire city block was silent. Every now and then the winter breeze caught a piece of trash or debris and stirred up some noise, but there was nothing else. No animals, no kids, no cars, no bikes, nothing.

“This is it, Canary,” Oracle’s voice confirmed in her ear.

At four stories, her search of the building didn’t take long. She kept quiet, creeping up the stairs floor by floor until she saw a figure in red and a green trucker hat at the darkened end of the hallway on the top floor. Bingo.

Roy was in a low squat, flexing the bill of his hat between his hands and taking deep breaths. Even from Laurel’s position, she could see his hands were shaking. When she showed herself fully, emerging from the shadows into the moonlight, Roy popped to his feet with an arrow drawn at her. As quickly as he was on the defense, he lowered his weapon and sighed, shaking his head. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“We’re gonna have to agree to disagree on that.” As she stepped closer, he squared to her, filling the space in the hallway with a wide stance. “Arsenal, I need to talk to Jason.”

Arsenal shook his head. The tips of his gloved fingers twitched. “I can’t let you in there, Laur.”

“You know you can’t stop me.”

The bow twitched in his hands. Neither party moved. Laurel schooled her expression to stone. Roy didn’t have the discipline, or was too overwrought from being in the middle. Sweat beaded under his mask and his breath was coming and going in great huffs between his lips and out his nostrils. He needed less than a second to draw another arrow and at this distance, he couldn’t miss. Laurel needed even less time to send him tumbling with a quick, powerful sonic cry, and they both knew it.

They stood silent, squared in standoff, each waiting to see what the other would do. The door
Laurel knew would lead to Jason was behind Roy on his right. Another set of stairs opened at the other end of the hallway behind him. Whether she knocked him back or he ran didn’t matter. She just needed a clear path to the door. Roy had the considerably tougher job of trying to deter Laurel Lance from her target.

In the end, a third option presented itself. The tension ratcheted between the two vigilantes, each itching for the other to make a move. Just when it seemed the air around them would split like an overstrung piano, Roy grunted. His eyes, even obscured by a mask and hat, went white and his body locked and jerked. Laurel balked, briefly wondering if Roy had had a seizure, until he slumped to his knees, and then to his face, revealing Starling behind him.

Starling flipped one of her escrima sticks playfully and grinned at Canary. “That was easier than I thought it would be.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

At their feet, Roy was moaning, but still down.

“What?” Ev returned the stick to the holster on her back. “You had to see this coming.”

Laurel felt her molars grinding against each other. “Just,” she exhaled slowly, “stay out here and make sure no one sneaks up on us.”

Ev’s dark eyes flickered between Laurel and the door. She looked ready to argue, but thought better of it. “If you need help-“

“I’ll let you know.”

The door suddenly appeared far more formidable than it had a few moments ago. If she let herself stew for too long on all the possible scenarios happening in that room, Laurel might never go in. She steeled herself, quelling the shaking in her hands before stepping over Roy, twisting the knob and walking in. She pushed it shut behind her as she took in the scene.

Jason had his back to her, but the straightening of his shoulders and ever-so-subtle turn of his head told her that he knew she was there. He wasn’t wearing his helmet, and Laurel could see little red spots and flecks haphazardly sprayed on his neck and into his darker hair. The room was dark
except for a single work light illuminating whatever Jason’s body was obscuring. The room - the whole building - looked like it had been crumbling for decades. The floorboards were bare, loose, and even broken clean through in places. The walls were a hodgepodge of layers of pealing wallpaper, holes, cracks, and visible black mold. At one point, this might have been an apartment, but it was too dark down the hallway to tell. The windows facing the street were intact, explaining why she hadn’t heard anything outside.

“You shouldn’t have come.” Jason’s voice was hoarse. He still hadn’t turned to face her.

Laurel sidestepped carefully around the edges of the room until she saw what he was blocking. Mother was tied to a chair, each arm tied to an armrest, each hand covered and dripping blood. Her slate gray hair was mussed and matted with dark blood in places. Her head was drooping forward, her breath coming and going in low wheezes. She lifted her head to smile at Laurel - a frightening, ghastly grin of missing teeth, already purple-green bruises, and yet more deep red blood dripping from her twisted nose, gashes on her lips and cheeks.

Mother directed her sickening smile up to Jason. “Afraid the little bird is going to see your true colors, son?”

Jason moved so quickly, Laurel almost missed him land a vicious blow across Mother’s cheek, except she couldn't miss the crunch of bone and against bone.

“I am not your fucking son,” Jason roared.

“Jason!” Laurel shouted, then held up her palms in deference when he whipped his head back to her. His eyes had taken on a wild quality she hadn’t seen before. “Jason,” she started softer this time, “I know you are angry-“

“You don’t know.” Jason shook his head and dropped his gaze from Laurel. He produced a hunting knife and returned his attention to Mother, who was still smirking up at him. “You don’t know what she did to Bruce. To Tim. And Cass.”

Laurel took a tentative step closer. “Then you can tell me about it, but I need you to come with me now.”

“Yeah, okay, sure,” his words came out vacant, still watching Mother. He flipped the knife in his hand. “When I’m done with this, I’ll get right on it.”
Before he inched closer to Mother, Laurel felt the anger bubbling to the surface, then bursting. “Shove it up your ass, Jason.” Laurel broke past the unspoken barrier to Jason’s side, getting an even better view of the damage he’d done to Mother. She swallowed the bile back down her throat. “Do you really think you’re the only one here who’s angry? This is not right and you know it.”

Behind his domino mask, hesitation flickered in his eyes before he shook his head. “Not every criminal deserves mercy. She’s already told me—“

“It’s not about her, Jason.” Looking at the woman was tough, but she had to look. She had to see. “Anything you can get out of her, we can find another way. You told me that you didn’t know why you were brought back. It wasn’t this.”

Mother groaned and rolled her eyes. “Could you two maybe finish this another time?”

“Shut up!” Laurel and Jason snapped simultaneously.

Unphased, Mother leaned forward as much as she could against her restraints. “Mother has bigger fish to fry than you, so I’d appreciate it if we could move this along.”

Jason sneered. He kept flipping and twirling the blade in his hand. “Gotta get out of town before Darhk knows what you gave up?” He stopped twirling the knife to point it at her. “For the record, has anyone ever told you how unbelievably creepy it is that you call yourself ‘Mother’?”

“Granny Goodness was taken.” Jason scrunched his nose in disgust. Mother shot her eyes from Jason to Laurel and back again, then resumed that bloody sly smile. “Tell me, how is Talia? I haven’t spoken with her in ages.”

That got their attention. Jason was looming over Mother with the knife to her throat before Laurel could even open her mouth. “What the fuck are you getting at?”

“Oh come on,” she pressed forward into the blade, “you know her. She sent you to train with the worst of the worst. Did you honestly think I wasn’t the first person she called when her little gift for Bruce came out of the grave like a feral dog? Talia wanted the best and honey, I’m it.”
Jason slowly pulled back. Doubt and confusion shadowed his face. Laurel could hear the buzzing of a poorly-wired lamp and the steady drip of the old pipes moistening walls and floors, ripe for mold and rot. She could hear Jason’s unsteady, heavy breathing puffing in and out of his nostrils.

“Didn’t really take for you, though,” Mother went on, heedless of her stunned audience. “You were too damaged for even me to fix. Honestly, I need to give that woman credit. I told her to put you down.”

Jason shook his head and dug in. “You think I don’t know who Talia is? You think I don’t know she’s lied to me? Surprise, I don’t care.”

“Aw,” Mother tipped her head in a mockery of maternal sympathy, “yes you do. It eats you up inside every single time someone you trusted betrays you. You and I both know what she would have done with you if I had succeeded. You’d still be her lapdog.”

His hands were shaking and he brought the knife back up to the papery flesh at her throat. Laurel reached out to his bicep, but she surprised him. He whirled on her so fast she ducked his knife slash by millimeters. Jason’s eyes flashed when he realized what he’d done. Neither of them moved until Laurel held her hands up, palms out and tried again. “Please come with me. We can just walk out of here together.”

He wanted to. Laurel could see the conflict plain as day on his face. The hand holding the knife actually trembled, barely perceptible but it was there. He rubbed his fingers against his eyes and wiped a layer of sweat and grime away. He inadvertently smeared some of the black paint that helped obscure his eyes under the domino mask.

Once he set his jaw, he had decided. “I’m sorry, Laur. She has earned this and then some, and if I don’t stop her, she’ll keep on doing it. It has to stop.”

“No,” Laurel slowly shook her head and extended a hand out to him. “If you do this, you are never going to know what you came back for.”

He started to lower his weapon. They were so close to defusing the situation, Laurel could taste it. So of course, everything immediately went to hell.

It started with a literal bang. Smoke grenades popped through the remaining uncovered windows, filling the defunct apartment with noxious, burning smoke. The same door Laurel had entered
through exploded into splinters, ushering Palette’s massive form. He held Roy by the back of his neck like a ragdoll. Jason swapped a knife for his guns, but there was too much activity from all directions. Arrows sailed through the broken windows, sending Laurel and Jason diving for cover. Laurel found herself behind a crumbling faux column. Jason was crouched behind Mother’s chair.

As the smoke cleared, Thea materialized, leading a snarling Ev at the point of her sword. The onslaught of arrows stopped long enough for Malcolm to launch through the street-side windows and stride to the center of the room as seamlessly as if he’d just walked in.

Laurel twisted to sneak out from her hiding spot to better cover, but Malcolm met her with edge of his sword. He pulled down mask covering his mouth to tsk tsk her. While maintaining eye contact with Laurel, he said, “Mr. Todd, I would drop the guns if you value their lives.” Laurel’s eyes slid to where she could see Palette and Thea with their respective quarries. “I know what you’re thinking, Ms. Lance, and you have two choices: you half-ass that little scream of yours, and you might free your sidekick, but you aren’t going to even slow Palette down before he snaps Roy’s neck. Or you pump out a building-crasher and kill both of them anyway. Oh and I slit your throat with the flick of my wrist. I know you dated my son, but I truly don’t believe you’re that stupid.”

Two .45’s clattered and slid across the room. If there was one time she needed Jason to pull some wildly unexpected Batman crap, this would have been it.

“Good,” Malcolm sneered, “he’s smarter than he looks.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Mother’s head lolled and she made a dramatic sigh, “Palette get your giant ass over here and untie me.”

Palette took one more look at Arsenal before spiking him to the floor. Laurel and Starling both twitched, but didn’t move. Jason’s face remained a mask of stone, but his breath hitched. Roy wasn’t moving.

The only sounds in the apartment were Mother’s grumblings and the heavy, uneven breathing that drowned out most of the other noise in Laurel’s ears. *Ears.* Her radio was still on. Oracle was silent, but she would be silent right now, right? She couldn’t risk that the sound might travel in the quiet.

Tension simmered and rolled off of Jason in great, heaving waves. It galled him to be caught so unprepared, even more so to be held back while people he cared about were in danger. The tip of Malcolm’s blade flicked against the soft exposed skin of Laurel’s neck. He pulled it back, as if to inspect it, and then, with a viper’s speed, he thrust it back toward Laurel.
Time slowed down. She felt the air push and break against the blade. She heard Jason’s yell the loudest, but Ev’s shout was just behind his. Her body reacted quicker than her mind. Her hand found a tonfa - still collapsed to just a handle and short stick, no longer than her wrist. Her hand brought it up into a guard, within a microsecond, catching the edge of Malcolm’s sword and pushing it to sink into the shoddy drywall behind her. It happened so fast, she barely registered the bracing impact of blocking the blow or the way the tonfa crushed against the fist holding it. Malcolm flashed a Cheshire grin, and sheathed the sword.

Black Canary’s lip curled with rage and she sucked in air, preparing to knock that smug, evil bastard clean through the wall when she realized Jason had staggered to a stop, and dropped to his knees, reaching blindly for something at his neck. Ev was on the ground clutching her stomach and groaning, at least a few feet away from Thea.

“Good girl.” Malcolm strode to his daughter. “Laurel, you are getting faster. I’m honestly impressed. Your sister wasn’t quite that quick when she realized she was in danger.”

As much as it stuck in her craw, she ignored him. There would be time later to get some payback, but not tonight. Canary moved past Arsenal - who was struggling to his hands and knees - and slid next to Starling, who was still coughing and clutching at her middle. “I’m okay,” she choked out. “Just a kick.” Her eyes were on Jason. His hand fell limp to his side, dropping three small darts. Even under his mask, Laurel saw his eyes glaze over, lost on the brick wall at the other end of the apartment.

“Jason?” He didn’t even blink.

Mother hummed and lifted her eyes to Malcolm. “I told you three should do it. My boy is too strong for anything less.”

Thea joined her father, sword still drawn. Beneath the hood and veil, her eyes flickered to Roy.

Black Canary pulled Starling to her feet, her eyes on the dangerous foursome lined up near the hearth where Jason had set up his little “interrogation” session. Palette was supporting Mother, still bleeding freely from too many places to track. Jason was on his knees, stock still and silent.

