Summary

Harsh circumstances often choose their victims at random, and sometimes the mantle of hero is pushed upon those who least expect it. The night before Oliver Queen was to go to China with his father, they received an anonymous tip about the Queen's Gambit being tampered with, so they flew instead. Oliver thus made it to China with his father, where circumstances still threw he and Sara Lance into a fight for survival. One Felicity Smoak, on the other hand, was on her way to China on Ferris Air flight 637 for an overseas job interview. And, with Oliver never on the island, Scylla remained completely operational. Follow them both through their intertwined journeys as vigilantes in Starling City.

Note: Oliver is still the Arrow.
Chapter 1: The Hitman

Alarms were blaring overhead, and luggage was flying by as it was sucked out that hole near the front of the plane. The cockpit had been breached and was vacated of non-strapped personnel quickly as air fled the plane to even pressurization between the two systems of the plane and the outside air. All those poor people seated up front had never stood a chance. Felicity was only vaguely able to hope through her panic that they'd been killed by the blast, that it wouldn't be the long fall that ended their lives. Others weren't so fortunate. Many people seated in close proximity to the breach had been pulled from their seats by the sudden and dramatic change in cabin pressure. There hadn't been enough of a warning for passengers to put their seatbelts back on, and then the plane had been shaken violently by the explosion.

Felicity's only fortune had been her fear of flying. Her seat belt had been firmly in place whenever she was in her seat, and that had probably saved her life as those around her were pulled away. She also had her oxygen mask on almost the instant it had fallen down from its storage space above her head, meaning she could breathe fairly easily while she watched everything around her quickly descend into utter chaos.

She was just removing with great haste the life jacket stored under her seat when a second more violent explosion shook the plane, this time from the back end, and Felicity fully realized then that this wasn't an accident.

They were being shot out of the sky.

The fuel in the tail had been ignited, but with their swift forward motion the explosion hadn't reached far enough to ignite the tanks in the middle of the plane. That was lucky, or everyone on that plane would've surely died that instant. Then again, maybe that would have been the more merciful alternative. That death would have been quick and thus relatively painless, and now more people were vacated from the plane without anything to help them survive the fall.

She was being pulled to her feet then by a man wearing a brown leather jacket and a life vest of his own, but Felicity couldn't hear most of what the man was saying to her over the screams and the roaring sound of rushing air. She did hear when he said they needed to jump, and, of course, it made sense. If they were being shot at, they couldn't wait for the plane to fall farther because, in the time it would take to plummet the rest of the way, a third shot might ignite the rest of their fuel and kill them all.

But, then there was still the issue that she was being told to jump out of a plane while it was still in the air.

On one side of the plane, a raft was still being deployed over the wing. The other had apparently already gone down, and people were being told to evacuate with vague directions on how to use the parachutes that pairs of them would be given-in retrospect, she probably should've listened. Felicity, noting she was probably going into shock, was pulled in the direction of the door. Fortunately, the air pressure had stabilized, so they weren't being sucked out of the plane, but all thoughts of luck fled Felicity's mind the instant it was her turn to jump with a partner. One look down to the water below-
water that was fast approaching as they plummeted from the sky but was still quite a ways away—and she was trying to retreat back into the plane while shaking her head vigorously to say she couldn't do it.

She bumped into Leather Jacket Man, but the panicking people around them were swarming, and they were both pushed from the plane without any further preamble sans parachute. Felicity fell hard onto the wing of the plane, hearing as the man landed beside her, but they both slipped right off.

And then they were in freefall.

Almost 10,000 feet up.

Felicity screamed into the oxygen mask that was still strapped to her face, and she was quite certain in that moment that she was going to die.

Why she thought of her old turtle Quigby in that moment, she had absolutely no earthly idea. She thought of how she had talked to that turtle so much as a child, how she had come home one day to find him gone. She thought of how her mother had told her the turtle had grown to miss the outdoors and had escaped to get back outside. It was years later that she realized turtles couldn't climb the glass walls of a tank and that Quigby had probably died while she was at school. It was the one thing she could think of that her mother had ever done for her that she didn't in some way resent, shielding a little and lonely nerd girl from the death of her only friend.

She wished she could thank her mother for it, but it didn't look like she would ever get the chance.

Someone grabbed her elbow then, and Felicity couldn't help the shriek that escape her as she turned to find it was Leather Jacket Man who had taken hold of her arm. Frozen in terror, she could only watch as he flipped her over to put her back towards the water and then flipped himself to mirror her. The plane was no longer above them, she noticed, as Leather Jacket slung her arm through his and tried to say something to her through his own oxygen mask. She couldn't hear him, though, even for how close he was, so he just held his free arm and his legs out wide as if to demonstrate what he'd tried to say. Felicity caught on quickly enough. She'd taken physics in high school and had rather enjoyed it-happy nerdism at work.

At terminal velocity, the two of them had less than a minute before they would hit the water, and they needed to slow down as much as possible before then. A greater surface area meant greater air resistance, hence the spread-eagle posture.

She mirrored the man beside her, praying that he at least knew what he was doing and that maybe this wouldn't be her last day alive afterall. She was glad she couldn't see the water approaching because she probably wouldn't be able to think straight if she could.

Then Leather Jacket was counting down from five on his fingers. She could only assume it was the time to their landing and braced herself, but then he reached 'one' and tilted them forward instead. With his feet together, he pointed his toes and brought his free arm in, and Felicity barely had the sense about her to mirror his posture, noting they had fewer than ten seconds until they hit the water. The last thing she did was remove her glasses and clutch them to her chest, otherwise she surely would have lost them to the sea.

And then they hit the water as a wave reached up and broke apart to greet them.

Felicity jumped up with a muffled shout, her mind alive with fright, and it was only after she noticed the deafening muteness of her surroundings that she realized she was in her quiet room in her warm bed in her grounded apartment. She breathed in deep and hung her head, running her hands through
her sweat-soaked hair, and she pulled her knees up to her chest to rest her forehead on them.

That was how she was found a moment later: seated upright on her sheets-damp with the perspiration from her nightmare-in the fetal position. The light in the hall turned on, and then there was a hesitant knock on the door.

"Felicity?"

Said blonde glanced up to find the girl's dark brown hair was mussed and lacking its usual styling product, and her blue eyes expressed openly her concern. This was the second time she'd been awoken by Felicity that week alone, and the blonde sighed, feeling guilty.

"Sorry I woke you up, Cin."

"Nah, it's fine," the girl was quick to dismiss her guilt, as per usual. "Are you okay?"

Felicity offered her best attempt at a smile. It probably wasn't very, if at all, convincing.

"No," was her small answer.

She looked at the clock on her bedside table then. 3:47. It would be another hour yet until her mother's shift ended, and there was still plenty of time before Felicity had to report to QC. But, she would be getting no more sleep that night-although she'd actually gotten more than her usual three or four hours already.

Sighing, Felicity slowly unfolded herself from her ball to stand from her bed-she would need to wash the sheets again for the sweat drenching them-and she noticed Cindy was, as expected, eased none at all by her answer.

"But, I will be," she assured as she approached the girl. "Go back to sleep." Felicity put a hand on her young friend's shoulder as she passed by her to step into the hallway. "I'm just gonna' grab a shower and then do some homework."

Cindy seemed loath to agree, but, seeing as Felicity then retreated into the bathroom to get a start on that shower she sorely needed, the formerly wayward youth eventually gave in and returned to her own room.

October 26th, 2012:

Felicity doesn't sleep much. As it turns out, even the soft of her mattress can't make the nightmares go away. At first, she'd tried using that time to focus on her heavy homework load from MIT's online program, and it did work most of the time. But, as a computer sciences savant, she's often still left with quite a bit of free time every day even considering all the time she puts into her studies and her job. She doesn't like it when her mind is idle. It tends to… wonder. Usually to things she rather not dwell on.

It had all started one day out of mild and somewhat bitter curiosity. She'd started digging into ARGUS's databases. While she doesn't much care for the agency itself, it has ultimately been their enemies, their 'Most Wanted' files, that have captured a good deal of her attention. That's why she'd started embedding internal triggers into the SCPD's case database that will warn her in the event that one of their MO's comes up.

That's how she catches wind of one 'Deadshot' operating in Starling City. Sharpshooting hitmen are rare. Sniper hitmen who lace their bullets with curare poison are nonexistent save for the one. The
moment she learns that a dangerous sniper is local, Felicity starts digging around for information that might lead to his whereabouts or potential targets. As it turns out, intelligence agencies don't like to share their information with each other because, while ARGUS's files on Deadshot are limited to not much else other than his handle, Interpol has acquired a good deal more.

Floyd Lawton.

An address.

Felicity knows she's hardly a cop, but she doesn't trust intelligence agencies like ARGUS or Interpol, so she won't go to them with the intel she's found. She also doesn't want the police to scare him off, as he would surely notice their approach were they to come knocking. All she knows is there's a dangerous gun-for-hire in the city in which she lives, and he has to be stopped. It's this that brings her down to the apartment complex the night she learns of Lawton's current residency in Starling.

It isn't the first time she's done something like this since her return to the States. She'd caught a rapist once. He'd been an idiot and hadn't put up much of a fight at gunpoint. He'd confessed. She'd left him outside a nearby police station with the taped confession duct taped to his chest and his intended victim as a witness.

That has still been one of the few times her… vigilante-ing has ever brought her into the field-vigilantism, that's the word. Usually, it's only digging around on the internet and sending what she finds to the police as an anonymous source. This current task, however, brings her back out onto the streets under the cover of night, and chasing a deadly sniper is admittedly the most dangerous situation she's found herself in.

Well, the most dangerous since her return, that is.