“Orphan,” Mother spoke with jarring force, but she wasn’t yelling. “On your feet.” Jason stood.
“Put your helmet on,” Mother said next. Jason complied. “It’s probably going to get loud in here,” Mother added for the benefit of her compatriots. “You know, I thought all that time I spent training him was like throwing spaghetti at a wall, but look at that. Something stuck. Orphan, twirl.” He spun on the ball of one foot. It would have been funny, seeing their favorite massive vigilante, helmet, body armor and all, gracefully execute a spin worthy of any dance class, except his instant obedience was bone chilling. Mother laughed.

“What is this? What did you do to him?” Canary’s voice rose. She moved her arm to slide Starling behind her and took a step out in front of Arsenal, who was only now struggling back to his feet.

Merlyn pursed his lips in mock sympathy. “Sorry, Laurel, I voted to keep you on the island. I know we haven’t always been on the same page—” She opened her mouth but Malcolm wagged a finger at her. “Ah ah, I wouldn’t. I’m the only one with the antidote to the nifty little mix in his system.” He patted a place on his robes for good measure. “Wouldn’t want to damage it, right?”

“Blast ‘em,” Arsenal whispered behind her. “They’re bluffing.”

“But what if we’re not?” Malcolm grinned. He and Thea were slowly backing toward the street-facing windows.

Jason had his helmet on. Without a jacket, in just the black armored suit, Laurel found herself suddenly very aware of the breadth of his shoulders, the size of his arms, the thick muscles in his legs, all of what made him a human wrecking ball. He was faster than all of them, except maybe Nyssa. Diggle came the closest in strength. Helena rivaled his ferocity, but she had only a fraction of his experience using it. He had been training all of them, not the other way around. He knew each of them: strengths, weaknesses, which side they preferred, the moves they’d all go to.

This was really, really not good.

“Kill them, Orphan.” Mother turned her eyes to Canary. “Start with her. Let’s go,” she directed to Palette who scooped her off her feet and followed the path Malcolm and Thea were on.

Before Canary could process what Jason was doing, Oracle’s voice filled her ear. “Hit them, NOW.” She opened her mouth and pumped out a sonic scream, directed at the floor. Even Thea looked stunned when the rotten wood buckled and burst under her feet. Unfortunately, the damage
rippled like a stone into a pond, taking everyone with it down a level in a sea of dust, mold, asbestos, wood, copper pipe and more.

Canary was on her feet quickly. She’d seen this coming when the floorboards started to crack and give way under her cry. That of course didn’t really prepare her to take everyone down with her. She landed hard on her left side, but kept her head protected from the falling debris. Other and a sore shoulder and hip, she was alright, but that didn’t account for Ev or Roy. The room they landed in, if it had lights, didn’t anymore. Smoke and dust clouded what little light filtered in through the windows. Something was sparking, a water pipe had burst somewhere in the apartment, and the whole building seemed to groan and reject the metahuman-induced impromptu remodel.

“Laurel?” Evelyn’s voice called from somewhere behind her. That was a mistake. An arrow sailed through the smoke and dust, probably missing its target by millimeters before sinking into a wall. “Oh shit,” Ev’s voice came again, followed by the sound of feet scrambling for purchase over the debris.

Canary took a step toward the sound, but a massive hand caught her by the hair and yanked her back and to the floor. Pain swirled her vision and the impact knocked the wind from her lungs. She tried to suck in more air, but all she got was a throat full of dust. She coughed and gagged. She needed to get back on her feet. Jason was circling her slowly, that much she could tell. She could hear things clearer now over the water and settling remnants of an apartment floor - shouting, mostly. Mother was somewhere, barking and arguing with Malcolm. The ground shook with the great booming footsteps that could only be Palette running for something, but what?

Red Hood materialized over her, and he was all Red Hood in that moment. Laurel understood the fear he struck in criminals; she could feel it tickling up her spine. Under the sleeves of her suit, gooseflesh prickled up and down her arms. He was moving slowly, almost disinterested, still twirling that horrifying knife.

He’s not even concerned, she realized. I’m no more a threat to him than a small child.

“Use your cry,” Oracle whispered over the radio. “Use it or he’ll kill you.”

She had to wait. Let him get close. Let him get in her face. If she could time it right, she could hit him hard enough to knock him out without any permanent damage.

Her pulse was thundering in a way she hadn’t felt since the first time she pulled on a ski mask and tried to even the odds on a wife beater.
The smoke and dust were clearing. Somewhere, a neon light was flickering and the orange street lights were penetrating the haze. Red Hood’s form cut through all of it like a shadow. He loomed over her, one boot on either side of her hips. What the hell was he waiting for?

Quick as a cat, he snatched her up off the floor by her throat. He held her up so high her toes barely scraped the wood. Canary brought her hands up around his, scratching and pulling to no avail. She knew how to get out of this. He practiced it with her. Her throat burned under his crushing grip, but she focused on small, measured breaths through her nose while she planted her feet against his thigh and hip. Just a little bit higher and she could throw a leg over his neck and bring him down, but he crushed harder and her mind began to swim into the terror of being without air. She was moments away from losing all control and going into that blind panic that would get her killed. He brought his free, knife-wielding hand up. He reared back, but before he could bring it down into her chest, a red arrow sailed right through the meat of his palm.

Red Hood dropped her and stumbled back. Arsenal was there before Canary could collapse to the ground, dragging her back a few feet before nocking another arrow and drawing down on Red Hood again. “I’m really sorry about this, buddy, but I…can’t…I…” Arsenal’s voice trailed off. Canary was seeing the same thing he was, and it froze her blood.

Red Hood grunted and inspected his hand, arrow and all. With his other hand, he grabbed the shaft of the arrow and crushed it with a sickening crunch that sounded too much like splintering bone. Maybe it was just sickening because it was impaled clean through his hand.

“Jason, please…” Arsenal’s voice shook.

“I don’t think Jason is home right now,” Canary breathed. She and Arsenal unconsciously drifted so close they were shoulder-to-shoulder, legs almost intertwined.

Red Hood discarded the arrow shaft. He grasped the bloodied arrowhead and yanked the remaining piece out of his palm. Arsenal and Canary’s eyes turned to saucers. Red Hood flexed and fisted his damaged hand.

“T-1000,” Canary managed between gasping breaths. “He’s the T-1000.”

“This is bad.” Arsenal didn’t need to say it.
Starling darted out of the smoke, sliding past her partners’ legs. “Oh shit!” she cursed as she barely missed them. The floor shook with Palette’s steps, close on her heels.

Palette was not so quick. Instead of dodging, he simply shot his arm out and snatched Arsenal up off his feet. As he whirled to throw Arsenal back the way he came, Arsenal was still shouting. “Oh, it’s really bad!”

As they tumbled off to their own fight, Canary registered that Red Hood would not slow down for long. A fist slammed into her back, probably a kidney. Nope, an arrow through the palm had not slowed him down. She stumbled but kept her feet. She had her tonfas out and extended and it was all she could do to keep up her defenses as she blocked and parried blow after blow. Years of dance and cheer prepared her more than any boxing practice to keep up with his rapid, sweeping foot work, but she was still nearly running backwards. They were in a dance - a dance Laurel was losing - over fallen two-by-fours, chunks of brick and dry wall, from the remnants of one apartment to another. Palette was barreling holes all throughout the building, chasing and being chased by Arsenal and Starling.

“Black Canary,” Oracle’s voice came through, steady and serious, “I’ve got backup inbound, but you have to use your cry. You have to incapacitate him.”

Yeah, no shit. She was already tiring. Instead of blocking his next sweeping strike, she ducked and rolled out of the way, leaping to her feet and running. That was no more sustainable than matching him hit for hit. He was faster and hot on her heels. His long legs gave him a stride she couldn’t match, and his arms would reach her where most others would come up short.

Palette was barreling holes through walls as he chased the far more nimble Starling and Arsenal. At some point, Thea had joined the fight, trading rapid fire arrows with Arsenal when he wasn’t tripping up Palette. Every time Palette would whip his substantial bulk around to knock another arrow from his flesh, Starling would flip, dive, or roll back and deliver another shock from her escrima sticks. Palette was red from blood, burns, and rage.

Thea managed to duck under Arsenal’s guard, bringing up her bow as a bludgeon across his gut. He adjusted to her speed - her brother had nailed her on the head when he nicknamed her Speedy - catching the next swing of her bow across his open palm and spinning with the moment so it merely glanced off. When she came back with a sword, he was ready, bringing his own bow up just in time to block the strike.

“Thea,” he breathed in between counters to her viper-quick swipes, “you don’t have to-“
“THEA,” Malcolm’s voice boomed from another part of the building. She spared Arsenal one last look before spinning into a high kick on his chest. Before she disappeared, Starling and Palette’s chase thundered back to the fight.

Jason’s closed fist cracked across Laurel’s jaw. She’d been hit, a lot, and by some of the scariest men she could imagine, but this hurt. Stars danced across her vision and pain blossomed, radiating up to her hairline and all down her spine. She was tiring too quickly, and he was showing no signs of slowing down. It made her sloppy and slow, when she couldn’t afford to be either.

His hand sank into her back collar and the other gripped her hip so hard she was more afraid that she’d die from internal bleeding from a cracked pelvis before the night was over. Her head was still spinning too fast to defend herself. He picked her up like she was nothing, spun and tossed her like a fucking frisbee through one of the walls Palette blew a hole through.

Starling watched the man she considered a surrogate brother toss her mentor - her favorite adult, the woman who let her tag along and train when no one else would - from one room straight to another apartment altogether. Arsenal’s return gave her enough time to pause and catch her breath, but she could only watch in frozen terror as two people she’d come to love were killing each other. Red Hood disappeared through the hole after Laurel. A second later, a sonic scream rang through the apartment and Red Hood flew back the way he came, crashing and rolling until his back hit the opposite wall.

Canary marched through the rubble, following the path Red Hood had flown. She sucked in air, preparing to hit him again, but Red Hood flicked a batarang at her. She dodged, but not quick enough. It sliced across her bicep on its journey, successfully slowing her down long enough for Jason to find his feet again. She ignored the open cut and unleashed a scream, knocking him back to the floor. The wall cracked and rumbled ominously despite her effort to keep the sound focused on Red Hood. He tried to put his feet back under himself, but the slipped and he slid back to his read. The exaggerated rise and fall of his chest betrayed just how hard he struggled to breathe.

“Canary, do not stop until he’s unconscious.” Oracle was still on their comms, trying her dammedest to keep the team focused. Arsenal and Starling were having a hard enough time keeping Palette’s attention on them, and not getting crushed. Canary screamed again and again, he fell back against the wall but didn’t stop struggling to stand.

“If I keep this up, I’m going to kill him,” Canary huffed under her breath. She flipped a tonfa over her knuckles and cracked the handle end against his helmet. After he righted his head, he responded by reeling back and head butting her right in her gut. He was finally back on his feet as she stumbled away, coughing against the impact.
Oracle’s breath shook over the comms. Canary was back to stumbling and dodging Red Hood’s tight, powerful punches and strikes. She screamed again, but Red Hood only bent his head against the sound waves, barely even acknowledging the blast. “Laurel,” Oracle kept her voice as measured as possible, but the usually unflappable woman couldn’t hide the quaver, “if you can’t knock him out, you are going to have to kill him.”

Arsenal’s hands froze on his bow. Starling slowed down just enough to get caught up by Palette. He knocked her into Arsenal with a punishing hit to her chest and they tumbled into a pile. Canary’s heart stuttered just long enough to get cracked across the cheek by Red Hood’s fist.

“You don’t have time to wait for backup,” Oracle kept on. “If you don’t take him down by any means necessary, he will kill you, and then he’ll kill Roy and Ev. You have to stop him.”

Canary brought a tonfa up to block the knife Red Hood was bringing down on her. Both weapons clattered to the floor, so he snatched her by the front of her costume, twisting the material so it clamped down against her throat. With his free hand, he punched her across her other cheek. That was definitely a broken cheekbone. Her vision was blurring and her thoughts scattered to the wind. He was just a red mask looming over her, cutting off her voice with increasing pressure. A batarang appeared in his free hand. That’s what he would use to kill her, if he didn’t choke her or beat her to death. She needed to scream. She needed to hit him with everything she had. She could feel it spinning up in her neck, a slow burning pressure that radiated from her diaphragm to her throat. If she didn’t do it on her own, the mother box taking residence in her body would do it for her.

She didn’t want it to. Behind that mask was Jason. Her Jason. The Jason who believed in her without any hesitance or question, from the moment he first saw her. The Jason who would fight anyone for her. The Jason who supported her decisions and spent almost all of his time training with her and the others. The Jason who spent the rest of his time patrolling the streets on his own because he still cared deeply about protecting the innocent, not just fighting the big war. The Jason who would use his own body as a shield to protect someone else. The Jason who believed that his life didn’t mean anything unless he was helping others.

“Do it, Canary,” Oracle’s voice rose. “Just let it go. You have to hit him as hard as you can.”