Squatting against the brick wall of the building in the alleyway-donned in her usual field gear of a black hooded jacket, dark pants, sneakers, dark-lensed goggles, and a face mask that admittedly has her feeling a little like an American ninja-Felicity has her laptop propped on top of her bent knees. It's her 'field' laptop, stripped to the studs and perfect for anonymous hacking. Fortunately, at this end of the Glades, few people have the funds to procure a laptop of their own. Even fewer have any kind of firewall protecting their files. That means the laptop she's currently hacking into is most likely Lawton's.

There isn't much there. It seems he scrubs it frequently, and she would usually say that raised a person's intelligence to above that of most others'. Of course, in this case, it also makes it easier to find what she's looking for. Or rather, what he's looking for.

The Exchange Building.

Normally, Felicity would have to do more research. The Exchange Building, after all, is booked for any number of events every week. Finding out which one has the Sniper's attention is the challenge of this mission. Or at least, it would've been if the event hadn't been all a-buzz at QC for the past couple weeks. Lawton's last victim had been involved in the auction as well, and that's all the connection Felicity needs to know someone at the Unidac Auction will be his next target.

But, that's when Felicity's system alerts her that Lawton has detected her hack. She shuts her laptop an instant later and hastens to her feet. As she's moving, a window is thrown open several floors above her head, and she knows it's time to run. She takes off down the alley, an odd sort of gunfire following her in her wake-not quite a machine gun but not a handgun either. Her survival instincts kick in, and it's the resulting vacancy of her mind allotted by these instincts that saves her life.
Five years ago, she would've died in a situation such as this. She would've stopped running to hunker down in a fruitless attempt to hide from the bullets. Now, she doesn't stop, not even when she reaches the bicycle that she left waiting for her just around the corner.

Felicity doesn't stop pedaling once until she's a couple blocks from QC, in the parking structure where she'd left her car and borrowed the bicycle-hopefully, no one has noticed it missing or needed it while she was away-an hour ago. She discards her head gear and jacket into the hidden compartment in the trunk of her red mini, laying them over the pistol and tactical ninja sword already sitting within, and dresses in the backseat of her car back into her work clothing.

She's already making plans about what to do now that she knows Lawton's target by the time she drives the car out of the parking structure to head home after 'working late at QC'.

A.N.: This story already exists on Fanfiction.net, but someone suggested I also post it here as well, so here we are. I've decided to try something new with this story. Present scenes from Felicity's point of view will be in present tense while scenes from anyone else's POV or flashbacks will be in past tense. This is supposed to indicate Felicity's continual avoidance of and inability to deal with what happened in the past.

Fun fact: Because of terminal velocity, a landing from 10,000 feet is essentially the same as a landing from 1500 feet. With the higher fall, you have more time to prepare. Also, open waves break water tension.
Floyd Lawton is in town, and our hero must stop him before he succeeds in killing anyone else, including his stepfather. The Hood of Starling City also finds himself assisted by yet another hood in this endeavor. Just who is this young kid who’s decided to take on a dangerous assassin?

As a note, at this point in the story, Felicity has had some training in hand-to-hand and sword combat, but she’s mostly proficient with pistols.

An anonymous call to the police had been made regarding a potential assassination at the Unidac Industries Auction by a sniper going by the name of ‘Deadshot’. Oliver had the impression that Detective Lance had only informed his family of the threat because it had been an order from somewhere up the chain of police command. He also got the impression that Lance himself was more interested in keeping an eye on his stepfather than he was with trying to find the assassin. He’d gotten it into his head that Walter was behind the hit and probably wanted to watch for anything that might implicate Walter in giving a signal for the assassination. Doing so would give him leverage to lock up one of Starling’s high-rollers--that Walter was a member of the Queen family would simply be an added bonus.

Oliver was only lucky that someone in this city other than himself seemed to have their eyes on Deadshot, otherwise he may never have gotten another chance to find the sniper who’d eliminated one of the people on the List. But, this anonymous caller, if they were correct, had inadvertently informed Starling’s new archer vigilante where Deadshot would strike next. Once he’d taken care of Deadshot, Oliver would need to look into the anonymous caller. After all, no one else seemed privy to Deadshot’s presence in the city, and he needed to make sure it wasn’t one of the hitman’s equally dangerous enemies who wanted to see him captured or put down.

In the end, the mission was the only reason he’d agreed to attend the auction at all, and Oliver was ready to jump into action the moment he set foot in the building. He didn’t have to wait long, and it turned out to be a fortunate turn of events when Detective Lance’s hawk-like focus on Walter had ended up saving the Englishman’s life.

Walter was fine, and that knowledge inspired Thea and their mother to leave the auction site to make their way to safety. Now that he knew his family was out of the crosshairs, Oliver was shifting into Hunter mode. He knew roughly where the shots had come from. The sound of the first shot was
almost enough for him to pinpoint the exact building, and each successive shot had narrowed the location to the point that he now had the building and an estimation of the floor number.

In not but a few short minutes, he was hooded up and preparing to grapple across the street, and now the suppressed flash of Deadshot’s rifle gave Oliver the exact floor he needed to go to. The hitman was clearly trying to cover up who his target was by creating utter chaos, and the news stations would probably spin the story that the sniper was simply on a killing spree. If Oliver had his way, that story would end with the police finding the sniper’s body with at least one arrow in it.

What Oliver hadn’t been expecting was the additional gunfire that broke out even as he was still grappling to his destination through the air half a dozen stories above the busy city street below. The initial bark of a high-powered rifle was interrupted by a smaller gunshot. Judging by the volume and rate of fire as whoever it was kept shooting to force Deadshot behind cover, it was probably a handgun. That made the vigilante think that perhaps Lance’s people had been more on top of the situation than he’d originally thought, but there was only one shooter--police officers most often traveled in pairs. When Deadshot retaliated against the gunfire, his weapon sounded almost like an automatic one, but there was something not quite right about it. It didn’t sound like any weapon Oliver had ever encountered before, and he’d encountered far more than his fair share--usually aimed at him.

As it turned out, Oliver wasn’t the only non-law-enforcement entity after Deadshot. By the time he smashed through the window of the vacant high-rise, that was abundantly clear because there was no police backup on the way to the building. What he didn’t expect, however, was for his current supposed ally to be so small. His initial and lasting instinct was that this vigilante, also wearing a hood, was a kid, what with the small stature and the Converse-type sneakers worn by his masked compatriot. Anything else he might discern, however was obscured by a pair of shaded goggles and a lower-face-concealing mask.

Oliver almost second-guessed this instinct when the kid twisted out of cover in a very fluid and practiced motion and leveled his handgun, squeezing off three rounds that forced Deadshot into hiding. The tight grouping of bullets left in the concrete column lead the newly arrived archer to believe that the kid had something against killing, that lack of intent was undoubtedly one of the reasons he’d had no luck taking Deadshot down even after getting the drop on him. With groupings like that, accuracy clearly wasn’t the issue holding him back. Hesitation, however, would get him killed, particularly when going up against a hitman with the shooting skill of a master sniper.

The muteness of his surroundings as all the gunfire ceased was so sudden that it was almost deafening to Oliver. A quick glance to his left showed the archer that the kid, his back to the pillar just opposite him, was probably out of ammo. He popped the magazine out of his handgun, and his shoulders slumped just enough to show his frustration.

“And here I thought the Hood worked alone,” said Deadshot from his hiding spot across the room. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. It would be you who had this kid hack into my laptop.”

He most certainly hadn’t, and Oliver found himself more curious now than he was before as to the kid’s identity.
“How’d you find out who I was? I’d like to cover up my tracks after we’re done here.”

As he cast a glance at the kid, however, Oliver nearly cursed his luck aloud when he saw the kid disappear around the other side of the pillar he’d just been hiding behind—good lord, was that a backpack he was wearing? He knew the kid was trying to get the drop on Deadshot, but he was probably going to get himself killed doing it.

Oliver always hated babysitting.

“I didn’t, and we’re not partners,” he said to keep Deadshot’s focus on him. “You must just be the kind of person who attracts unwanted attention.”

“Two hoods working separately?” came Deadshot’s indignant reply, and Oliver took this as his chance to sneak from his own cover.

He approached the sniper’s cover slowly with his bow drawn but pointed somewhat downward to keep his view of Deadshot’s cover column free. With a glance, Oliver found he had to commend the kid. If he hadn’t already known he was there, sneaking along opposite and a little ahead of him, the archer may not have noticed him at all. The kid’s footfalls were controlled and rolled well-enough to keep them silent, at least from this distance, and he clung well-enough to the shadows to keep himself mostly obscured—although his black clothing also helped to that end.

Oliver’s distraction with the kid cost him, however, as Deadshot rounded the corner of his column then, pinning the archer out in the open with his bow still pointed harmlessly at the floor. Oliver went still as Deadshot grinned in the face of his victory, and Oliver berated himself for his own folly. He was just about to jump into action, banking on his reflexes being quicker between the two of them, when the kid made his move, and Oliver was surprised when he saw the kid was wielding a sword. The kid hit Deadshot in the back of the knee, and that no blood was shed tells Oliver that the blade had been mostly dulled in order to best avoid dealing lethal damage—this kid would surely get himself killed with restraint like that. Deadshot’s arm flew wide as his knee buckled, and dodging the spray of bullets he got off was then a simple enough task for Oliver.

Deadshot turned from Oliver then, and he whipped out a bowie knife. The kid’s skills with a sword clearly weren’t up to par with his ability to shoot because the sniper outmaneuvered him even though the kid’s blade offered him much greater reach. For his failing efforts, the kid got a nicely sized slash on his bicep, and it was Oliver’s quick actions that saved his life. The archer made it to the brawling pair, and just as Deadshot leveled his wrist-machine gun with the kid’s face, he pulled back on the scruff of the kid’s baggy hoodie, throwing him back and out of the way. The bullets passed through empty air, and Oliver heard the kid hit the ground with a grunt, but he didn’t turn to check if he’d been hit or not.

The hitman fared much worse against Oliver than he had the kid. After trading several blows for blocks, Oliver had landed several shots on a number of pressure points and then had the man pinned to the wall by the throat using arm end of his bow. Deadshot jabbed him in the shoulder in an attempt to throw him off, and the second strike did the trick, hit a nerve that made Oliver’s arm buckle involuntarily.

Deadshot stumbled away, choking to regain his breath, and he leveled his wrist-machine gun on Oliver. He got off a quick burst of shots, but the archer was one step ahead of him. With a simple sidestep, he released an already knocked arrow, and his aim held true as Deadshot dropped to the ground with an arrow through the scope covering his left eye.

With the man now put down, Oliver spun on his heel with another arrow knocked, intending to find
out who the kid was under his mask. He was surprised to find that the kid, however, had disappeared. What Oliver did find was a laptop, sitting on the ground where he estimated the kid had landed after he’d thrown him back. He retrieved the laptop, hoping something on it might lead him to the kid’s identity, and he ultimately decided to take Deadshot’s knife as well. The kid’s blood, after all, was on the blade and was hopefully in the system somewhere.

Any thoughts of looking further for the kid in the surrounding area fled from his mind in quick order, however, when Oliver turned to vacate the building before the police arrived. Because John Diggle had clearly made his way over to locate the sniper as well, leaning against the doorframe of the stairwell.

And he’d been hit.

Oliver didn’t know what exactly he’d been expecting to come of the offer, but he’d admittedly had higher hopes for it than Diggle’s outright refusal. He’d known convincing the man wouldn’t be easy. Diggle was a former soldier—though many would argue that one didn’t simply stop being a soldier when the uniform came off—so killing wasn’t a new concept to him. He was also, however, a man of strong and upstanding morals. Casualties off the battlefield were unacceptable in his mind. Oliver had tried explaining to the man that he was fighting a war, a war against the cancer eating away at his city, but the man hadn’t been able to hear him. It all boiled down to the simple fact that John Diggle couldn’t overlook the body count that came with his crusade.

Oliver almost wished he could feel the same. Killing, however, was something he did without second thoughts now—a vast difference to when he’d first begun to learn his skills. He ended threats. Permanently, to keep them from causing further damage. That was what this city needed. It needed a surgeon to mercilessly cut out the tumors that had been allowed to fester for far too long. It needed a hunter to track and slay the greedy who had widened the rift between the rich and the poor, raised themselves to wealth and power by stepping on the throats of the less fortunate.

He’d hoped Diggle would be his ally in this crusade, but that door had shut, at least for now. If he didn’t want that door locked, he knew he needed to back off for a while, so Oliver resigned himself to the fact that he would have to keep at it alone for longer still.

He let his head fall back onto the headrest of his desk chair, and Oliver knew he needed to head home to check on his family. They were probably going to be furious that he’d just disappeared from the auction, and he didn’t really know what excuse he could give them this time. Missing a family dinner was one thing, but vanishing after a shooting was a whole other snake-pit to throw himself into. He was already not looking forward to what was waiting for him, but he knew he couldn’t put it off any longer. They were probably worrying themselves sick, hoping he hadn’t somehow been caught in the crosshairs of the sniper who’d nearly taken Walter from them—of course, Oliver had actually been in Deadshot’s crosshairs quite a few times that night, but they never needed to know that.

It was as he was about to stand that he heard it: a small beep. Oliver turned toward the source of the sound to find the laptop— the one supposedly left by the hooded kid from earlier that night—was the most likely source, sitting where he’d left in on the table earlier to tend to Diggle. He’d honestly forgotten he’d even grabbed the thing. He needed to make sure it wasn’t dangerous, however, and he realized too late that he shouldn’t have brought it to the Foundry. He was hardly a computer expert, but he knew remote hacking was certainly possible for those with the technical know-how to pull it off.

Oliver flipped the lid open and pressed the ‘enter’ key to bring the screen to life. What was waiting for him hadn’t quite been what he was expecting to find. It looked like some form of chat window,
but it had none of the aesthetic add-ons that he’d come to expect from any social-networking sites or anything else of the like. The screen, completely taken up by the chat window, was almost entirely black save for the single line of text printed across the top.

1925142008: **Good to know I’m not the only one who noticed Floyd Lawton was in town. Thanks for taking him down.**

The user name seemed to be merely a string of random numbers, but the context of what had just been said confirmed Oliver’s suspicions that the hooded kid had indeed left the laptop for him. How the kid was able to chat with him through a device that hadn’t been active a moment ago, he wasn’t quite sure, but he simply took it to mean they didn’t share a lack of understanding when it came to computers—it also reaffirmed the notion that he shouldn’t keep the laptop near his own computer systems.

Assuming the kid was correct, he also now had a name to put to Deadshot: Floyd Lawton.

0118181523: **Who is this?**

Oliver already knew the answer, but he figured he’d fish for information anyway. The response was almost instantaneous, as if the kid had anticipated the question and already had it typed out, just waiting to hit send.

1925142008: **Just an anonymous friend who wanted to get a dangerous murderer off the streets.**

0118181523: **You’re the kid in the hood. Were you also the one who called in the tip to the police about Deadshot?**

1925142008: **Yes.**

Oliver thought back to how it had been Detective Lance who’d saved Walter and that it was Walter’s safety that had convinced his mother and Thea to get out of the area, and he suddenly found himself feeling gratitude towards this unknown person. He also didn’t want to encourage future incursions by voicing such praise, however, so he kept his appreciation to himself.

0118181523: **You should leave the crime fighting to the professionals. You could have gotten yourself killed tonight.**

It was true. If Oliver hadn’t been there, the kid would’ve died. If not in the gunfight, then by that knife Lawton had pulled.

1925142008: **I know.**

The next response, much longer than the first, came so quickly that Oliver realised the kid was simply a much swifter typist than himself.

1925142008: **That’s why I told the police there would be an assassination attempt tonight. I’d hoped they would be able to take him out, but I guess Lawton was two steps ahead of them.**

So, it seemed the kid had gone down there to try and stop Lawton in the event that the police weren’t on top of their game. He’d only gone after the sniper when it became clear that the police were too busy trying to get the civilians out of harm’s way to find him. Oliver could commend the bravery—if this was the true story—but it had been utterly foolish for someone of the kid’s caliber to try and take out a man such as Lawton.

1925142008: **That was my fault. He found me when I hacked into his laptop and knew I was onto**
him. It won’t happen again.

0118181523: You can’t be sure.

1925142008: I can. Because now I can tell you in the future as well.

Oliver wasn't quite sure what he felt as he read this last message. The mistrust was still there, making him question whether or not he could believe the kid, much less rely on him for any accurate intel. But, he also couldn’t deny the small spark of pride that ignited in his chest to learn that someone now trusted him to defend his city against the likes of Lawton.

That pride was selfish, however, not befitting a weapon, so he was quick to discard it.

1925142008: I’ll be in touch. Keep the laptop.

Oliver sat back in his chair then as the chat log informed him that the kid had logged off, contemplating everything that had been disclosed to him. If he could be believed, it seemed as though he wouldn’t be going into the field anymore. Oliver hadn’t been lying when he said the kid would get himself killed doing this. Even if his marksmanship was admirable, his lacking skill in other areas would do him in, probably sooner rather than later. Worst of all was the unwillingness to kill.

Oliver still planned to find out who the kid was, however. If what the kid had said was true, then their goals ran along similar lines, but trust was not something that came easily to Oliver anymore. Shooting with such accuracy in moments of duress wasn’t a skill one learned over lazy weekends. The kid had seen combat before, and marksmanship such as that could very easily become dangerous if aimed at improper targets. The archer removed from his boot the knife he had confiscated from Deadshot’s corpse earlier that night.

With any luck, the kid’s blood would be in the system.

Chapter End Notes

As a reference to the number strings here at the end, the one that starts with a 0 is Oliver, and the one that starts with a 1 is Felicity.
Unlikely Allies

Chapter Summary

Our hero regrets that he needs assistance for this particular mission, but Iron Heights is a maze, and he has no hope of locating a certain attorney on his own. He and his unlikely ally must work together towards this end, but differences in how they operate could lengthen the rift between them.

October 28, 2012:

Trust didn’t come easily to Oliver Queen.

It used to. He used to feel invincible, like all the money in the world was his parachute, waiting to catch him every time he slipped. No one would even think to harm him, not with the influence his family had. He used to give no thought as to the potential danger he was exposing himself to by broadcasting his location at any given time while clubbing, loudly yelling at the world to pay attention to the amazing boy whose only merit was being born from the right people. He would accept any driver his mother hired for him without performing his own in-depth background check on said driver whose hands he would be handing over his life to every time they went on the road. He would eat at any restaurant without keeping an eye out for signs of poison in his food or assassins lurking in the background. He used to walk down the street without taking note of all the best locations where a sniper might be nested or all of the alleys where faceless enemies may be hiding in wait for him to pass.

He used to be innocent, relatively speaking.

Then his father had been murdered, and he had spent five long years learning just what kind of darkness was hiding in the world.

So, when Oliver had been introduced to another masked fighter the night before, he didn’t assume him to be an ally simply because their goals had been aligned in trying to take down an international hitman. He would’ve chased after the kid—marksmanship of that caliber couldn’t go uninvestigated—if Dig hadn’t been shot in Deadshot’s last attempt to kill The Hood.

Afterward, when Diggle was up and moving and Oliver was back at home—and after a hashing out with his family over his inexplicable absence after the shooting—he’d resolved to unmask his self-claimed ‘friend’. He’d spent a good few hours digging through that laptop the following morning, up and out of the house before dawn had broken. It had been wiped of everything save for that one chat program—which told him the program was either the laptop’s entire purpose or, more likely, that the kid had somehow wiped it remotely. The second address in the chat program had been so heavily encrypted that Oliver hadn’t even had a clue on where to possibly begin decrypting it to backtrack the second user to a location. Another dead end had been the blood on the knife, and that the kid’s DNA wasn’t in the system was both intriguing in its curiosity and concerning. Either he was just starting out, which was a possibility he couldn’t outright dismiss, or the kid knew how to keep a very low profile.