Jason’s hand gripped her throat. He only needed one hand to nearly encircle it, and he squeezed. The burning exploded like fire. She could feel a cry coming on with or without her, but she forced it down. She kept her jaw shut so tight, even with the throbbing broken bones, she might have cracked a tooth. Tears flowed unbidden from her eyes. Her body desperately gasped for air through her nostrils, but nothing made it to her lungs. Her heartbeat became a booming, painful thing in her chest. Blackness teased the edge of her vision. Something popped in her ears. Had she blown an eardrum? Was that a thing that happened when you were being choked to death?
Reality faded away like a dream, replaced by the memory of him holding her after they left Central City together. He was sweet and gentle and there when no one else was. He smelled like hotel soap and buttery, warm cinnamon rolls. He was a bright, white smile and gentle, calloused hands, professing love in the purest way he could.

No. She’d fight the sonic scream back as long as it took. Laurel wouldn’t willingly unleash something that would kill Jason. She thought of Roy and Ev somewhere in the building engaged in their own battle. Would they forgive her for not stopping him? God, she hoped so. She prayed they would understand why she couldn’t do it. She was always weak, wasn’t she? If Jason survived this, he would never forgive himself or her.

I’m so sorry. She saw Sara’s face and her heart shattered. Sara would never understand this. While she was fighting to get their father back, Laurel couldn’t even defend herself. Wasn’t that how it had been for years? Sara was always fighting the real enemy while Laurel drowned - strangled - in whatever she valued over her own life or the people she cared about. If it wasn’t the bottle, apparently it was Jason. She would let Jason kill her as surely as she would have let booze kill her.

“So show me.” Sara was standing over her in her Canary costume, holding out a gloved hand.

Show her I can be strong. Show her I’m not going to abandon the people I love.

She let her meta ability vibrate louder until it was a high-pitched hum shimmering around the apartment. Jason’s grip loosened and she let it get louder. It grew until he reeled back, clutching at his wrist. He even cried out. Air rushed down her throat and filled her lungs until her vision began to clear. It was hard to tell under his glove, but the unnatural bend to his fingers and palm suggested that she had shattered the bones in his hand.

Laurel was still sucking air down her damaged windpipe. She fell onto her back, her chest heaving against each painful breath and her eyes still struggling to regain their focus on something, anything. The sonic scream was winding back down - that was a first. If she just kept breathing in and out, no matter how searing, she could control it. She had to control it. She couldn’t be a ticking bomb every time her life was threatened. Besides, any second now Jason was going to recover himself and come for her again.

A shadow passed over Laurel’s vision. It flew, trailing a long, dark purple coat. Huntress’s boot connected with Red Hood’s helmet, cracking the back of his head against the brick wall. She didn’t slow her assault. She spun, twirling her bo over her head and then bringing it across Red Hood’s helmet with the full force of her weight and momentum. The face of his helmet splintered and his shoulders slumped. Maybe…
She spun back around the other way, but his hand whipped out, catching the staff and yanking her forward. He hauled back and slammed his fractured helmet into her face. Blood exploded from her nose and she stumbled backward while Jason regained his feet. By some miracle, not only was she no longer nursing an injured shoulder, but she looked good. Even with blood pouring down her face, she smiled and spun her bo staff playfully.

Canary whispered into her mic, “If we get his helmet off, we can knock him out.” If she just kept hammering him with her sonic scream, she was going to kill him.

“C’mon big guy,” Helena beckoned him with her free hand. “I wanna see what you got.” Hadn’t Laurel left her bruised, bandaged, and limping at the fire house? They went at each other full force and full speed. Laurel had never seen Helena move that quickly. It might have been the lack of oxygen to her brain, but Canary could barely discern their dizzying flurry of punches, blocks, kicks, spinning and ducking each other faster than her eyes could track. Huntress was taking serious hits, but she was giving as good as she got.

A small hand found Laurel’s shoulder. She jerked and turned to see that Starling was kneeling at her side, holding out a flask. The same flask Nyssa had tossed to Helena. Over Starling’s shoulder, Arsenal and Green Arrow were slinging arrows at a particularly enraged Palette. Canary shook her head and pushed the flask away but she was weaker than she thought. Starling merely pushed past her - oh yes, that was broken - hand. Starling’s dark eyes were wide and glassy. Laurel realized she must look a lot worse than she felt which, at the moment, was bad.

“Trust me,” Starling implored. Her hand was shaking on the flask. Laurel took it. She brought it to her nose. It didn’t smell like any alcohol she’d ever imbibed. Starling was shifting between the balls of her feet, casting her panicked gaze between Canary and Huntress. She wanted to force it down Canary’s throat, but didn’t want to cross that line. Laurel gulped. Bottoms up. She tipped the mouthpiece to her lips and let the cool - or was it pleasantly warm? - liquid slide down the jagged, bruised tissue in her neck.

After that, things got really interesting. The warmth spread and licked through her blood like a gentle fire. Her limbs and nerves and God, even her hair tingled with energy. It choked in her airway, but she could breathe. She could see, but everything was hazy and glowing. Even the sounds in the room were overtaken by a high-pitched ringing. Meanwhile, Huntress was still laughing and egging Jason on, between grunts and cries of pain as they traded punishing blows. Oracle was saying something over their comms and Starling was nodding along with it, calculating whatever she needed to do between Canary and Huntress.

Starling nodded one more time and checked the chamber of her M320 and shifted it to the front of her body. “Huntress, open a gate!”
The order was so firm and confident, so adult. It jarred Laurel out of the strange reverie of sensation still rocking over her, and it even gave Helena enough pause to spare the time for a double-take. She didn’t waste anymore time and swung her bo at Red Hood, just slow enough for him to catch it. She stepped into his outstretched arm and pivoted, jerking the staff away, knowing he wouldn’t release. As his body followed forward, she pivoted again in the opposite direction until she was on the other side of his arm and the staff. She moved so quickly, she was yanking the stick back, leveraged between his twisted wrist to his shoulders, and broke his arm in a sickening crunch before he realized what was happening and let go.

While he was still roaring in pain, Starling was on her feet in a dead sprint worthy of any vault runway. Instead of a pommel horse, she leapt onto Red Hood’s exposed torso, one leg looped over his shoulder and her opposite hand on the collar of his jacket. With one broken hand and a broken arm, all he could really do was bring one arm up to strike at her, but she held on.

She held on just long enough to level her M320 at the chin of his helmet and squeezed the trigger. The 40mm round exploded in a boom of smoke and enough force to knock Red Hood clean off his feet. Starling dropped onto her back but rolled backward out of the way, coughing and gagging against the smoke grenade. Huntress took her by the shoulders to help her out of the way, back to Canary’s side. Except Canary wasn’t on the ground anymore.

Her blood was singing and the smoky, poorly lit apartment was alive. Her vision was razor sharp and she could pick out the different heartbeats thumping away in the room. The only one she needed to worry about was Jason’s. Everything was slower, or she was just faster. She had her tonfas in her hands again and twisted the rings on the handles, lighting up with electricity. She could hear the buzz. The impact of the 40mm round had cracked Jason’s helmet off his head.

He was wide open, shaking his head in a daze. Blood poured from his nose and lips. Her feet barely touched the ancient wood floorboards, and then she was on him, slamming the taser ends of her tonfas on each side of his neck. Even without her heightened senses, the smell of cooking flesh would have made her nauseous. She held her ground though, not letting up even as his body twitched and spasmed. She held on until his eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped against the wall, no longer twitching.

Canary dropped the tonfas and grasped Jason’s face between her hands, shaking him gently, and then with more urgency when he remained slack and unresponsive. “Jason!” Her voice croaked. She didn’t finish the entire contents of that flask - she assumed must be Lazarus water since it came from Nyssa - so she still wasn’t entirely recovered from Jason’s onslaught. She patted his cheek, then smacked it, then slapped the other cheek. He had blood dripping from everywhere, even his ears. When his filter turned off, it turned off. She kept shaking and hitting and calling his name, but nothing.
“Here,” Helena had the flask again. There couldn’t be much left, but it had to be better than nothing. Laurel tipped his head back so that his jaw fell open, slack. Helena poured the remnants - only a few drops - and then they sat back to wait.

After an eternity, his eyelids fluttered. When Laurel leaned in, two pairs of strong hands pulled her back. Helena and Oliver tugged until she was behind them, but she struggled and pushed anyway. Oliver was seething with barely restrained anger, and still was only just holding his ground to keep Laurel from shoving both of them aside. His hand tightened on his bow so hard, a lesser weapon would have cracked.

Jason’s eyes flew open, wild and confused. He was scrambling on his feet, backing up against the wall even more than he already was, his gaze shooting all around the room looking for answers but not finding any. He hissed when he tried to move his broken arm, then brought his broken hand up to inspect it. The bones were already knitting back together and if he was feeling anything Laurel had, he could only be more and more confounded.

Laurel finally broke away against Helena and Oliver’s simultaneous “No!”’s but she couldn’t let him suffer any more than he already had. At first he only panicked more, trying to simply escape Laurel’s sudden encroachment on his space rather than defend himself. After a few soothing words and Laurel’s outstretched palms, Jason slowly returned to himself. She could see it in his eyes, the gradual transition from frightened animal to Jason Todd.

“What-?” he breathed, still searching the room and putting together what he could. He was seeing the destruction, smelling the burnt flesh, blood, all while his body slowly put itself back together. Then he saw Laurel. She looked like herself. A little haggard, a little tired, her hair was tangled and matted in places and she had dried blood on her cheeks and lips, but no bruising. And then he remembered, everything, all at once. It strangled his lungs.

Laurel didn’t know where to touch him but knew he needed something to ground himself, so she settled on his cheek and neck, gently stroking away the grime and blood. “It’s okay, everyone’s okay. I’m fine. Ev is fine. Helena is fine.”

“It is not. Fine,” Oliver roared. He took a step forward but Laurel was back on her feet, blocking his advance.

“Get out of here, Ollie.” She squared with him, chin tilted up. Oliver pulled up short, visibly grinding his jaw and wincing in disbelief.
“I saw him almost kill you!”

Laurel took a deep breath. “And I will deal with it, but you need to leave.”

Oliver shook his head and started to reply, but his eyes went wide over her shoulder. “Son of a bitch.”

Laurel followed his gaze: Jason was gone. There was an open window not far from where he had been sitting. Dammit.

Roy jogged into the room, eyebrows raised in question. “Uh, sorry to interrupt but,” he tossed a thumb over his shoulder to where Palette was unconscious and hogtied, “should we call ARGUS or what? Where’s Jason?” He saw the window and nodded. “Want me to go after him?”

Oliver opened his mouth to answer but Laurel cut him off. “No, I’ll get him.” She forced herself to soften a bit and turned her attention to Helena. “Thanks for coming. Both of you.” Helena nodded and Oliver looked away, pretending to be interested in the window where Jason had made his escape.

Helena held up the empty flask. “We owe Nyssa big time. Do you think she feels like this all the time? I could still go a few more rounds.” She wiped the blood away from her lip, only just barely bruised. She pulled Ev under her arm with a squeeze. “That was some pretty impressive ridin’, Tex.”

“I’m still the reigning Urban Cowgirl champion of The Double Deuce.”

Helena’s lips formed a thin line. “I don’t want to know how or why you’ve been frequenting the only redneck bar in town.”

“You guys think you can clean this up?” Laurel ignored them. The high from the water was ebbing and a general soreness, maybe even whiplash, were settling back on her bones. “ARGUS can have Palette. Where’s-?”

“Outside.” Oliver answered. “We found her on the way in with a League arrow in her chest.”
“You don’t think Thea…?”

Oliver shrugged. “I don’t know what to think, but Mother is officially out of the picture.”

Laurel stretched her neck and shoulders, and replaced her collapsed tonfas on her belt. “Okay, I’m going to find Jason and talk him back.” All of them rose a protest at once but Laurel stopped them. “Enough. It’s over. If you want Felicity and Digg back, you need to let me talk to him.”

Hopefully this time it would go a little smoother.

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Jason chugged another few gulps of the Jack Daniels bottle he kept hidden in the floorboards under their bed. It’s not that he didn’t trust Laurel to have the restraint to not dive into the bottle if she found it in the kitchen, he just didn’t like the idea of rubbing her face in it. He hadn’t even touched the bottle since she moved in, he just liked knowing it was there should a situation arise that required getting good and drunk.

Tonight called for good and drunk.

Between his preternatural healing and the few drops of Lazarus Pit water they gave him - he could still taste it - this whole bottle wouldn’t do much more than give him a buzz for about half an hour. Better than nothing.

Even now, with his braced arm in a sling, he could feel the strange, static-like tingling of his tissue knitting itself back together. At least something would knit itself back together tonight.

He was alone in their bedroom in the firehouse, staring out the window, and seeing only her face. He had tried to kill her tonight. He had watched himself doing it like a spectator. He felt every impulse, every instinct driving him to the kill. He fought it, of course, which was probably the only reason she and the others lived through the night. When his body told him to snap her neck, it took every ounce of energy he had to redirect that impulse to anything else, choking her instead. She could get out of that, and had.

That didn’t make him feel better.
The front door clicked and slid open downstairs. Soft footfalls trotted up the spiral stairs and then stilled at the top. He didn’t need to turn his head to know Laurel was there. He took another pull from the bottle. There was no point in hiding it. He shouldn’t have come back here, but he wanted to face her, right there and then, like ripping off a bandaid.

In his mind’s eye, she was standing behind him, battered and bleeding. She had a broken wrist, and knee and ankle swelling like grapefruits. Her bright green eyes were wide and dark with terror, and the capillaries in her eyes were bursting, flooding the white with red. Her face as a swollen, distorted mass of bruises, cuts, blood, and grime. Worst of all, his hands were wrapped around her neck, slowly crushing the life out of her.

When he forced himself to turn his head to look at her, she was fine, glowing even. Her hair shone in the filtered moonlight, glossy and golden. Her skin was bright and healthy. She stood straight and strong, waiting at the top of the stairs for some sign to approach.

Jason turned back to the wide floor-to-ceiling window. “I guess I’m going to have to send Nyssa a thank you note.”

“I think she’d prefer your head in a box,” Laurel’s voice still had a rough, sandpaper edge to it in spite of the healing waters. “Otherwise she’s a Pauillac Bordeaux drinker.” Laurel sat down next to him, close enough that they could lean against each other, but staring out the window rather than looking at him, just the same.

They sat in silence for a long time. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. Their view had been progressively dimming over the past months as more and more people disappeared.

“What happened to Mother?” Jason finally broke the silence.

“They found her dead outside by a League arrow.”

“Makes sense,” Jason nodded. “She gave up too much.”

“You tortured her.”
“I got valuable intel-”

“That’s not why you did it, though,” Laurel cut him off. “You were angry with her.”

He was, there was no denying that. Yes, she’d given up actionable intelligence, but he didn’t need to torture her for that. She’d known Malcolm and Damien were through with her. She wanted to hurt them in a final act of defiance, or maybe currying favor with the vigilantes. Oh no, he wanted her to suffer. He wanted to carve from her skin what she owed his family. When he thought about his family, his anger rose up like bile.

“You’re damn straight I was.” He finally looked at her. Up close, he could see how tired she was. Drinking Lazarus Pit water, however helpful, was a short and limited solution. Without the full bath and ritual, a person could only derive so many benefits. It was handy enough for the League elite and certainly came packed with fewer side effects than the complete process, but limited nonetheless.

“You put Starling at risk at least twice over. You put Roy and Helena in danger. You put yourself in a dangerous position with a woman here for the express purpose of mind control, and nearly killed all of us.”

“You mean like when you demolished a building without knowing who was nearby and could have been killed, so you could have a face-off with a magician who, as far as we can tell, can’t be killed?” Sometimes Jason shot first and asked questions later. The subtle flare of nostrils and pupils from Laurel told him this was less of a shot across the bow, and more of an arrow to the chest.

The air in their loft chilled. The noise from the street drowned into nothing against the heavy, almost buzzing blanket of tension between them.

“You were angry,” Jason’s voice dropped. “You still are.”

“I wouldn’t torture someone because I’m angry.” The words spilled out in a rush.

“No,” Jason shook his head, “you got me there. But you did put people at risk because in that moment, all you could see was the chance to take that bastard out. Before this is over, you will do it again, and maybe you won’t be so lucky with bystanders.”
Laurel pushed up from the bed and stood staring out the window, arms crossed. “We need to get John and Felicity back.”

“I know.”

“Waller is ready to deal.”

Jason scrubbed his hand over his chin. How long had it been since he’d had a shave? “You know she’s not going to give you what you need.”

“She’s going to give us a cover for Thea.”

Jason nodded. His nose wrinkled and his molars ground together. “And what are her terms?” He already knew. Laurel answered with a stiffening of her shoulders. “I’ll go tonight.”

“Thank you.”

Jason stood and retrieved his jacket. His hand stilled over one of his Red Hood helmets. Would he need it? No, he wouldn’t want to just hand his tech over to ARGUS and Waller. Laurel was rooted in place, staring out at the Star City night sightlessly.

Before stepping down the stairs, Jason turned back to Laurel. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, least of all you. You’ll get them back. All of them.” He waited a beat for a response, and when it didn’t come, he left.

Jason walked down the 4-lane freeway bridge where the Starling County line crossed. On the other side of the county line was the ARGUS and National Guard blockade, one of many at each major thoroughfare out of Star City. Portable industrial lights obscured his vision of the blockade setup, but he could see the 7-ton trucks and all-terrain vehicles, and soldiers in full combat kits.

As he got closer, a voice came over a loudspeaker, instructing him to stop where he was, get on his knees, and put his hands behind his head. It raked against his flesh, but he complied. He allowed the shaking-hands of too young and too green soldiers to pat him down and wrench his arms
behind his back, bound by flex cuffs. It hurt more than he wanted to let on to bend his barely-healed arm. They lead him to a well-guarded temporary command tent and plopped him unceremoniously into a plastic chair. They left him alone until the tent flap rustled again, and Amanda Waller slid into a seat across from him.

That smug smile on her tastefully red lips was infuriating.

“You’re looking a little worse for the wear.” She crossed her legs, her eyes dancing up and down his face.

“Let’s not waste time flattering each other,” he said. “I wanna hear the pitch.”

“Pitch?” Mock sincerity dripped from her mouth.

“C’mon,” he dragged it out. “This is the part where you tell me this is my chance to serve my country, give back a little. Tell me about the dirtbags you’re gonna saddle me with. Who’s on my suicide squad? Kingshark? Livewire? The Hamburglar?”

Waller chuckled. “Mr. Todd, you underestimate yourself. We know all about you, the one man army. Why would I waste valuable assets when you can do the job of ten dirtbags?”

“Spare me.” Jason leaned back, straining the limits of the plastic chair and further jamming his protesting arm. “What makes you think I’m not just gonna cut and run? You and I both know your little nanite in the neck trick will last all of half a second before my people turn it into the world’s most useless implant.”

Waller only laughed harder and shook her head. “I don’t need to waste energy on that, either. I know what you value and what you don’t. If you don’t accomplish the mission I assign you, I am going to level Star City with a firebombing that will make 1942 Tokyo look like a practice run.”

Jason’s heart stuttered, but he kept his face unimpressed, even rolling his eyes. “Give me a break. We can hack any tech you got.”

“That’s why I procured a fleet of B-17 Super Fortresses. They navigate by map and compass, and get their orders over AM radio waves. They already have their launch codes and are awaiting my abort order, should I give it.” Waller sighed and produced a grotesque mockery of concern. “I
guess you could try to shoot them all down, but all those pilots and aircrew; honest Americans just following orders. What will Ms. Lance think?”

This time, Jason couldn’t hide the dread, wrapped in a tight blanket of rage.

Waller dropped her faux-concern. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and smiled like a cat with a mouse. “Welcome to Task Force X, Mr. Todd.”

Chapter End Notes

Felicity has a real bad time in this chapter, but please let the story develop. I am not trying to punish her or treat her unfairly. I have a hero arc for her planned, and this is her "Island."

Also, I live for comments and feedback! It's helped me check areas I may not be presenting the way I want them to come across, or otherwise could be better.

Thank you!!
Episode 13

Chapter Summary

It's the beginning of the end. Despite their best efforts, Darhk's plan is still moving along seamlessly. The team gets wind of a big move - bombs that are going to kill thousands and put the final nail in the coffin, cutting of Star City from the rest of the nation.

Jason is a one-man Suicide Squad, but he's not playing by Waller's rules.

Felicity and John face hard truths about their roles as vigilantes and their families.

Laurel faces down the accusation Jason leveled at her: when faced with the opportunity to finish Darhk, consequences be damned, will she do it? Or will she chose the high road?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Malcolm studied his daughter as she sat cross-legged on the tatami floor, eyes closed and deep in meditation. The drugs were in the incense and his men made sure the air circulated. He doubled the dose tonight. She hadn’t been herself since the raid on her brother’s bunker. Malcolm hadn’t wanted to put her in charge of that, knowing damn well the risks of forcing her to confront the people she loved, but Damien needed his doubts quelled. If Malcolm was to bring the League and Thea along on Damien’s journey, he needed the man to trust him.

Thea’s hair was greasy from too long between washes and the hollows of her cheeks were more pronounced. If her willfulness wasn’t a direct threat to her safety with Damien, he’d be pleased with her. Only his true heir could put up such a fight against the onslaught of drugs and Mother’s brainwashing triggers. Even in her passive state, some part of her mind still fought. A muscle in Malcolm’s cheek twitched with pride.

Malcolm’s idea had been for Andy to take the lead on Felicity’s capture. Andy was such a delicious little traitor and the perfect fracture of the bond between the vigilantes. According to Damien, Felicity cracked like an egg when her R&D team had been brought in, but let John Diggle suffer for hours. Their team would never recover from all of this.

Damien had a different idea: he knew Andy was as traitorous to HIVE as he was to his brother. “Let him die as a hero and let Thea be the one to finish him. Pit all of them against each other. They’ll be so busy taking sides, they won’t be able to organize coffee let alone an insurgency.”
It had been more than that, though. Malcolm could read Damien like a book, and vice versa. Malcolm needed to prove his unquestionable authority over Thea and the rest of the League.

“Is it taken care of?” Damien materialized at Malcolm’s shoulder, more somber than usual.

“Yes.” Malcolm’s hand itched to take his sword, but he wouldn’t give the other man the satisfaction. Malcolm had killed Mother himself. He couldn’t quite say why he did it, but the impulse had washed over him, protective and fierce, something in his bones driving him to shield his daughter from that particular murder. It was senseless, but that was parenthood.

Damien pursed his lips. “You should have let her do it. She’s looking a little rough. You know, I could-”

“It’s better this way,” Malcolm stopped him before he could finish the suggestion Damien had already made five times. Whatever Damien had in mind for Thea, it would end her current dependence on Malcolm. He couldn’t abide that.

“At least take one of mine,” Damien offered with an obsequious smile. He snapped his fingers and one of his newer men stepped forward. Of the children he’d procured, Damien had been grooming any older than 16 and physically fit into Ghosts. What happened to the others made even Malcolm’s skin crawl. This young Ghost couldn’t have been older than 18.

Malcolm nodded his thanks. Damien tucked his hands into his pockets and moved to leave, but stopped, raising his finger as if he just remembered something. One day, Malcolm was going to slit him open.

“Oh, before I forget,” Damien grinned, “a little birdie tells me Andrew Diggle and Huntress are still alive.” His eyes slid from Thea back to Malcolm. “For an Heir to the Demon who needs to kill to survive, she’s not very good at it, is she? Make sure she’s ready. Oliver and his super friends are going to try to stop the next phase. Wouldn’t want us losing any more ground because you couldn’t control your daughter.”

With a sneer, Malcolm opened the door to usher Damien’s sacrifice in. Thea’s dark eyes blinked open. Sometimes it took Malcolm’s breath away how much Thea looked like his own mother.

He needed her in line to keep her alive.
Grand Central Station, Star City, 7PM

“They want to keep your children hungry!” the man howled into a megaphone for the cheering, armed crowd gathered on the convergence of train tracks outside the station proper. “They want to keep us unarmed! Unsafe! They want us divided! Can they divide us?”

“NO!” the crowd sang back, waving guns, bats, machetes, and sundry weapons in the air.

“One front! One people! Star City will survive!” the man’s voice rose to a scream.

The crowd dissolved into chanting, “THE PEOPLE. UNITED. WILL NEVER BE DIVIDED,” pumping their weapons and fists in their to the beat.

“Well,” Lyla whispered into her throat mic, “this is unexpected.”

“I’m not sure it was worth it to cut a deal with Waller for this intel. We could have just opened a window and heard this,” Green Arrow lamented in response.

“Is anyone else really annoyed that Darhk had his people co-opt that chant?” Roy asked.

“My team is in position,” Lyla said, ignoring Oliver and Roy. “It looks like we have hostages on six different trains. Huntress, can you call in the 300?”

“Already on it,” Huntress replied from the back of her motorcycle, racing toward the safe house where Liza Warner and a few others hunkered down at night.

“Good. Darhk has the full force of his militia out here tonight. What the hell are they doing?”

“Bait and switch,” Black Canary answered. She had a good view from a rooftop just a block away. “They want all of our attention here.”
“Uh guys, I hate to be the bearer of more bad news,” Oracle cleared her throat, “but I’m picking up some low band radio noise from the trains. It looks like receivers separate from the radios the conductors use. I think they have explosives on each of those trains, and five Shadow drones parked on the station roof with 12-pound missiles.”

“Those’ll do just enough damage to make the highways impassible,” Roy said. "And, you know, kill a lot of people."

Black Canary stood up straight and cocked her head to give her neck a satisfying crack. “We split up. Archers hit the drones. Starling and I will take out the train tracks. Nyssa, can your team clear a path through the Ghosts so the ARGUS teams can get to the hostages?”

There was a taut silence over the radio before Nyssa replied a crisp, “Yes.”

Talia hadn’t responded well to Laurel’s request for help, and insisted - correctly - that the train station was a fool’s errand. She had her own leads from her own men, as well as her vicious interrogation of Andy. Nyssa talked her into letting them split their troops for the evening. Talia couldn’t resist the irrefutable logic that no matter which direction they took, they could kill more HIVE and disloyal assassins by hitting both fronts. Though as much as Talia relished the idea of a sweeping hit against her enemies, she did not appreciate Nyssa’s refusal to stay in line. Win or lose tonight, Nyssa had put herself in her sister’s crosshairs.