The best ones never left a trace unless it was intentional.
Oliver had thus resolved to keep his ear to the ground for any further intel and was resolute in his decision to keep the laptop powered down. He wouldn’t risk it compromising his currently favored base of operations by keeping it active. Just starting out or no, the kid could always be a ground-runner-in-training for some dangerous player making a move on Starling.

He did not trust easily.

Now, however, Oliver was desperate enough to overlook all of that, that he had no clue which side of the conflict of corruption the kid was actually on. According to the information Jason Brodeur had just—not entirely—willingly given him, the man had his head of security moving in on Peter Declan. He planned to silence the one remaining witness who could blow the whistle on the criminal dumping of toxic waste by his company. Oliver knew how these people thought, too. They would want to create chaos to hide Declan as their intended target, and, to him, that meant either ‘riot’ or ‘prison break’.

And, Laurel was about to be caught in the crosshairs.

Oliver was very desperate.

It went against every single one of his instincts, the ones that told him trust only extended so far as a person’s known usefulness and that unknowns were commensurate with enemies until proven otherwise. As soon as he’d gotten his motorcycle out of the vicinity of the search perimeter of Brodeur’s security team, Oliver pulled over to the side of the road and took out the laptop he’d stashed the night before in a side pouch strapped to the seat—at least there it was kept a safe distance from his systems at the foundry. The chat window activated as soon as he brought the device to life, and he typed out a quick message.

0118181523 : Are you as good with computers as you seem to be?

While waiting for a reply, Oliver tried to envision the quickest route to Iron Heights from his current location across town. He was also debating his options in the event that no response came. He could just strong-arm his way into the prison, but he would be flying blind. He couldn’t exactly say he was familiar with the layout of the building, and time wouldn’t permit him to learn it via surveillance.

In the end, however, a reply came in less than thirty seconds, and Oliver found himself wondering if the kid had just been sitting around waiting on word from him.

1925142008 : I’ve been told I have certain skills in that area, yes. Why?

Had he mentioned how desperate he was?

0118181523 : How about hacking security systems?

1925142008 : Alright, now you have to spill the beans. What’s going on?

Oliver debated momentarily over what exactly he should disclose to this kid. He could’ve been working for someone, after all, and the archer couldn’t expose his weakness of Laurel to whatever secondary entity that might’ve been. In the end, he stuck to the very basics, hoping to appeal to the moral compass the kid had vaguely hinted at during their last—brief—conversation.

0118181523 : I think there’s going to be a prison break at Iron Heights.

There was a momentary pause, and he was sure the kid was busy processing the news, having not anticipated something of this nature. Prison breaks weren’t common, and they spelled potentially terrible things for a city depending on the number or severity of criminals released.
1925142008: Oh. I have to say, I wasn’t expecting that.

Right on the mark.

1925142008: So, you want me to hack into the prison’s systems, then?

0118181523: Is that a problem?

There was hardly a pause.

1925142008: No.

1925142008: Find a radio if you can and give me the frequency.

The lack of persuasion needed to get the kid to help him by committing a felony of this magnitude sent up a little red flag in Oliver’s mind, reminding him why exactly he needed to uncover the kid’s identity as soon as possible. If he could break into a prison’s systems as easily as he’d implied, there was no telling the chaos he could stir if he ever became so inclined.

1925142008: I’ll get you there. Follow the Green, Arrow.

Oliver was about to ask what this last comment meant when a glance at his surroundings showed him the street lights ahead of him were all turning green.

Apparently the kid could hack streetlights too.

And, he also knew Oliver’s current location without being told, which sent up yet another red flag about the potential danger of that laptop. He’d dwell more on that later, however.

Right now, he had a prison break to crash.

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The prison was already dark by the time Oliver arrived, and warning sirens were blaring across the campus. Fortunately, this meant most of the perimeter security had gone inside to help with the internal situation, making it easy enough for Oliver to get the drop on a lone security guard posted at the perimeter. The dart would leave him unconscious for 34 minutes, and if all went well, that would be plenty of time for him to get Laurel out of the prison.

Oliver stashed the guard out of sight and took his uniform. He probably should’ve felt conflicted about it, but he didn’t. Once his own gear was stashed in his bike, which he’d parked not too far off, he took out that laptop again. He shifted the frequency on the radio he’d just confiscated until he found an empty signal--to keep the other guards from hearing their conversations--and sent the kid the new frequency. The response was almost immediate.

“Archer.”

The voice that greeted Oliver through the earpiece was heavily synthesized, so much so that he briefly wondered if this was what talking to a computer sounded like, its tones somewhere between male and female. But, that was probably the point. Oliver, with his frame, couldn’t get away with anonymity like that, but, for this kid who could pass for either gender given the loose fitting jacket he’d been wearing, it actually worked.

Oliver allowed himself to wonder briefly if he should be assuming the kid to be male in the first place.
“Or, do you prefer I call you ‘Hood’?”

“I don’t care,” Oliver said in a gruff tone as he started across the prison yard, moving without caution over being caught now that he was incognito.

“Okay, then, I’ll keep name-shopping. How about Robin Hood. Kind of cliched, but it gets its point across. Hawkeye is kind of on the nose. Apollo? I think he was an archer… Legolas… Ooh, I know! Link! Can you use a sword? … No?, okay… I’d say Cupid, but I’m pretty sure his arrows spread something of a little more upbeat nature than what you-”

“Stop!” Oliver all but pleaded as he came to a dead halt.

His eyes were wide after listening to this person he didn’t know spout out a plethora of names—most of which he didn’t recognize—and he was suddenly regretting his decision to get the kid involved for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with trust.

He didn’t remember anyone ever talking this much around him even before China.

“Fine, ‘Hood’ it is,” the kid relented, and Oliver huffed out a sigh of relief. He thought the matter settled and dropped just before the kid muttered, “Gawd, that’s so lame…”

The vigilante was about ready then to ditch the radio, audio assistance be damned, because focus would be nearly impossible with all this chatter in his ear. He was just about to toss it when the kid finally got back on point with the mission. As it just so happened, this was also as Oliver neared the outer wall of the darkened prison, and he briefly wondered if this was by coincidence.

“What are we doing that SWAT won’t take care of?”

“There’s a woman inside,” Oliver explained as he made his way to the nearest side door. “A lawyer. I sent her in. I need to get her out.”

“Why would you send someone into Iron Heights? Isn’t that where people go after you’ve already dealt with them?”

Either there or the morgue. He wasn’t particularly picky about which, but the morgue left fewer lasting complications.

“She’s a lawyer meeting with a man named Peter Declan,” Oliver said aloud. “He was framed for his wife’s murder by his boss, Jason Brodeur.”

“That’s horrible,” the kid said, and it was probably the first thing he’d said that the vigilante could agree with. “Alright, Barton, the prison’s backup systems are still working on rebooting, so I can’t see anything inside yet. I do, however, have access to blueprints. If I’m reading these correctly, once you’re inside that door you’re heading to, head straight and make the first left you come to.”

Oliver didn’t have the time to question the directions he was being given, and it left his stomach twisting in uncomfortable knots, relying on someone not himself to get him where he needed to go. Fortunately, he soon found himself entering the outskirts of the cell block, so his mistrust was proven misplaced.

It’s fortunate her sleep is always so light nowadays because she probably wouldn’t have heard the laptop signal her about a message otherwise. The backseat of her mini is probably not the most ideal
location for Felicity to be hacking into the secure mainframe of Iron Heights, but it’s certainly the most convenient and out of the way place she could come up with on such short notice. Nor are pajamas the best crime fighting attire, but she’ll make due with them as well, she supposes. Fortunately, she’d had the sense to at least grab her coat on her way out the door--it is almost November, after all--and no one in her house is any the wiser to her sudden late-night departure from the apartment.

She doesn’t know what normal person reason warrants a felony such as this, and she doubts she could get away with ‘I help the police sometimes’ because why would they need to hack into a prison database?

With the back-up generators at the prison finally kicking in, Felicity is able to hack into the campus camera feeds. She watches as ‘The Hood’--ugh, that name is so bad, it literally hurts her just to think it--strides down the prison’s hallway, now donned in the confiscated clothing of an unfortunate perimeter guard--that guard is okay, right? While she’s directing him, she’s simultaneously scouring the prison’s feeds to locate this lawyer he’s after. She’s always been a talented multitasker.

She also watches, with no small degree of amusement, the guard on duty at the security station. He’s clearly dirty (in the moral sense, not the kinky one, because how on earth would she have any idea what kind of stuff he’s into in the- moving on ). He’s trying to flush her hack out of the system to bring the cameras down again, which is just such a laughable thing for him to try to do. He’s all flustered and jittery, and if she wasn’t so busy doing important vigilante things, Felicity might’ve gone to grab a bowl of popcorn to watch him as he looks just about ready to soil himself.

No rent-a-cop is going to beat out her MIT education, that’s for sure. He should really just quit, tuck, and run while he still has the chance.

But, then Felicity finds that lawyer the Archer--she will not call him Hood--is searching for, and thoughts of outing all of the guard’s dirty secrets are tabled for later. The woman is with a man wearing a prison jumpsuit, and Felicity can only assume this is Peter Declan because Miss Lawyer is trying to get him out of the cell block with pausing steps and cautious glances that really do her no good in the situation--she should really just keep moving, cover as much ground as possible before things escalate.

“I’ve found them,” Felicity says into her headset, and she can see Mr. Archer’s fingers twitch as he draws to a stop.