Lights on each of the six trains sparked alive and Ghosts filed around and through the militia crowds, ushering them out of the way and reforming them in a defensive perimeter around the open-air track junction. All told, 10 different tracks converged at this point into four tracks that disappeared underground, where the main station sat. From the underground station, the four track diverged into another 10 routes traveling all over and out of the city. Off the top of her head, Canary counted at least four choke points those tracks lead to that could provide safe passage in and out of Star City: bridges, tunnels, even a mountain pass to the east.

HIVE was going to cut Star City off from the rest of the nation.

A Ghost dumped Felicity in a heap on the floor of a subway car. The Star City light rail transit had,
30 years ago, represented an energy-efficient mass transportation solution for the growing west coast metropolis. In the past 10 years, however, it had degraded into delays, track and train maintenance that was only staving off the inevitable, stations and near-empty routes that only served crime, oh, and the destruction of the Undertaking. Less than 30% of the trains and tracks were still in service, and only those most critical to the daily functioning of Star City.

This particular car was painted with graffiti and smelled strongly of urine. Grime from the floor seemed to ooze up through Felicity’s long-soiled skirt. She tried to push herself up, but the Ghost was faster. He slapped a metal cuff around one wrist, then the other, with the handcuffs looped around one of the vertical metal handrails. Resigned to her fate, she let her forehead rest against the cool bar and paid no mind to the disgusting floor. She could live and die in this spot, and the world would go on just as it already was. It didn’t matter.

Everything in her body hurt, but it was her chest that ached like she’d been run through on a sword. She hadn’t seen John in days now; she didn’t even know if he was still alive. *Probably not*, her pessimistic inner monologue kept her on track.

She didn’t believe in Heaven. Even if she wasn’t Jewish, her analytical nature wouldn’t allow her to believe in something so fanciful and nonsensical. But she did believe in Hell. She was in it. She was in Hell because the love of her life asked her to be, because her friends needed something from her, because she insisted on being the center of *Team Arrow*.

And what good had any of that done? Half of her R&D team was dead, shot as they knelt before her. Her best friend was probably dead after days of torture. Damien had moved on to torturing her when it became clear that his other methods weren’t working.

There was so much she had left to do, so much she could do. How much time had she wasted half-assing her way around Palmer Tech? If she got out of this alive, she wouldn’t waste another day. Every fiber of her existence would be spent learning the resources she’d had at her fingertips all along. With the right leadership, Palmer Tech could save the world, and she could be the one to guide it there - if she lived through this, and stopped dicking around with the half-measures and reactionary planning that vigilantism lent itself to.

A pair of polished wingtip oxfords appeared in her vision. At least he hadn’t broken her glasses.

“Thanks for all your help,” Damien drawled in a singsong voice over her. “I don’t think we could have ransacked the Palmer Tech archives without it. My hackers are good, but they’re not you.”

Felicity pulled her knees under herself, forcing her spine to straighten and look him in the eye.
“You’re making a big mistake. The archives are just the tip of the iceberg. Even with what you’ve left of my R&D team, we can make you anything you want.”

“I really just wanted the specs on that Holt battery,” Damien shrugged. He pulled a kerchief from his pocket - a silk, ornate slip of fabric that might be Hermes - and wiped his fingers clean from where he’d touched the handrail. “And what you had on our resident vigilantes. Honestly, your dwindling little company can’t offer me anything that… well gosh, any other development firm can offer. You, my dear, have worn out your usefulness. Oh, don’t feel too bad, your last gift to me will be finishing the work our mutual friend Andrew started.”

Felicity’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Damien crouched to her level. “You’re going to help me tear Team Arrow apart from the inside out. Like my own little blonde, annoying chest-burster. And, thanks to yours and the elder Diggle’s presence here tonight, no one is going to be around to stop me from starting the final countdown.”

He grinned at the confusion on her face, straightened, and marched out of the train car, whistling *Final Countdown*.

Lyla made a quick count of the fighters Helena and Liza returned with. Her husband’s 300 were closer to three dozen, but the more, the merrier. They could use the numbers. She always got butterflies right before stepping off for a mission, but tonight was different. Her husband was down there. Based on general size from the body heat signatures, she identified the most likely train John was being held on, and painted it with an IR laser.

Lyla regularly appreciated John’s massive build, but tonight it might actually save his life. He had an easy 75lbs on all of the other hostages, giving him the most distinct body heat reading of the group.

*Just hang on a little bit longer, baby,* she thought, shifting her weight between the balls of her feet, hoping that if she thought it loud enough, he might hear her and know she was coming.

The HIVE troops and their militia had formed up their positions. It would be difficult to get to the
trains before they left the station, or access the drones on the roof. Lyla trusted that her people and the vigilantes could handle it. Mostly. It would be close.

The trains heated to life with puffs of steam and belligerent groans and screeching. They were moving.

“Harbinger to all teams,” Lyla said, “we are go. I repeat, we are go.”

Green Arrow and Arsenal were already ascending to the station’s rooftop, while Black Canary and Starling started toward the closest train. There was no way to know which train held Felicity, but Lyla already had her teams moving toward the other trains. Nyssa and a small band of assassins would take the last train, while the rest of her men, the 300, and Huntress saw to the mob of HIVE soldiers and militiamen.

Liza’s men cut a neat path for Black Canary and Starling to their targeted train. Canary ducked a wide swing, came back to grab the militiaman’s collar, and used his own inertia to toss him into the next two coming at her. Starling kept pace behind her, lobbing bag shotgun rounds at any who got past Canary.

“Cover me,” Canary called out to Starling. She took off running down the track ahead of the train while Starling followed, her feet dancing over the gravel, debris, and tracks even as she turned and ran backwards to cover their backs.

Canary slid to a stop and judged her distance from the train. Thankfully, most of the militiamen and HIVE were occupied. She turned back away from the train, took a deep breath, and focused a booming cry on the tracks ahead. It only took a single hit to blow a section of tracks into a mangled mess. The noise got the attention of three Ghosts who immediately abandoned their own fights to make a wide arc around her, LIGHT guns drawn. The train was ambling slowly toward her and she felt Starling at her back.

“We do not have time for this,” she grumbled before blasting out another cry at the oncoming Ghosts, just enough to send them off their feet.

She boarded the train and found was empty save for a hostage she recognized as Curtis. Felicity had told her about Curtis in a quiet moment. Felicity was big on large displays of self-deprecation when it came to anything not computer-related, whether it was her physical fitness or even the management of Palmer Tech. A lot of it was just noise, though. She always figured it out, or figured out a tenable solution. There was very little she couldn’t think her way out of. Curtis, though, represented a living, breathing problem she nearly tanked. He was part of a bigger, long-
term solution for Palmer Tech and she almost let him get laid off. There was no loud self-
flagellation when she mentioned it, just a soft admission that she was failing Palmer Tech, failing
to serve her community in a way beyond her role as Overwatch, and failing to live up to her own
potential.

Starling helped her lift Curtis to his feet. He was dazed and bleeding from somewhere on his head,
dirty, tired, but otherwise ambulatory. Canary looped his other arm around her shoulders just in
time for the front car to hit the mangled track section she left. The train shuddered and slammed to
a stop, sending the three of them stumbling, but they stayed upright. Curtis let out a hiss of pain,
shook his head and forced his feet back under himself. Felicity hadn’t mentioned that he was
tough, but then, she probably never saw him in circumstances like this.

They made it to the nearest door when a familiar figure strolled through the back of the train car.
Canary’s blood ran cold at the sight of Damien Darhk grinning at her. She shifted her weight and
pulled Curtis’ arm back over her head to loop around Starling. “Go,” was all she said. Starling had
a moment of panic, just a tiny head shake, which Canary answered with a stern look. Starling knew
this was not the moment to pick a childish fight. She stumbled out the much-larger man in tow and
the door slid closed again behind her.

“You’re looking fit,” Damien said. “So’s the little one. Man, I selected and trained her, I gave you
that nifty little noise box. You all should really be thanking me. You’re practically my creations.”

Canary scoffed and crossed her arms. “You think you did this?” She smirked at the flash of
surprise on his face. “We trained Starling. And I was already in the mask. I was always going to go
down this road. You just happened to be there.”

Damien tapped his finger against his lips and resumed his feral gleam. “You really think you have
the upper hand here, don’t you?” He cocked his head playfully. “That’s adorable. Kid sis thinks so,
too. It’s funny, my memories keep changing. Just here and there. Sara keeps popping up over the
years, trying to kill me, but I’m still here. Nothing’s changed. I wonder what that means.”

Years of legal practice schooled her for this precise moment. While every nerve in her body sizzled
with the need to beat Damien until he told her exactly what happened between him and Sara, she
knew this technique. The opponent presents something shocking, unexpected, meant to unbalance
you, get you to show your hand. You give them nothing. No reaction. Force them to show their
hand, instead.

Laurel sighed, channeling the best of her mother whenever she knew Sara was lying. She tilted her
head, the unequivocal invitation for the speaker to continue tying his own noose. Her heart
hammered, battering against her ribs, screaming to know what this bastard had done to her sister.
He was right: nothing had changed. Either Sara had created an alternate universe where their father
wasn’t dead and by the mysterious rules of time travel, Laurel was stuck in this one, or Sara failed. Both options didn’t bode well for her to ever see her sister again. To hear it from her enemy was a punch to the gut, but she’d never let him know that.

She held her ground while he stewed, studying her like a lion might watch a wounded bison before striking. His eyes glittered, then slid from side to side, glancing out the windows at the melee around them. “Train number five is rolling out, right on schedule. Your team looks a little busy. Are you really going to stand here and try to beat me in a staring contest?”

She flinched. He was right. Train number five was…which one? One was eastbound, to the mountain tunnel. Two others were north and southbound, intersecting the two major freeways up and down the coast. One was westbound, toward the harbor, and the other made a loop through the city. So which one was five? Did it even matter?

Canary pulled her tonfas off the magnets on her belt, but kept her stance loose. She needed to get off this train.

“Oh goody.” He adjusted his cuff links and loosened his tie. “I knew you’d want it this way. You and your sister are in love with death. You’ll both always come back to me, because I’m the one who can-”

She cut him off with a short Canary Cry to the nearest window, and dove out into a roll. She popped back to her feet and used the momentum to keep running, dodging Ghosts, militia, assassins, and more in what had broken into a pitched battle without any discernible lines. There was a train still moving, and it was packed with Ghosts. She could get to it, she could climb to the front and blow the tracks. It would be ugly, but it would do the job.

Damien materialized in front of her, shaking his head and tsking at her. “Sorry, Ms. Lance, but I can’t let you walk away that easily.”

There was a retort on the tip of her tongue, or maybe just another sonic scream for the sake of efficiency, but before she could bite off either, a powerful hand snatched her by the back of her neck and lifted her off her feet.

Damien lifted his eyes to whomever was behind her. “I told you I’d deliver. She’s all yours.”

Everything after that was a blur.
“Where is she?” Green Arrow snarled into his radio. Everyone was coming back negative. Lyla had John, Huntress and Starling had half the hostages, and he’d rescued the others, leaving Arsenal to finish disabled the drones.

He watched with dawning horror as the last train - the only one they hadn’t disabled - rolled away from the station. He was too far. He’d never catch up with it in time. That had to be where Felicity was. According to Oracle, at the last second, more than twenty Ghosts had boarded that train. It was eastbound, and would arrive at the tunnel pass in less than ten minutes, where it would most likely blow.

He took off at a sprint toward the track. Maybe he could make it. Maybe he could catch the last car. But fighters blocked him, and even his nimble dodging - not even bothering to look back at each opponent he leapt aside - just slowed him down. He roared with frustration, his legs pumping with every ounce of strength he’d meticulously carved over years of training. And it wasn’t enough. The train was disappearing down the track, further and further.

“Get in, loser!” Starling’s voice broke his concentration, shouting over the rumble of a truck engine.

He almost stopped dead in amazement. The girl was driving one of the maintenance trucks emblazoned with the city’s transportation logo, with Huntress riding shotgun. He shook off his momentary shock and launched into the bed of the truck, not waiting for her to even slow down. The truck accelerated hard, bouncing down the unmaintained access road along the tracks.

He’d get her back. He had to get her back.

Felicity gripped the upright rail as best she could, but her palms were sweaty and the effort of avoiding the booted feet of the Ghosts positioned around here was difficult. The train was
bouncing and rattling along the track, faster than she thought it ought to. Was this train supposed to be going this fast? The clattering roar of the Plexiglas windows suggested otherwise.

About twenty of them - as far as she could see - jumped on the train as it started moving. Damien wanted to ensure she wasn’t pulled off this train before it blew. Anyone who would try to get through the Ghosts was more likely to die with her than escape.

Her heart sped up and her breath caught in her throat. This was not how it was supposed to go.

She was going to get taken. She was going to get interrogated. She was going to give them exactly what they asked for from the Palmer Tech servers while releasing a line of code that only she and Oracle knew existed.