She knows he’s about to ask it, so, with a few keystrokes, she’s unlocked the door next to him. It must give an audible click because he turns, and, for a moment, his outfit and the way he tenses and readies his police baton reminds her a lot of someone Felicity really doesn’t want to think about. She does thinks briefly that the two of them might actually have gotten along, but it’s a foolish notion because she doesn’t even actually know this man, only that he runs around in very distracting form-fitting leather and uses arrows or all things to fight Starling’s elite circle of scumbags.

“Streetlights, Robin Hood,” Felicity says into her headset, and he seems to actually understand what she’s saying--that she’s leading him--because he lowers his weapon and reaches for the door handle. He slips through an instant later, moving at a truly impressive pace, even for his naturally long strides.

Those five seconds she had her eyes off of Miss Lawyer and Mr. Declan were apparently too long, however, and Felicity mentally curses. Someone has managed to manually override the cell block doors, and now the pair is about to be swarmed.

“Damn it!” she swears--and flinches because she doesn’t usually resort to profanity--as all of her
focus shifts onto that camera’s feed, and she misses the way the Archer tenses.

“What’s wrong?” the incognito vigilante asks, and she’d realized before that he must be using a synthesizer of his own because no one’s voice should be that deep.

“There must be more than one guard in on this,” she says. “They’ve manually opened the cell block doors. You’ve gotta’ hurry. That lawyer and Mr. Declan are about to be in the middle of a prison mob, and- oh my god!”

Now he’s running through the halls as he very loudly asks, “Which one of them?” and there’s something to his tone, something a little desperate, that Felicity almost recognizes as very well-bottled hysteria. For a moment, she can’t talk, can’t even move, because she’s frozen as she watches the two guards in the area get brutally taken down by the prisoners. One of them is even being dragged into a mob like a piece of meat to a pack of ravenous hyenas, and for the first time in a long time, Felicity feels the need to throw up because just the thought of what they must be doing to that poor man…

“Hey!”

She consciously realizes at this point that this masked man has a personally vested interest in this mission’s outcome because she’s certainly heard that kind of manic before.

“S-sorry,” she gasps out, finally jumpstarting her brain back into action. She’s already initializing the process of getting those cells to close and lock again—at least half of the inmates are still inside, although they seem to be the passive half—when she finally says, ‘Neither of them. I-it was the guards, they…” Felicity swallows the nausea rising in the pit of her stomach, and she just knows she won’t be getting anymore sleep tonight. “Make a right turn ahead, and they’re just inside the door at the end of the hall.”

When he finally saw Laurel, clearly and understandably terrified but alive, Oliver was able to breathe a little easier. He wasn’t overly fond of guns, but he used one then to shoot the inmate who was making a mad dash for her and—as an afterthought—Declan. It offered less control than his bow, but his aim was just as good with this tool, and the man went down with a bullet hitting him center mass. If the inmate was lucky, he would live, and the only reason Oliver didn’t stop to make that an impossibility was because he needed to get Laurel out of there.

Laurel noticed him then, and relief flooded her posture and expression. He knew she’d recognized him—The Hood, not Oliver Queen—and then she was pulling Declan in his direction. He ushered them both through the door he’d just come through, and he was about to keep going, running along behind them.

But then, “Close the door!” was shouted in his ear as he crossed the threshold into the hall.

He backpedalled and did as he was bidden, and the door lock clicked into place just before several inmates slammed into the door on the other side. Oliver paused to observe the door for a moment, making sure the lock took, and then he turned to join Laurel and Declan, who had paused to wait for their escort a few paces off.

The horrified, “…my god…” uttered in his ear stopped the vigilante in his tracks for a reason his consciousness rebelled to define—of course, it did anyway.

He knew the kid was watching the security feeds, and the regret Oliver felt for the security guards he
knew they’d left behind in the madness came as a slight surprise to him because it was something he hadn’t felt in a very long time. Oliver didn’t know what came over him, but as he cast a glance back at the door, and the criminals raging against the narrow strip of glass over the handle, he felt like he needed to say something to the kid--whether it was to appease the kid or his own suddenly resurgent conscience, even he didn’t know.

“We can’t help them.” Oddly enough, this statement sounded an apology, even to his own ears, and Oliver found himself hating this moment, hating the guilt.

Those guards were already dead. There was no way to stop it, and he couldn’t dwell on something that was inevitable.

“I-I know…” the kid said quietly in his ear, and then Oliver turned, turning off that switch inside him that tried to remind him he was human.

They needed to get out, and he was through feeling guilty. It would get him--or Laurel--killed.

“Who are you talking to?” Laurel asked as he passed her, but Oliver knew it was best not to answer, so he didn’t.

That he didn’t know who the kid was wouldn’t appease her.

He lead her and Declan down the hall, and they stayed close in tow, adjusting his gait so as to ensure that they never fell more than a few paces behind him.

“SWAT’s finally here. They’re not in your area yet, though.”

Oliver nodded, knowing the kid could probably see it on the security feeds of that camera they had just passed.

“If you just take that path you took to get in, it should be- Watch out!”

They’d entered an office, and someone else was clearly micromanaging this thing because there was a security guard--clearly bought out by the enemy--lying in wait inside as though he’d been planted there as a contingency. That the guy managed to get the drop on Oliver was a matter of shame for him. The taser brought him to the ground, and the guy must have thought him out of commission because he moved on.

It was unforgivable when, shoving Declan aside, the man barreled into Laurel, bringing her to the ground--she knew too much and was unfortunately in an actual position to do something about it. They started to wrestle, and when the guard removed the gun from his holster, that animal started beating on the edge of Oliver’s psyche like he hadn’t felt since his return to the States.

“Close your eyes, Hood!”

Oliver, fighting against the numbing aftereffects of the 1200 volts that had been forced into his system, barely registered this command in his ear in time to react. He clamped his eyelids shut, and he saw the increase of brightness in the room even through them. The flare was brief, and he heard the others shout in alarm.

Then glass shattered, plunging the room into darkness, and Oliver finally let go of his control on that animal inside him. He rushed forward, a force of nature, and threw the guard off of Laurel with ease, and then all of his reservations were gone. He forgot the mission. He even forgot Laurel. All he knew was he wanted to rip that man apart.
When the backup lights turned on, the man was already a bloody mess on the floor, and Oliver was on top of him landing punch after harsh and unforgiving punch. He was damaging the fingers in his hand because he was hitting the man so hard, but his rage kept the realization from his conscious mind. He barely managed to notice in time that it was Laurel who tried to pull him from the man, and the way she retreated from him in fear when he turned to her twisted Oliver’s insides as he finally returned to himself.

More SWAT agents were passing by outside the door, and Oliver knew there was no more present threat to Laurel--or Declan, he thought as another afterthought. Without looking at Laurel--the fear he would surely see in her eyes as she looked at him wasn’t something he could take--he strode from the room. The SWAT agents didn’t give him a second glance, which was the whole point of the disguise, and he was nearly to the exit by the time he was finally reminded of his audience.

“Were you gonna’ kill that guy?”

The kid sounded furious, even through his heavy synthesizer, and Oliver didn’t feel like being preached to by a kid who clearly had no idea what it was like to be forced do whatever was necessary--on the positive side, at least this escapade had reaffirmed the notion that this kid likely wasn’t (currently) a criminal entity, or at least not a serious one if he was. The real world was cold and unforgiving, so that was what Oliver had become in order to fight it, and he wasn’t in the mood to argue the point.

When the kid yelled in his ear for him to answer, Oliver threw the radio away, hardly noticing the way it smashed violently apart when it hit the wall for how much force he’d put into the throw.

Oliver later found a message waiting for him on the kid’s laptop, which he now kept in his motorcycle parked several blocks from the Foundry. It was a short message, and the only reason he looked was because the laptop had beeped again while the lid was still closed, which was a curiosity.

1925142008 : You're welcome, by the way.

He didn’t respond and was about to walk away, but clearly the kid somehow knew that he’d seen it because he typed out a second message despite the silence from Oliver’s end.

1925142008 : Whatever. Try not to almost kill anyone next time, or I’m out.

Oliver promptly slammed the laptop shut, much harsher than he needed to. He was barely able to keep himself from giving the device the same fate as that radio from earlier, but he surmised this to stem from his realism. He still needed to find out who the kid was, and the laptop was his only lead--even this rageful side of him knew that. All other possibilities as to his reservation were discarded from his mind the instant they made themselves known.

Why he kept thinking back on the kid’s tone as he’d watched the guards succumb to their fate was something he told himself he’d never dwell on. Those guards had been lost by the time he’d gotten there. He knew that--no matter how many times he seemed to need to reaffirm himself of the fact. All he knew was that there was a reason The Hood worked alone.

He wasn’t a hero. He was a hunter. He was a weapon.

He was merciless. He was the cold steel that would strike at the shackles slowly binding Starling City. Collateral damage didn’t matter to him. It was an inevitability. He couldn’t stop everything, and he had no intention of trying. His mission couldn’t afford it.
... 

'...my god...'

...

So, why did that voice keep repeating in the back of his mind, accompanied by mental images of security guards being brutally beaten and murdered by adrenaline-crazed inmates?
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood... Our hero makes an odd acquaintance in the form of a surprisingly upbeat blonde IT specialist who puts him on the trail of his worst enemy yet.

*May 26th, 2008:*

If Felicity thought she would be arriving on land with relative safety after miraculously surviving the fall into the ocean alongside the guy in the leather jacket, she would soon find out just how mistaken she was. It was almost the instant the second raft of survivors touched down on the sand that two figures came darting out of the treeline. A man in heavy tactical gear and a woman in a green hood—And, oh dear God, the man had a gun.

“You all need to get off the beach now!” the man bellowed in a gravelly baritone as he reached them.

Was that a sword on his back?