And then Oliver would get her out. That was the deal. They wouldn’t torture her, at least not enough to do permanent damage, because she was too valuable, and she’d give in anyway after 72 hours.

If she’d had anything to eat in the past 24 hours, she might be throwing up right about now. Her stomach roiled. She might dry heave anyway, and that would be worse.

It was not supposed to be like this. She couldn’t die like this, after everything she’d been through with Team Arrow. She signed on knowing there was risk, but she hadn’t really ever believed it, had she? Even when she took a bullet for Sara, she’d known on some elemental level she’d be fine. It was always fine as long as Oliver was there. But he wasn’t here, was he?

There was a scuffle up ahead, murmuring and shifting. The Ghosts were spreading out. She was on the very back of the very last train car. Only two Ghosts stood behind her, and they stayed in place while the others dispersed further ahead.

Felicity pushed up to her knees to get a better look, but it was no use. Something was happening, and it was getting closer. Felicity jerked and squeaked in shock when a Ghost crashed out of one of the windows and tumbled past the train into the darkness. The Ghosts were converging on something, moving with a fresh urgency.

Something - someone dressed like a Ghost - popped over the crowd once, then they started to part like the Red Sea. She was too far back, too low to the ground, to see what exactly this wild Ghost - and he was dressed like a Ghost - was doing to make the space. All at once he was close, and the
men guarding her left an opening, for just a second, and that was all he needed. Felicity’s eyes were
too slow, only fast enough to see his hand reach out and the flick of a wrist, followed by a small red
blur. Felicity screamed when the handcuffs binding her to the railing jerked and she heard the
thunk of a blade connecting with… the railing.

Her hands pulled away from it, the chain between the cuffs severed. Her mouth fell open and she
leaned around the railing just enough to see the red batarang still wobbling where it had embedded.
The odds of landing a target that small, on a rattling and rumbling train, while fighting… Her mind
boggled at the sheer improbability of it, but there it was: red, shiny, and so sharp.

*Jason.* If there was one person who would appear to rescue her at the last possible moment like
this, she hadn’t ever considered Jason. He was here, he freed her, and he was *kicking ass.* Another
Ghost flew out of another broken train window.

“Yes!” she hissed then cast an alarmed glance over her shoulder at the two Ghosts guarding the
rear of the train. Luckily, they were focused on the human wrecking ball working his way through
their buddies. A metal baton clattered to the floor and Felicity pulled it to her as quickly as
possible, but the Ghosts over her were too busy trying to get into the fight.

Ghosts dropped like flies. Felicity rose to her bare feet on shaky legs, gripping the baton handle
between her sweaty palms. She flexed her hands around it like a baseball bat, then swung with all
her might at the back of the head of the unfortunate Ghost who had lingered behind his friend. She
stumbled against the impact, but he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

She looked up to see only one Ghost still standing. He pulled his balaclava down and lifted his
goggles up over his helmet.

Jason Todd grinned at her and winked. “Hey there, cutie.”

“Aren’t you a little short for a Storm Trooper?” Her voice wavered and her hands shook on the
baton. Jason reached forward and took it from her, then pushed her behind himself so he could
kick the door open.

“I’m gonna ignore the short joke since I’m a foot and half taller than you. What do ya think?” He
thumbed over his shoulder and Felicity could see the white Star City Rail truck bouncing and
racing alongside the train car. Oliver was standing in the bed of the truck, shouting something that
couldn’t be heard over the noise of each vehicle and gesticulating aggressively. “Hard way or easy
way?”
Felicity ventured a look out the door. Oliver’s face, even behind the mask, was wrought with the
determined panic she saw only rarely. “Why do I get the feeling there is no easy way for me?”

Jason didn’t answer except to scoop her into his arms and sidle carefully through the narrow rail
car door. “You gotta go. My cover’s blown and I have a train to stop.”

Green Arrow was balanced precariously in the bed of the truck as it bounced and swerved to stay
steady on the unfinished gravel access road alongside the train. He held his arms out, beckoning
for Red Hood to… oh God. She felt the muscles in Jason’s arms and chest bunching and flexing,
and she realized exactly what these two costumed lunatics intended. The air was rushing by like an
exhaust-ridden tornado. Between the wind and the engine noises and the rattling of the train cars,
she couldn’t hear anything, but she could see Oliver’s mouth still shouting.

Jason, though, she could hear just fine. His chest swelled with breath and he shouted, “One! Two!
Three!”

Felicity shut her eyes on Jason’s three and for half a second, she was weightless, flying through the
air, until she landed in a hard slam against Oliver. He tumbled backwards with her and she didn’t
have time to scream before they both hit the metal bed of the truck.

Oliver’s gloved hands were brushing over her head and he was asking her something, loudly and
repeatedly, but the blood was roaring in her ears. His hovering, his hands, the discomfort of
bouncing heavily in a truck bed, it was all too much. She couldn’t breathe. She screeched
something - probably telling him to stop touching her, but she was only barely conscious of her
own words - and he backed off. He stood again, balanced precariously. He and Jason were
shouting at each other. Jason waved him off and the truck began to slow, carefully at first, then
harder, skidding and fishtailing.

“Jesus, who taught you to drive?” Helena’s voice was audible through open windows.

“My uncle Earl used to take me off-roading!” Ev responded cheerily. Oh God, they let Ev drive?
The truck jerked into motion again, but she spun it around and they were racing back the way they
came.

Oliver’s hand found her shoulder again and he crouched next to her. “Are you-”
“Just stop!” Felicity threw her hands up, shielding her face and shrinking away. She couldn’t look at him right now. Right now she knew without looking at him just how shocked and hurt his expression must be. If she made eye contact, she might forgive him.

He opened his mouth to speak, still leaning over her, but he pulled up short, his hand going to the radio in his ear. He stood and cursed. “What do you mean ‘she’s gone’? Where is she?”

Oliver became so focused on barking orders and questions, he barely even flinched when the train exploded and derailed in the distance.

The world came back in a swirling cacophony of noise and pain. Laurel crashed and rolled, bouncing off of large rocks, through thorned bushes and finally skidded to a stop in the dirt. She coughed and forced her eyes open, gulping in crisp night air after what felt like an eternity without oxygen. Her eyes flew open, wild and unfocused, searching for some marker to tell her where she was. She was able to grasp specific images: sharp mountains in the distance, cacti and low bushes dotting an otherwise flat, unremarkable expanse of desert. The stars were in full force overhead, and it was colder here than in the city. She was in the salt flats.

Correction, they were in the salt flats.

“Get up, Black Canary,” a growling, inhuman voice said behind her.

She forced her hands underneath herself and pushed until her feet could follow. Her entire body ached like she’d been hit by a truck. Her legs were shaky, but nothing was broken or stopping her from rising. Unsteady and still gasping for breath, she slowly turned to face the voice. Her eyes widened in terror at the sight of the black-clad speedster. “Zoom.”

He cocked his head and she could just barely make out the subtle narrowing of his eyes beneath his monstrous cowl. “You have gotten stronger.”

Canary forced herself to stand straight, unwavering despite the way the earth still rolled beneath her feet. “Yeah, I have. What do you want? Why did you bring me here?” Her mind reeled. The battle had been going full-force when she was ripped away from it. What if they still needed her?
Was Starling okay? And this was Zoom, the guy even Barry had barely been able to land a single hit on. She was alone with Zoom. She was in trouble.

“I can help you.” The way his mask parted like exposed tendons and muscles, revealing only more black beneath, was disgusting. It was horrifying and unnatural. “And you can help me.”

“Thanks but no thanks.” Canary spoke with more conviction than she felt. Her ear radio was gone, which meant she couldn’t radio for help, and they couldn’t find her. She needed time to think, to work out a plan, an escape, something. “Don’t you have a Canary all your own, anyway?” She knew enough about Black Siren to know she didn’t want to know more. It was enough to make her permanent imprisonment in the pipeline a legitimate debate back in Central City.

In a flash of blue lightning and burst of air, Zoom disappeared and reappeared behind her. Canary didn’t repress the shudder that rolled through her at his sudden nearness. “Black Siren is ruling our Earth in my stead. But you’re already here. With so much untapped potential.”

Revulsion coursed through her as she felt his gloved hand run through her tangled hair. She snarled and whirled on him, swinging her back fist at what should have been his jaw, but he only chuckled and caught her hand. He squeezed and pressed until she was forced to her knees with a cry of pain.

“I can help you.” He released her and towered over her. “With my help, you can rule this world as a god.”

Canary cradled her hand against her chest and gritted her teeth. “We are not. Gods.”

“Oh no?” Zoom disappeared and returned with a bobcat, hissing and growling, hurting itself to get free. “I can take life.” Canary couldn’t stop the pained gasp as Zoom cracked the poor animal’s neck. There was another flash of blue and burst of air, so quick Canary didn’t even see him disappear. He reappeared and dropped the very alive and very brassed off animal to its feet. It ran away without a backward glance. “And I can give it. Together, we can bring this world to its knees.”

Canary struggled back to her feet and let her lip curl at his suggestion. “Sorry, I guess I’m not as into world domination as Black Siren.”

He blurred close to her, too close. So close she had to crane her neck to look up at him. “Would you like your father back, Dinah?”
Part of her expected this, but another part was bowled over by the possibility. No, no, nothing in life was that easy, and nothing was free. She knew speedsters could manipulate time - she just saw it - but she also knew it came with consequences. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t spent months mulling over what Sara could change and what that might mean for her, their family, their home. Killing or derailing Damien Darhk meant, despite her earlier bravado, losing her sonic scream.

“The possibilities are endless.” Zoom answered his own question for her. “I can restore your father. I can ensure you get your revenge on Darhk. I can even ensure you still develop the ability that is your birthright. I can give you everything you’ve ever wanted, so long as you swear yourself to me.”

“Word of advice?” Laurel dropped her hand, but kept it tightly clenched. “Lawyers learn pretty early to hold onto their good cards until the right moment. The opening statement? Usually not the right moment.” She wanted to move away from him, but there was nothing she could do to stop him if he wanted to stay in her personal space. Good. Let him think he’s winning.

He traced a finger down her cheek, along her jaw to her chin. It was almost tender. *That answers a few questions I had about Black Siren and Zoom*, Laurel thought. She swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat.

“You have the same fire she has.”

*Ew. How many creepy dudes did she have to deal with in one night? As if Damien’s not-subtle innuendos weren’t bad enough, now she had to deal with one of Barry’s enemies getting weird? Gross. “Why should I trust you? You made a deal with Darhk to get me alone in the first place, right? And now you say you’d help me kill him.”*

If she wasn’t mistaken, he was smiling underneath that god awful mask. “Darhk is nothing; a charlatan. He feigns our power. He’s a means to an end.”

“And you think I’m your end?”

“Your rightful place is in the Parthenon. With me.”

Canary pursed her lips and nodded. “Right. Pass.” Zoom could run faster than sound. A lot faster. That left her with one option, and thankfully Zoom had brought her out to this wide open expanse
of nothing with which to try it out. She sucked in a breath, focused her energy from her diaphragm up the muscles in her throat, and blew out a sonic cry as hard as she ever had, directly at the ground between herself and Zoom.

She was blown backward as the ground ruptured and rippled and for the second time that evening, the world went black.

As it turned out, Liza and Nyssa made a team. A damn good team. Their paths had crossed and converged on Sean Sonus, who was successfully holding back their own assassins and 300 volunteers with his sonic gun. As if the LIGHT guns weren’t bad enough, this asshole had a gun that made police-issue sonic cannons look like children’s toys. It was almost as good as Laurel’s cry.

All it took was a shared look across the battlefield and the two women moved in sync. Liza made a show of herself, drawing his fire while Nyssa circled around to flank him. He was unconscious before he could fire more than two volleys of his artificial sonic boom.

It was, at least, one win they could count for their side. With Darhk gone, disappeared without so much as a puff of smoke, the Ghosts were making a disorganized retreat. Liza thought it might be a battle tactic, they did call themselves Ghosts, after all. They were fading away, disappearing into the night with no regard for their eager militia. ARGUS was rounding them up now and Nyssa’s assassins had taken the perimeter.

Arsenal was groaning back to consciousness from one of the ARGUS medic trucks. He had suffered a nasty fall from the roof of the station. Lyla tried to hide her frustration that two drones still took off, but there was no point. Two trains and two drones successfully left the station. It looked like one had derailed and exploded before crossing under the major highway section heading north.

Lyla had the double duty of directing her men while also refusing to leave John’s side, despite his assurances that he would live. He took up space in the truck next to Arsenal. It was hard to say who between the two of them was worse off.

It was as Lyla was directing first responders toward the drone and train targets - a battle in itself -
that the radio chatter took a different turn. Black Canary had disappeared off the tracks, leaving nothing behind but the tiny ear radio they all used.

“What do you have?” Green Arrow barked as he vaulted out of the bed of the truck, before Starling managed to come to a halt. Lyla ignored him, pushing past him to help Felicity out of the truck bed. She was shaking and clenching her jaw, bruised and dirty, but alive. Huntress appeared on her other side and took Felicity’s hand in hers. Lyla pointed to the medic truck and Huntress and Starling helped guide Felicity to it.