“You must head for the cover of the forest.” That was the woman who spoke, and she pointed to the indicated treeline with—Was that a bow?

No, really, it was a friggin’ *bow*.

One of the survivors—an African-American man wearing a suit who looked like he’d been working an office 9-to-5 job for fifteen years—flew off the handles the moment next. Really, after the day they were having, who could blame him? But, it still seemed terribly ill-advised when 9-5 stomped right up to Mr. Tactical. Seriously, that guy’s arms were twice as big as his—not to mention he was holding a *gun*—and yet suit guy wanted to argue with him?

“We just watched people we love die, and now here you are giving us orders?” Suit guy raged.

“Oh, sweet baby J…”

Mr. Tactical turned his eyes on the man, and suit guy actually had the sense to back up a step. Of course, that proved rather difficult when gun guy snatched his tie and held him stationary with his considerably superior strength. That look in his eyes didn’t quite seem to be a sane one to Felicity.

“If you don’t want to join them, you will do as I say and *run*!” Gun guy shoved 9-to-5 towards the treeline off towards the left, and the man stumbled, barely keeping upright.

Felicity couldn’t move if she tried. She really wanted to because, to her knowledge, when a man with a gun told you to run, you probably should. But, her limbs wouldn’t respond to her commands. Everyone else must’ve been having the same problem, because no one else budged either. Then Mr. Tactical held his gun in the air and squeezed off two very loud shots that certainly fixed that problem. Beside her, Leather Jacket reached for his side to an… empty gun holster. He must’ve been an air
marshal or something to be carrying on a plane of all things. And the landing in the water must’ve stripped his gun away.

“Run!” Mr. Tactical bellowed, and most people were very hasty to comply this time.

Felicity and a few others still rendered immobile by recent dire events were the first to notice the dark figures that poked out of the treeline twenty yards in front of them. Somehow, the blonde knew that this was the danger the two armed people were warning them about. She was proven correct when, noticing the reactions of the survivors, the woman in the green hood drew an arrow from a quiver on her back and knocked it as she turned, and she let the arrow fly. It hit one of the dark figures center mass, and he went down with a loud shout. Another man with him raised his own weapon and fired in retaliation.

One of the plane crash survivors dropped as he took three rounds to the chest from the automatic fire—he wouldn’t survive this one—and Felicity and several others screamed.

“Run, dammit!” Mr. Tactical shouted at them one more time, and they didn’t have to be told again.

They ran after the others as more armed men appeared at the treeline. Mr. Tactical and Miss Archer drew most of the masked gunmen’s attention, thankfully, but not all of it. Under the rain of bullets, two more crash survivors would never leave that beach, dead or dying by the time they hit the sand, but Felicity honestly didn’t notice. It was all a blur to her, just a bunch of screams and the pounding of her feet on shifting sand. All she truly recalled afterward was how loud the pumping of her blood sounded in her ears as she joined the others in a mad dash for the cover of the treeline as they’d previously been bidden. Most of them made it, and, although they weren’t yet being chased, they didn’t stop to let the enemy catch up.

But, today’s luck was just gawd awful.

One minute, Felicity was running for her life with the others through the forest—lagging behind a little because gym had never been her forte growing up—and the next she was tumbling down a large incline, tripped by the foliage under the canopy of leaves that covered the ground. It was completely undignified and true to almost every woman in any horror film ever. It was a hard fall down the hill, and she was pretty sure she hit a rock or something on her way down because her side suddenly started screaming at her in protest. She landed heavily on her back at the base of that hill, and her glasses flew off. She thought she heard them land several paces to her left, but she couldn’t look for them if she wanted to with how her vision was momentarily failing after the harsh landing.

Felicity didn’t move for a bit, instead just sort of lay there in a tired heap as she slowly caught her breath—there was a reason her Major involved computers and not Phys Ed. Her side was killing her, and she was sore in so many places after the harsh tumble. She must have been lying there for longer than she realized, however, because, when she finally lifted herself up with a groan and managed to find her glasses which had—miraculously—not broken during either fall, there was a shadow at the top of the hill. Felicity turned, but she already knew before she looked up that her luck of the day had gotten no better. The man, wearing a ski mask and toting a truly impressive looking rifle, had his weapon poised and ready to shoot.

The blonde murmured a soft apology to her mother because she knew then that she wouldn’t be able to send her any of those pictures from China she’d asked for.

But, then the man screamed and jerked as if he’d suddenly been hit from behind, and the rifle fell from his hands as he lurched forward and then dropped.

There was an arrow in his back.
Felicity squeaked out a muted shriek and skittered back when, after his own tumble down the hill, the man landed but a couple paces from her. If the utter stillness of him wasn’t already enough of a hint, the wide and unblinking nature of his eyes was the only indication Felicity needed to know he hadn’t survived his fall. It was a first for her, seeing a dead body, and there was something slightly surreal about it, almost like she thought he would jump up any minute with an exclamation that it had all been some sick prank. And, it made no sense at all because he’d surely been about to kill her. She should be pissed as hell, especially after the month she’d had, but somehow Felicity and her angry, bitter heart actually felt… sorry for him.

It was a rustling of leaves somewhere off to the side that ultimately snapped her from her daze, and Felicity turned, jumpy like a foal caught out in the open, to find the man had not been traveling alone. This other man was scouring the area. Undoubtedly by the way he was expecting to find someone, he already knew she was there, and she realized somewhere in the back of her mind that these men must have access to radio communication—he’d been informed of her presence but hadn’t been told exactly where she was.

He was going to find her. It was only a matter of time, so Felicity did something that would probably be classified as ‘drastic’ by any computer nerd’s standards. She dove for the cooling corpse of the man before her—or, more specifically, for the pistol holstered at his thigh. The commotion naturally drew the attention of the man hunting for her, and he leveled his own impressive rifle on her just as Felicity turned the dead man’s sidearm on him.

They both froze. The man’s composure, however, seemed cool as a cucumber while Felicity was admittedly less level-headed. Her hands were shaking so bad, she would probably never hit him if she pulled the trigger, even as the man was slowly bringing himself closer to her by taking slow and tiny steps forward. He was testing her challenge line, gauging if he could push far enough to warrant getting a shot off before she did, but Felicity didn’t know that.

All she knew was, as she held the gun leveled on the man, the face of that dead man beside her kept coming to her mind and how inherently wrong the unseeing nature of his eyes was. She and her mother had never been the strictest followers of their religion, mostly only recognizing the high holidays. They never really fasted on Yom Kippur or rested on Saturdays—or Shabbat as they were formerly known. Felicity didn’t pray. She wasn’t even sure if she believed in God or not. But, as she held a gun on the man in front of her, the stresses on the value of life in the Kaddish resurfaced in the back of her mind, and the weight of the weapon in her hands suddenly became all too apparent. The man could have a family. He could have children. There could be some little girl out there who he hadn’t abandoned, waiting eagerly for him to return to wherever ‘home’ was. A simple pull of a trigger could take all of that away.

Were all guns this heavy?

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December 12th, 2012:

Oliver had planned on never contacting the kid again. He’d been so resolved to it, in fact, that he hadn’t once touched that laptop in the past month-and-a-half. It had just been sitting in that pouch in his motorcycle, collecting dust and losing it’s battery.

Then Adam Hunt had been killed by another archer. If it had been almost anyone else on the List, Oliver probably wouldn’t have cared, but he’d already visited Adam Hunt. That debt had been paid, so that he’d been killed meant there was someone in Starling who was undermining his authority. That Black Archer was a wildcard, and that made him a threat to Oliver’s mission. He was a threat
who needed to be eliminated, but the vigilante had tried all avenues he knew of in tracing the arrow he’d recovered. It had been made specially, so he couldn’t trace it back to a manufacturer of any kind by its appearance. He was quickly running out of ideas.

So, he’d gone out and bought a battery charger for the laptop that had since died.

0118181523 : I need your help.

It pained Oliver just to type the message out. He’d learned to rely on only himself to such a complete degree that even the thought of admitting he needed assistance on anything set him on edge. This was supposed to be his own personal crusade. No one else was supposed to get involved. It was bad enough that he’d had to enlist John Diggle because, however useful the man might be, the thought that he could lead such an honest man to the slaughter was enough to turn his stomach with guilt. Oliver was not accustomed to feeling guilt anymore, and he found quickly that he had a powerful disdain for it.

He did need help, however, and this matter was time sensitive. That was the only reason he was reaching out.

1925142008 : And here I was thinking you’d forgotten about me. What can I do for you, Barton?

Oliver ignored the name, undoubtedly some pop-culture reference that meant nothing to him, and stayed on point with his inquiry.

0118181523 : I’m looking for the identity of an archer.

The kid replied quickly, doling out typed comments almost as fast as human speech.

1925142008 : I’m just going to assume this is someone other than yourself we’re talking about.

This should go without saying, and the sarcasm he could almost hear was an added irritation. Oliver was in a hurry.

0118181523 : I have one of his arrows, and it seems specially made. Can you do anything with it?

A pause followed, lasting a few beats that personally dragged out much longer than reality for his anticipation, and then Oliver got the answer he’d been dreading.

1925142008 : No.

Oliver sighed and rested back in his chair. It had been a long shot anyway.

He’d just starting to weigh his options again when another beep sounded, and he turned a half-attentive eye back to the screen, thinking the comment to be nothing of consequence. He was wrong about that, as it turned out, and there was a spike of something that ran through him--some positive entity--as he read the next message that he couldn’t quite identify until much later: gratitude.

1925142008 : But I know someone who can. There’s an intern at QC I’ve gone to for… odd jobs. She may be able to help you, and she’s discreet.

Oliver was already planning to run an in-depth background check on this QC employee--quite the fortunate coincidence--when he responded.

0118181523 : It’s worth a shot. Who am I seeing?
Felicity Smoak.