“Harbinger, what-” Green Arrow started again, searching the gradually calming chaos for some answer.

“Stop.” Lyla held her hand up. “You are not helping anyone like this.” She cast a look in the direction Felicity had gone.

His nostrils flared. “Oracle, tell me something.”

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” Oracle replied. “The good news is: I can find her. The bad news is: I can’t do that until she uses her cry.”

Huntress joined them, crossing her arms and frowning. “What the hell does that mean?”

There was a long, measured pause before Oracle spoke again. “Her cry isn’t just noise. Since bonding with the Mother Box, she also emits electromagnetic and ultra low frequency radio waves.” The three of them shared a look. “I have been working a monitor that registers her unique signature.”

“You made a Black Canary tracker?” Huntress raised an eyebrow.

“And when you find her, you can thank me.”
Exploding the ground rippling into waves in all direction helped, it really did. Black Canary managed to recover quickly and follow Zoom’s momentary distraction with another shattering scream that knocked him off his feet. She got a few good hits, even zapping him with the tazer ends of her tonfas.

She punched him across the jaw with the short end of her tonfa, then backhanded him with it. She pulled back for another swing, then stumbled to the empty space where Zoom had been. He reappeared, snatching her up off the ground by her collar.

“You will come to see that my offer is good.” Zoom cocked his head and lowered her just enough that her feet were back on the ground. “You will come around to my way.”

Canary’s lip curled. Both of her hands were gripping his wrist. “I am sick. To death. Of men telling me what I want or what I’m gonna do.” She screamed again, deep and hard, like an explosion concentrated all on him, and this time she didn’t let up. She kept screaming, louder, fueled by the anger that had been simmering under her surface for so long now. She didn’t relent. The moment she gave him any reprieve, it would be too late.

How dare he? How dare he insert himself into her life and declare what she would or wouldn’t do? How dare he make such a promise about her father? How dare he, and Darhk, and even Jason, presume to know her better than she knew herself? Jason was wrong. When presented with the opportunity to wail on Darhk when her friends needed help, she didn’t make that choice. Darhk was wrong. She wasn’t in love with death. There was a time when that might have been true, when she courted death, hoping she could finally rest, but she wanted to live. God, did she ever want to live. She wanted to live to see her sister again. She wanted to live to help Evelyn start college and get her life back. She wanted to see what Oliver could really do as the mayor of Star City. She wanted Thea back. Good God, she wanted Thea back. She wanted one - just one - girl’s day with Thea, Helena, Felicity, Iris, Sara, and Ev that involved brunch, pedicures, and gossip that had nothing to do with battle tactics. She wanted to go on a real date with Jason, and afterward stop some petty crime with the reasonable expectation that the victim would be alright and the perp would face justice. She wanted to get to know Barbara and Caitlin better.

She wanted to take classes - photography, flower arranging, Vietnamese, sewing, basic auto shop, even an accounting class. She wanted to see what life had for her as a full-time vigilante. She didn’t know what it would be like; to live a semi-normal life that revolved around helping people outside the law, but she wanted to know. Life outside the law. And all of this meant living.

Lastly, Zoom was wrong. She would never want what he wanted, and she would never be just another Black Siren. She didn’t know what the difference was between her and her counterpart and she didn’t care. It didn’t matter, because that wasn’t her and never would be. He could offer her her
father, her sister, the safety of everyone she loved, anything she ever wanted, and she would say no every. Single. Time. No matter what Zoom or Darhk believed, they weren’t gods. They were people, no better and no worse than others.

Zoom was a man, a human being. She’d felt his facial bones break against the force of her tonfa. No matter what he said or what uber-creepy masks he wore, underneath he was just a man. Right now, he was a man writhing in pain, helpless against the onslaught of noise. The force was actually pushing him into the hard-packed dirt, further fracturing the desert floor.

She was running out of steam. Her diaphragm was cramping and her head was spinning from the effort of exerting this effort for so long. Her lungs were on fire for oxygen and the cry was faltering and weakening.

Her throat gave out and she gulped down air. It burned as it went down. Zoom had stopped writhing. Any second now, he’d be back on his feet, and he wouldn’t let her get the upper hand again. Canary tried to get her throat to cooperate, but her head was swimming and the muscles in her neck were twitching. She didn’t know those muscles could twitch.

Zoom stood and shook his head. Even with his speedster healing, his ears had to be ringing. That gave her a little satisfaction. He cracked his neck, reached his hand around to the back of his mask, ripped it off, and Laurel froze. Her stomach plummeted to her feet.

Jay Garrick was smirking at her, a sick thing that didn’t reach his eyes. They were cold with fury. “C’mon, Laurel. You hurt your friends now?” He held his hand out to her. “I just want to help you.”

“You’re…” She couldn’t finish the thought, giving it life. Her mind swam. How was this possible?

“It’s complicated, Laurel.” He said her name again. She took a step back as he advanced slowly. “I meant what I said. I can help you. If you’d just-”

Red and gold lightning exploded before her eyes. She was blown backward by the force of it. By the time the light and noise died down, Zoom and, presumably, Barry were gone. She pushed up to her elbows, searching the empty, quiet desert.

“Iris! C’mon!” Iris’s voice called behind her. She turned and her eyes widened even further. Cisco, Iris, Caitlin, and their office in Central City were behind her, gesturing wildly for her to step
through the shimmering breach. Cisco had his special glasses on and his gloved hands held out, controlling the bizarre and unreal gap in space and time that brought them together across hundreds of miles.

“He can’t hold it open for very long!” Caitlin shouted.

She stood on unsteady feet and studied the outside edges of the breach, and with a pounding heart, jumped into it. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but simply stepping in STAR Labs was not it.

Once she was in, Cisco dropped his hands and pulled his glasses off. A little bit of blood was dripping from his nose. Laurel looked from face to face, still bewildered by the course of her evening.

“We can explain,” Iris said.

The pain in her throat had already faded, but a headache had clustered and taken root in her forehead. Laurel’s voice was still scratchy from overuse when she said, “I need to get back to Star City.”

“So you’re telling me you had the box in sight and you just let Darhk walk away with it so you could play hero?” Waller was not impressed with Jason’s after action report.

Cool as a cucumber, Jason replied, “Thousands of lives were at stake from those bombs, not to mention the destruction of the major highways in and out of the city. What I did—”

“Save it.” Waller held up a flat, uncompromising palm. “The casualties today will be nothing compared to what we’ll face if he gets to use that box. We have a bigger picture to worry about than the holdouts in Star City, and we are running out of time.”

Jason leaned back against his cell wall and stretched out one of his legs, petulantly invading
Waller’s space at the door. “You’re the one with with the MOABs all queued up and ready to fly. Don’t tell me you give a shit.”

Waller had very few tells, and of the ones Jason picked up, he guessed they were deliberate. Her dark eyes narrowed at the corners and she scoffed quietly. “You got me there, Todd.” She clucked her tongue like a disapproving mother. “I don’t give a shit about Star City. This war zone is a lost cause. While you and Oliver Queen’s vigilantes worry about this battle, I am fighting a war for the planet.”

“And this city and everyone still here are just pawns.”

“That’s right.” She reached into her suit pocket and pulled out a smartphone. “Oracle would like to speak to you. Do yourself a favor and keep it short. I have another lead for you tonight that might actually stop all of this before it gets any uglier.”

“Gee, thanks, ‘cause I wasn’t feeling quite settled with my day just yet after derailing a train.” Jason took the phone with barely concealed disgust. She left but didn’t close the cell door. He wasn’t a prisoner, per se, but Waller couldn’t seem to find it in herself to give him anything more than what the other members of Task Force X got. Including the crappy accommodations and food. Oh well, better than a bomb in the neck.

Not as good as a comfy king sized bed with Laurel, though.

The phone buzzed in his hand. Unknown Caller. With one swipe of his thumb he was looking at Oracle’s avatar.

“You know it’s just us, you don’t need the mask.” Jason could see himself in the lower corner. Even at thumbnail size, he looked tired.

“With you inside ARGUS? Not likely.” Even her voice was distorted. “My suggestion still stands.”

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and groaned. “And my response still stands. I don’t need any of those assholes sticking their noses in this. The Renegades have enough chiefs already. The last thing anyone here needs is another Bat.”

She didn’t immediately respond. He could practically hear her sucking her teeth on her end. “We
“No.” Jason sat up and pointed a stern finger at the phone. “What we really don’t need is to stack up every skilled vigilante in one place when this asshole is toting the boom tube from Hell. You and I both know that Bludhaven and Gotham and wherever the hell Cass is now are gonna need their heroes if it goes south here. Let. Me. Do this.”

There was another long pause, punctuated by a clicking that had to be her TMJ. “Fine. But I’m coming.” Jason opened his mouth to argue, but Oracle barreled over him. “Let it go. I have something that’s going to help you, and it’s not like FedEx is still making the rounds in Star City.”

Jason felt tired from his toes to his eyeballs and didn’t have the energy to explain all the ways an in-person visit was unnecessary. “What’d’ya got?”

“You’re not going to like it, but I think it’s going to work.”

“Ouch.” Felicity grimaced and turned to look away from the arm Oliver was pushing a needle into. Guilt flashed across his face, but he kept going until the needle found the vein. With practiced care, he taped the line in place and hooked it to the waiting plasma bag hanging next to Felicity’s chair. She was already swiping and punching codes into her tablet with her right hand.

“Sorry,” Oliver mumbled. He squinted at the bag and checked the line to ensure the plasma was making its way to her bloodstream. “You need fluids.”

“Thanks.”

Laurel was safe in Central City, but everyone in Jason’s firehouse was on edge, teetering between exhaustion and mania from the past twenty-four hours. They hadn’t lost, per se, but Oracle was reporting that close to 2,000 civilians had been injured or killed by the bombs the team hadn’t been able to stop. John had immediately asked after his brother, only to be answered by a dark look from Oliver. Helena left to parlay with Nyssa, and John hadn’t spoken to anyone since she left. He sat on one of the beds letting Roy stitch up an array of wounds. The house was silent except for the electronic clicking of Felicity’s tablet, and every now and then a soft snore from Starling’s bed.
“There.” Felicity pushed up from her chair and shoved the tablet at Oliver. She hissed when she took a step too far from the medical hanger, tugging at the needle in her arm. With an annoyed huff she flipped up the brake with her foot and pulled the rolling hanger with her toward one of the empty beds, the one farthest in the corner.

Oliver frowned at the deluge of information on the screen, swiping and selecting things at random until he could make sense of what he was seeing. Felicity could sift through this information faster, but her retreating back urged him not to press the issue. It took him nearly half an hour, but he finally got a handle on databases Felicity had created a backdoor into. It was productive and terrifying: Darhk’s plan was worse than they realized, and the full extent of his and Mother’s team effort had moved thousands of derelict children not only out of Star City, but off planet, if he was reading this correctly. No matter what happened in the next 72 hours, he would be trying to correct these crimes for years to come.

He approached her bed and held up the tablet in a useless gesture. “It works.”

“Of course it does.” Her arms were crossed and her eyes were on the brick wall somewhere behind John’s head a few bunks down.

“Thank you.” It was lame, but it was all he had.

She swallowed and blinked. It was too dark to tell, but Oliver felt certain that she had been crying. “For what? You asked me to get in there and plant a Trojan horse, so I planted a Trojan horse.”

“You know what for.” He took a risk and sat on the edge of the bed. She didn’t move, but she didn’t kick him away, either. “If I had known how bad it could be, I-“

“Bullshit.” She shook her head with a bitter snort. “You knew exactly what he was capable of, and you let him take me anyway so you could get what you wanted.”

He recoiled, feeling her words like a knife in his chest. “You think I wanted any of this?”

Felicity’s jaw clicked with tension. “I think you already had an inside person, and you were willing to throw all of us under the bus as long as you could help Thea maintain her cover.”

“She is my sister.”
“And Andy is John’s brother. And I’m supposed to be your fiancé, right? Everyone here matters, but not to you.” Her voice was flat and she leveled him with an unrelenting stare. “No,” she shook her head, silencing him before he could muster a reply, “it’s fine. It’s who you are. It’s like you see people through these different lenses and some people need more protecting than others. And it’s not like you’re really wrong. I’ve known the risks since you first brought me a bullet-riddled laptop. But this is the first time I believed I was going to die, and I can’t do this anymore, Oliver. I was tied to a chair and locked in a cell for days. I watched my own employees get tortured and executed. Right in front of me. When I saw Ray a few months ago, he reminded me all of the good I can be doing at Palmer Tech, and I almost threw it all away – again – trying to help you instead. Damien tortured me and killed people trying to get the Holt Battery. We’re going to save the world with that. Maybe not in a blaze of glory like you, but long term? That battery is the end of oil and coal. I almost lost that.”

“He would have come after you for that anyway. We talked about that, we agreed he was coming after you.”

She huffed a bitter laugh. “Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe you would have been more inclined to rescue us if we’d been innocent bystanders. Maybe you would have sent the cavalry, used Thea’s tracker even though it might have blown her cover, because we would have been innocent. What they did to John-“ she clapped a hand over her mouth as a sob rose up, but she couldn’t hide her tears. After a few breaths she collected herself, visibly forcing her throat to work. “No more. I can’t do this anymore. After this is done, I’m going back to Palmer Tech full time. I can’t be your Overwatch anymore. It’s over, Oliver.”

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Nyssa put the truck in park outside a nondescript building. It was apartments, once upon a time. Now it was a League safehouse. Acquiring safehouses in Star City was easier every day.

Neither Nyssa nor John moved or spoke. They didn’t even undo their seatbelts.

“It will not be easy.” Nyssa’s voice was smoky, like molasses flowing over broken glass, with the smoothness of aged whisky. “I have done what I can to keep him alive, but it is not… You will not think it a kindness.”

John studied her profile. She was astoundingly beautiful, so much that if he didn’t know her, he’d
probably stop in his tracks if he saw her on the street. Even in the darkness of the truck cab, he could see the dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks. It was so innocent. Sara had probably kissed every one of those freckles at least once. Knowing her turned that inclination into a healthy fear for his own life. Knowing her was like knowing a tiger: when she was on your side, you didn’t need anyone else. When she wasn’t, you better have a back-up plan.

“You’re letting me say goodbye to him. That’s more than I got last time.”

How many times were you supposed to mourn your brother? John had mourned Andy even before his faked death. He mourned the young man who turned to drug dealing when he could have been anything. He mourned the man who never knew what he had with his wife and son. He mourned his brother who died too soon, just when he seemed to be on track for the first time in his life. He mourned all over again when Andy reappeared alive and still wrapped up in criminal shit, worse than ever. He had to mourn the loss of Oliver at least once, when he thought he lost Oliver to Ra’s and again when Oliver simply drove off into the sunset with Felicity. No looking back for the man who considered him a brother. John mourned the loss that comes with realizing that he couldn’t replace the gaping wound his real brother left over and over again in his soul. Now he had to do it all over again.

“I’m sorry.” Nyssa was looking at him now. There was no pity or remorse in her dark eyes, only understanding. A child of Ra’s al Ghul would know a thing or two about family grief.

When John was being tortured by Darhk and his people, he kept going back in his mind to why he was there. Felicity needed him. Oliver needed him. Laurel needed him. They needed him to be strong so Felicity could gain access to Darhk’s servers. Lyla and his Sara needed him to come home. And Andy needed him to be his brother. He was so close to breaking through a lifetime of barriers and years of magical influence. Constantine had broken the mystical hold Darhk had on his soul and now it was John’s turn to start building a new foundation from the ashes of their broken family. He had to survive. He had too much to do.

But now he’d never have the chance to fix things with Andy.

The scene inside the dim, moist room was no less than he expected. At least Andy wasn’t tied up. At Nyssa’s request, they moved Andy to a bed and did a perfunctory job wrapping his wounds in clean linen bandages. They provided an IV of fluids, but he would not drink and continued to flatly refuse even the tiniest dose of Pit water. They’d been using it to keep him alive while Talia wheedled information and vengeance from his flesh.

No amount of preparing himself - even all his years in special forces seeing the worst of the worst, mourning Andy over and over - shielded him from the onslaught of heartbreak and brotherly protectiveness.
Nyssa closed the door and left them alone. He approached the bed, afraid Andy wouldn’t open his eyes. But his younger brother blinked, focused, and his lips lifted in a smile. John took Andy’s hand and pulled up a seat next to the bed.

“Don’t,” Andy coughed, “be mad at them. This is my fault.”

The squeeze Andy gave John’s hand was so weak it brought a fresh wave of grief. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t get here faster, Andy.”

Andy tilted his head against his bare pillow. “You and I both know you’d have to go back in time to when I was 15 to stop this.” He chuckled, but his laughter dissolved into coughs.

“Don’t tempt me, I know a guy.” That earned him another chuckled and more coughing. John squeezed Andy’s hand again. “Easy, easy. Sorry, no more jokes for you.”

With a few wracking breaths, Andy quelled the coughing. “Listen, I gotta… there’s stuff you need to know.”

“I know,” John sat closer, “let them give you some of the Pit water-”

“No!” Andy shook his head. “No more of that.” His lips formed a sad smile. “I’ve had one too many wasted chances already. I’m so sorry about Sara. She wasn’t supposed to be there.”

The reminder of the danger Sara had been in was a painful jab in his ribs. He shuddered to think what might have happened had Felicity and Damian not acted. “I know that, man. I know we’re both alive because you held back.”

“I didn’t know what side Thea was on. Darhk had me watching her but she never gave herself up. I was so scared of what she was gonna do.” Andy’s eyes glassed with tears and he had to stop before he broke down.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Thea’s still with us. I should have told you, but…”
Andy sniffed and his grim smile returned. “You couldn’t trust me. You were right not to tell me. But I still gotta tell you what I told Talia. You can’t break from the team. Darhk wanted me to watch you and report back, but what he really wanted was for me to split you all up. He wanted you and Oliver and Laurel and Felicity all on different sides. You’re stronger together.”

A laugh bubbled up unbidden from John’s throat. “I’m sorry, little brother, but you did a really shitty job on the Yoko Factor.”

Andy’s shoulders shook with repressed laughter. “I did, didn’t I? I guess my heart wasn’t in it. But there’s more, it’s about the fight that’s coming and Lyla.”

That sobered John instantly. “What about Lyla?”

“HIVE,” Andy took a deep breath, “HIVE has agents and sleepers everywhere. They’re still all over the city, with the first responders, the cops, everyone has been compromised. Mother and Darhk knew everywhere to plant sleepers because of me and Thea. ARGUS is compromised. Lyla’s not safe. When the battle starts, you are going to be more outnumbered than you think.”

“I’ll worry about Lyla. Drink the water. Fight with us. I need you,” John’s voice cracked. “I need my little brother with me.”

“I’m so sorry, Johnny. For everything. Everything,” he punctuated his apology by channeling the last of his strength into John’s hand. “If I could do it over again, I’d be a better brother. I’d be a good husband and father for my girls. I never would have left any of you.”

John leaned over and kissed Andy’s sweat-dappled forehead. “You were the best brother you could be. I should have-”

“You couldn’t keep me locked up. You were a great big brother.” Andy’s eyes drifted sightlessly up to the water-stained ceiling. “I’m gonna see Mom and Dad.”

Tears were now flowing openly down John’s cheeks. “I love you, Andy. I need you to know that.”

“I know,” Andy’s voice faltered. He was fading so quickly. “I’ve always known. I always…”
The light left Andy’s eyes and he exhaled his last breath.

After a few minutes, or maybe a few hours, John felt Nyssa’s hand on his shoulder. She was stoic as always, but she was there. With her at his side, he stood and swallowed his grief. “I need to talk to Lyla, and I’m gonna need your help.”

Jason could live with ol’ fists of fury landing a flurry of unskilled blows on his chest and core, but the impact from the copper pipe on his kidneys was just too far. These kids were going down. Alive, but down.

With just two quick, decisive strikes, the final two mini-Ghosts went down. When Jason boarded the yacht twenty minutes ago, he’d had to cut his way through a swatch of HIVE’s finest until all that were left were the brainwashed, magic-enhanced teens left to die for some mystical relic. They weren’t dying today. They were going to be bruised, sore, angry, and alive if it was the last thing he did.

He zip-tied the two lone holdouts – he would need a fresh supply of zip ties after tonight – and removed his helmet. The fresh ocean air was a blessed relief. The helmets were great but they could be stifling, especially when his blood was up with a fight. He did a mental tally of the evening’s activities. He’d faced two dozen Ghosts, plus another dozen of Mother and Darhk’s “children” on a single 60-foot yacht. Had Damien been hanging out with P. Diddy? Who even had a boat like this anymore?

The relic was easy enough to find. It’s where the teens had been concentrated and was mounted on some ridiculous stone pillar, complete with spot lighting. And people said Jason was extra. It was small, no bigger than a baseball, disc-shaped, and etched with concentric circle patterns.

All this from Darhk and Waller for a rock? It was a good thing he’d already called Constantine. He had his suspicions about the nature of Waller’s big find, and his own suspicions about what she might do if she got her hands on it. The key would be giving her just enough to keep her finger off the MOAB button long enough to get her off the board entirely.

An irrationally optimistic part of him had hoped that tonight would be it; that he’d jump on the boat, slam some faces around, and there would be the Motherbox, ripe for the taking. Wham bam
thank you, Ma’am. No more of Darhk’s master plan, no more of Waller’s genocidal salt-the-earth policy, it would be over.

Of course nothing was that easy.

Instead he got a mystery disc. Constantine insisted that Jason had a connection to magic, but that was something he rarely gave any thought to. Tonight, for the life of him, he felt absolutely nothing coming from the object. No weird tinges of energy, no extrasensory intuition, not even a good Sulphur smell. Nothing. Sometimes a rock is just a rock.

Oh well. He could let Constantine be the one to decide whether or not the swirly rock was all that important or yet another dud lead. For now, it was time for a smoke. He tapped the pack against his palm then slid a cigarette smoke. He brought it to his lips and as he turned the pack over in his other hand to bring the lighter to his fingers, his entire body seized in burning, heart-stopping pain.

When he fell to his knees, the pain let up, but his muscles, heart, and lungs spasmed in violent aftershocks. Did I just get fucking tazed? He couldn’t form more than a guttural groan. His fucking jacket was smoking.

“So, this is the second time I’ve knocked you on your ass,” Electrocutioner’s familiar voice growled behind him. He kicked and planted his heavy boot in Jason’s kidneys, sending him forward onto his hands. “My predecessor thought you were unstoppable, but look at you now, and without a friend to split my attention.”

Electrocutioner punched his hands forward and shot another punishing bolt of electricity into Jason’s back. A roar of pain rose up in his throat, but he couldn’t control his muscles enough to actually scream, instead the sound was swallowed behind his clenched teeth. If Electrolux-lite kept this up, Jason was going to need to get his teeth capped.

The electricity pumping into his body created a cacophony of sound in Jason’s ears, but somewhere in the distance he heard the strangest sound, like a giant bird flapping its wings. The sound didn’t register in his mind as anything other than an electricity-induced hallucination, until the flapping turned into trumpeting. The whole boat rocked with great thumping steps. A whirl of brown, yellow, and glowing blue rushed past him and the pain stopped.

Jason slumped to his side and gulped down hair. He forced his eyes to focus just in time to see Electrocutioner’s form disappearing over the side of the boat, and the meta they called Vixen turning back to him. The unearthly blue glow faded, leaving just the woman.
Constantine’s familiar hands patted his shoulder and Jason turned to see his trenchcoated friend crouching at his side. “Shoulda called us earlier, mate, looks like we missed the party.”

Jason coughed and pushed up on his elbows. He’d almost forgotten about the energy Constantine radiated. It was magnetic. “I think I left you a good one.”

Constantine stood and offered Jason his hand. “Didn’t take you for the damsel type.”

“What can I say,” Jason pulled himself up to his full height, “I like to try everything once.” He dusted himself off and stuck out his hand to Vixen. “Jason Todd.”

“Mari,” she returned the shake with a not-surprisingly strong grip. “Thanks for saving me one. What is he, anyway?”

“An asshole with lightning gloves.” Jason scooped the stone off the ground where he’d dropped it during the attack and passed it to Constantine. “This is Waller’s big lead. Looks like a Magic the Gathering toy to me. How’d you guys get here, anyway? Everything’s shut down.”

Mari and Constantine shared a private smirk. “We flew,” Mari answered.

Jason arched a brow at that. “Whatever. Look, we only have a few minutes before I have to check in with Waller and get these kids out of here. Can you do anything with it?”

The way Constantine was studying the rock made the hairs on Jason’s arms rise up. He slipped the disk into his coat pocket and returned with a deck of cards. “Give her this. She’ll never know the difference.”

“This,” Jason took the cards, “is a dollar store deck of cards.”

Constantine rolled his eyes and Mari chuckled. God damn magic people. It was fun at first, but at the moment, it was obnoxious. “To anyone looking for a relic, it’s a relic. This,” he tapped his coat pocket, “I have an idea what it is, but I need a space to work to be sure.”

“I have a place. I have to go back to ARGUS, but I can point you in the right direction. The rest of
the team should be there.”

“Right on.” Constantine pulled out a cigarette and Jason felt a deep punch of longing for tobacco and those bastard magician hands. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys SO MUCH for kudos and comments, and for reading this far! I know my updates have been slow and irregular, so if you're still here, god bless ya! I know this update is on the short side, but the next chapter is where the meat is.

I've got ONE MORE chapter left! I do plan to wrap this up in Episode 14. I've been planning Episode 14 since I started writing and I am beyond excited to finish what I started here. This is not the best thing I've ever written, this could use massive edits, but finishing this has been a goal of mine for two years now. I've learned so much about my writing process and evolved significantly as a writer since I started. This has been a massive learning process and I couldn't be happier that I started. This fic is a big part of what inspired me to start a graduate program in creative writing.

It might be slow coming because of my schedule and other writing projects, but I will be finishing this with one more chapter and I can't wait to finally - FINALLY - put these words to print.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!