His Anonymous Friend—whom the news had dubbed Synth after the past several weeks of the kid taking on street crime—had given him some contact information for the woman, an e-mail address and a phone number, but she worked at QC which meant it would be simple enough for him to just contact her in person and without his vigilante garb.

Oliver had to say, her history painted a rather intriguing yet tragic picture. He’d done his research on the girl the night before in the hopes of getting an idea as to whether she could indeed be useful to him. What he found had certainly not been what he was expecting. There was little of her on the internet, an oddity if he did say so himself, but that was why the first thing he’d learned about her was that she’d survived being stranded on an island for almost four years after her plane went down off the coast of China. At the time of her return eight months previous, a number of news articles had been written on the story, and, if he hadn’t just returned to town himself a couple months ago, Oliver may have even heard about it.

With nothing else to find on the internet, he’d then delved into QC’s records to find her personnel file and had been further surprised to learn she was only 24, yet she was in a Co-op internship with QC to get her Master’s degree in ‘Cyber Security and Computer Sciences’—as listed in her file. If she’d finished the degree on track, she would’ve had her Master’s at 20. The serial college-dropout had to admit as he went to the tenth floor to find her that he was a little intimidated by the formidable intellectual image this girl set.

What he wasn’t expecting were such bright colors.

Felicity sat in her small cubicle, her blonde hair and the bright pink of her shirt standing out distinctly against the otherwise drab backdrop of the corporate workplace setting. The vibrant red of her lips matched the color of the pen she held between her teeth almost to a tee, and if Oliver hadn’t known going in that she’d spent four years stranded on an island, nothing about her cheerfully colored appearance would have told him so.

Her attention was on her computer screen, and the degree of focus she displayed had to be one of the reasons she’d done so well in school before her time away. There were some kind of notes open beside her, and Oliver wondered if she was using some free time to work on her studies. He found himself wishing in a brief moment of wistfulness that he’d been that dutiful with his education pre-China. But, if that had been the case, he never would have snuck off to China with his father. He never would’ve been forged into the weapon his city sorely needed him to be, so he was quick to discard any thoughts of how life could’ve been if he’d been different growing up.

“What’s up, Synth?”

He hadn’t spoken very loudly, yet the girl jumped in her chair high enough that she was practically halfway to her feet as her hand flew in the general direction of her side for a reason he’d surely misplaced, and her blue eyes flew up to his with a degree of alarm he was surprised to see from such a normal looking girl. She managed to recover quickly, settling back into her chair and correcting her expression in swift order, but he saw a glimpse of the hardened part of herself that her bright appearance hid well from those who didn’t know where to look.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Oliver apologized, and he was surprised himself by how sincere he was with this sentiment.

The girl’s mind seemed to catch up with her then because she blinked and gave her head a slight but
firm shake and put on a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“No, no, I… I startle easily. That’s all.”

She waved her hand through the air to dismiss the matter, and Oliver had no right to call her out on the reasons why. After all, it had undoubtedly been her time on that island that had resulted in her easy-to-startle nature, and he had no right to pry into the matter which was wholly personal. Everyone was entitled to their secrets, a notion he himself was no stranger to. So, the billionaire slash secret vigilante instead moved on to the business at hand.

“I’m Oliver Queen,” he introduced himself, and Felicity gave a small and nervous smile, one that was partly sincere this time.

“I know who you are,” she said with a light breath of a laugh. “You’re Mr. Queen.” She said these last words with a wide flourish of her hands in the general direction of his person that told him she couldn’t believe a larger-than-life celebrity such as himself was standing there in front of her.

“Please, call me Oliver,” he responded quickly. “Mr. Queen was my father.”

Aside from needing to keep up his image of immaturity, the moniker of ‘Mr. Queen brought to Oliver’s mind a shrewd businessman who may very well have been able to walk on water as far as his enraptured son had been concerned. They’d butted heads on many occasions, but there was no way to deny that Oliver had once looked up to the man for the empire he’d built--an empire whose wealth had sustained his profligate and petty lifestyle as a boy. ‘Mr. Queen’ brought to mind a man whose last act had been to end his own life to ensure he wouldn’t be the anchor that got his son killed. While the archer was hellbent to correct his father’s wrongdoings, he would never live up to his image and therefore had no right to his title.

“Right,” Felicity said as she gave a nod, “but he’s dead.” The girl flinched instantly as her own words reached her ears, and she shook her head with a grimace. “I mean, he was shot.”

Oliver swallowed deep as images of their car being shredded by automatic fire flashed before his mind’s eye, but he was quick to push them back with an ease that had come through practice. Felicity seemed to notice quickly how much worse this last comment from her was because she fumbled on, her face flushing more and more as she spoke.

“But, I mean, of course you know that. You were there that night.” Flinch. “And you weren’t shot, so that means you can come down to CyberSec... and listen to me babble on and on about what was probably the worst night of your life.” Felicity took a breath, and she looked so earnestly contrite that Oliver strangely found himself already forgiving this girl for her rather terrible string of faux pas. “I’ll stop. I promise I will.”

Felicity turned from him and closed her eyes and took another, deeper breath, and Oliver barely heard her count back from three under her breath. Then she opened her eyes again and turned back to him and put on another a smile, one a little more honest if also greatly embarrassed. Oliver found he had only one tangible thought.

This was the girl who’d been stranded on an island for four years? He’d expected someone less… personable? More like himself, perhaps. Brooding and bitter and with a general mistrust and dislike of people. Next to him, however, this girl seemed strangely well put together.

“What can I help you with?”

The degree and range of honest emotions she could display were quite surprising to Oliver, who was
admittedly quite emotionally stunted after his own harsh reality check over the past five years. He felt like he might get whiplash from her many expressions, yet… he was smiling, wasn’t he? It had completely snuck up on him, this mildly uplifting feeling of… amusement? It took him a moment to recognize it. Although subtle, the earnest quirking of his lips couldn’t be refuted, and he was well aware that it was in response to the complete oddity that was Felicity Smoak. She was absolutely nothing like he’d expected going in, and he found himself wondering how much of that had to do with her years of isolation and how much of it was simply ‘her’. How much of herself had she managed to hold onto, he wondered?

But, Oliver couldn’t dwell on it. He had an archer to find and a crusade to continue.

“My buddy, Steve, is really into archery,” the archer started his pre-thought-up story. “Apparently it’s all the rage now.”

Felicity actually rolled her eyes a little bit.

“Uh huh. An archer or two come to my mind as well, actually.”

Oliver quirked his head a little and narrowed his eyes at this odd comment from her--because he’d been lying about archery growing in popularity--but he moved past it without much further thought. His alter ego had been in the news a few times, so that was surely all she meant by it.

“Personally, I don’t understand it. It looks utterly ridiculous to me.”

Oliver forced his expression to remain neutral as he told himself to ignore this unintentional slap to the face.

“Mm-hm.”

“You thought the same thing once,’ he reminded himself.

He must’ve been wearing an odd expression because Felicity tilted her head slightly to the side, and Oliver quickly shook off his wounded pride--a pride that he had no right to feel as a weapon.

“Anyway, it’s Steve’s birthday next weekend,” he said aloud as he unscrewed the arrow tube he’d brought with him, “and I wanted to buy him some arrows. The thing is, he gets these special,” he noticed the way Felicity’s eyes went a little wide the instant he took out that black arrow, but he just assumed she’d never seen an arrow in person before, “custom made arrows. I have no idea where he gets them, and I was told you might be able to help me find out.”

He attributed it to her clear interest in the arrow as he held it towards her, so Oliver didn’t question why Felicity didn’t question him on who could’ve possibly sent him to a computer expert for information on arrows. He simply assumed she’d done this sort of thing before since his Anonymous Friend had said he too went to her for help sometimes with ‘odd jobs’.

As she took the arrow--verbally heeding his warning to be careful with the weapon with a suppressed eye-roll and her first completely honest smile--she looked up at him. For the briefest moment, Oliver thought she was reassessing something about him, as though she’d just realized something and looked at him with a new understanding. It passed so quickly, however, that he couldn’t decipher the look further, so he ignored it.

When she was able to find with a few keystrokes what he’d been unable to find with an entire night of research, he realized why his Anonymous Friend had sent him to her.
She would’ve died. The man was about to squeeze the trigger of his rifle, and Felicity would’ve been ended because, honestly, she—bitter and angry as she was at the world—couldn’t pull her own trigger knowing what it would mean.

Then Mr. Tactical was there. He shoved Ski Mask’s rifle to the side just as the man got his shots off, and Felicity fell to the side on instinct as his shots went wide. She didn’t notice until later that one of the bullets had grazed the outside edge of her right wrist, and she would understand then just how close she’d come to death. She didn’t see the blow, but she heard the sickening crunch of bone that came with it. When Felicity looked up, Ski Mask was dropping like a rock, and Mr. Tactical wrenched a large knife from where the unfortunate man’s spine had once met the base of his skull.

The only thing that kept Felicity from screaming was the bile that rose up in her throat.

Mr. Tactical turned to her then, bloody knife in hand, and Felicity looked up at him from her place on the ground, her eyes wide. Panic surged through her system.

“And whadda ya gonna do, kid?!” he asked.

And she did. She couldn’t really say if she was running from the armed gunmen hunting them or from the man who’d just saved her life. Both seemed like logical choices in that moment. She ran, ran until her legs felt like jelly, and then she fell to her knees and threw up that burrito she’d eaten on the plane. She heaved until her stomach was empty, and even then she still felt nauseous. Then she noticed her hand.

Or rather, she noticed the gun that was still in her hand.

Felicity dropped the weapon as if it had burned her, and then she skittered backwards until her back hit a tree. She’d never even seen a gun in person until that day, and this one… She clapped a hand over her mouth as a sound not un-kin to either a sob or a whimper escaped her, and then the bottle blonde was crying. She couldn’t help it, and, before she knew it, she was sobbing outright.

Her plane had been shot out of the sky, and she was now stuck on an island where she was holding onto a gun she’d picked up off of a dead man who’d previously tried to kill her.

What the hell?

She didn’t know how long she’d stayed there having her mental breakdown, but it was however long it had taken her to be found. Felicity gave another squeak of a shriek—muffled by her hand—when a man ran into her view, and she wasn’t as relieved as she probably should’ve been to find it was Mr. Tactical who’d tracked her there. She wouldn’t have shied away from him but for the tree that impeded her retreat.

The man held his hands up in an appeasing gesture, showing her he wasn’t armed, but Felicity couldn’t quite find it in herself to be relieved.

“Are you hurt, kid?” he asked, his tone gruff even when he wasn’t yelling, and he earnestly seemed to want to know.

When Felicity could finally get her body to respond to her brain’s commands, she offered a small, jerkish shake of her head as her answer. Mr. Tactical nodded, and then he observed her for a moment. He noticed the bullet graze on her wrist—which she had yet to notice herself—but said nothing of it, and then he turned and stooped to pick up the pistol she’d dropped on the ground.
Only then did Felicity realize the safety had been on the entire time.

Mr. Tactical checked the weapon and then tucked it into the back of his waistband.

“The others have not gone far,” said a much more feminine voice, and Felicity turned to find the archeress--bowwoman?--in the green hood was approaching them. Like Mr. Tactical’s weapons, her bow was also put away. Was it put away? Was it sheathed? Or, was it holstered? Did you holster a bow? Felicity couldn’t say because, honestly, it was a friggin’ bow.

Mr. Tactical gave the woman a nod, and then he approached Felicity, which she only truly noticed after he’d stooped down and taken her by the arms.

“Come on, kid,” he said as he pulled her up onto her feet. “We need to move.”

By the time they made it to the others, Felicity felt numb. She hardly noticed when the air marshal who had saved her life, upon seeing her catatonic condition, demanded to know what had happened.

She did notice when Mr. Tactical’s only reply was, “The first dead body is always the hardest.”

The first, he’d said.

...Did that mean he expected there would be more?

As it usually is, it’s late that night by the time Felicity leaves work. She’s just heading out to her car to head home when her phone alert goes off and shows her the story currently breaking on the news.

The Dark Archer, undoubtedly the same one Oliver Queen had bid her to help him locate just earlier that same day, has taken five hostages. He wants to face The Hood alone, threatening to kill the civilians if any police officers enter the building.

That he has one of the terrified hostages deliver the message is just wrong on so many levels.

Felicity is more surprised than she should’ve been to learn who the man under that green hood is. She doubts he recognizes her. In fact, she knows he doesn’t given their meeting earlier, but that’s not important. He never really did see her face, after all, so she has no right to expect him to remember. As to his current nightly activities, the timing of his return is more than coincidental. It’s telling. She really should’ve realised it sooner.

It’s possibly the most foolish decision she’s ever made--which is really saying something after the past five years. Felicity hurries the rest of the way to her car, tossing her trepidation and reservations into the trunk with her purse and laptop bag, and she casts a careful glance around to make sure she’s alone in the parking structure--fortunately, it has no cameras that reach this angle--before she pops the hidden compartment in her trunk. She’s dressed in minutes and tosses her equipment onto the floor of the backseat, and then she’s speeding across town, stopping at each infuriating red light to draw as little attention to herself as possible. She’s already late, she knows, by the time she makes it to the broadcasted location.

The Hood, Oliver Queen, is surely already inside.
The fight wasn’t going nearly as well as he’d anticipated. Oliver quickly found himself outmaneuvered by the Dark Archer, and the frustration building in him was making him careless and sloppy. He searched the shadows where his adversary had disappeared the moment before, his bow leveled and an arrow nocked with the drawstring drawn as tight as it would go without damaging the weapon.

He didn’t notice the archer was actually behind him until it was too late.

The first arrow that hit him in the back barely missed his spine, and Oliver cried out as he stumbled forward. A second arrow inserted itself forcibly into the tissue on the other side of his spine--clearly intentional given the placement was damn near symmetric--and he went down. Or, he would have, if he hadn’t stumbled into a wall that was under construction. But, when the Dark Archer kicked him in the back--the pain it ignited was excruciating--he was pushed right through the wooden boards. Oliver staggered to his feet, then he was kicked again and back on the ground. The green-clad archer lashed out with one of the flechettes fastened to his thigh, but this man was two steps ahead of him again. He screamed as the man twisted his arm, dislocating it at the elbow, and then the Dark Archer took the throwing arrow from the vigilante’s hand and stabbed him in the shoulder with it to add insult to injury.

Oliver was then kicked in the ribs so many times that he couldn’t even scream again, and he knew he was on the verge of passing out by the way his vision failed momentarily. He couldn’t quite seem to get that ringing in his ears to stop, and he was barely conscious enough to realize the man was saying something--something about ‘the man who created the list’ and ‘wants The Hood dead’. His vision was faring marginally better than his sense of hearing at the moment, so he was able to watch more clearly as the archer drew his bow and leveled it on him.

And then he thought of Thea, and his mother, and Laurel, and Tommy, and the fear that spiked in him was so foreign that he had trouble recognizing it as such.

All he knew was that he wouldn’t see them again.

For the first time in a long time, Oliver Queen had something to lose, and it terrified him. No longer was he the weapon, forged by a cold and unrelenting reality. He was the boy who’d watched his father shoot himself in the head, the boy who’d missed his family for five long years, who yearned to reconnect with his sister and make amends to Laurel, and the boy who desperately missed the easygoing and often crude jokes of his childhood friend. He was the boy who wanted nothing more than a hug from his mother. He wanted to talk to them again, to revel in the simple pleasure of some light, inconsequential banter, and he wanted to tell them that he, even in his broken and unrecognizable state, still loved them in all the ways he was still able.

He hadn’t felt so human in years.

Time slowed to a near standstill as Oliver watched the arrowhead come to bear, and he wished it would just end already. He also thought time might not have slowed at all, that the Dark Archer was simply lapping up his uncharacteristic fear like a gluttonous hound lapped up meat scraps. He just wanted it to end…

But, then it happened.

Oliver saw the glinting light more than he heard the swish of cutting air as a sword blade moved through the space behind the enemy archer. The drawstring of the man’s bow was sliced through by the blade’s tip, the Dark Archer’s arms flying wide as the weapon became unstrung, and then the tactical katana’s blade was nestled squarely against the man’s shrouded neck. The archer had been too focussed on his prey. He’d been so distracted that he hadn’t noticed the intruder until his plans
were already thwarted.

Oliver’s Anonymous Friend had come.

He tried to tell the kid to flee because he would surely stand no chance in this fight even with the Dark Archer’s bow now rendered useless. But, Oliver was so stunned that he was left speechless. He didn’t even know what loyalty was these days, and before that moment he probably wouldn’t have trusted himself to it. But as Oliver watched this inexperienced fighter who’d made his dislike in the vigilante’s methods very clear, he simply couldn’t fathom the reasons why.

Why would the kid come to help him?
This week on “Under the Hood”, Felicity goes toe-to-toe with the Dark Archer, a man who’s bested even Oliver Queen. Will she come out victorious, or has she found herself up a river with no paddle to beat him with? It’s time to find out!

Felicity’s arrival is fortunate because it’s at just the right moment. The enemy is so distracted by Oliver--good God, has he been shot in the back twice?--that he doesn’t notice her when she enters. He’s not even aware of her presence as she sneaks up behind him, though she has to remind herself to keep her pace controlled--and thus silent--when he lifts his bow with the clear intention of ending Oliver. She’s a little surprised she’s able to get the drop on him at all, to be honest, because she’s nowhere even near Oliver’s skill level, yet he’s clearly been bested by this evil archer. Somehow, however, she manages to slice the drawstring of the enemy’s bow before he deals the death blow, and she puts the dulled blade to his neck the instant next.

Felicity can only hope she can bluff her way through whatever follows because there’s absolutely no way she can take this man in a fight.

“Impressive,” he muses. “Few have ever been able to sneak up on me, even while I’m distracted.” The Dark Archer’s deep, synthesized tone is more curious than anything else as he turns his head just a little in her direction. “I must admit, I didn’t know The Hood had a sidekick.”

“He doesn’t,” Felicity says simply through her own synthesizer, and she thinks it odd that this is the second time the insinuation has been made.

It must be because she also wears a hood, she ultimately decides, but it seems of actual little consequence to her current adversary.

“If you’re going to threaten me with a sword,” the archer says then, and something in his tone makes her brow and the small of her back begin to perspire and her fingers to tremble, “you’d better be prepared to kill me with it.”

Felicity tightens her hold around the handle of her tactical katana, and she grits her teeth. This man is dangerous, she knows. With other criminals, she’d never even consider the possibility, but he’s the kind of man who can take a life as easily as he takes a step. He’s killed two people--that she knows of--and he was ready to kill five more just to get to Oliver. He’ll kill both her and Oliver the moment he’s given the chance, yet Felicity is frustrated to find she still can’t...

She wonders if she’ll ever learn this lesson.

She might never be given another chance now as the archer turns to look at her fully.

“Most of this blade has been dulled, so I don’t think you are.”

Felicity knows then that she’s already lost.

With a speed she hasn’t seen in a long time, the evil archer pushes the blade of the katana away from his throat, and then he pivots on his heel, lashing out at her nearest leg in an effort to trip her. Even
Felicity doesn’t know how she reacts fast enough to step over his foot, but the victory of it is short-lived. He slaps the upper limb of his unstrung bow against a nerve in the side of her lower back so hard that Felicity nearly crumples then and there. She falls to a knee, but she manages to turn the move into a tumble away from him.

He’s hot on her heels when she comes up out of the roll, so she lashes out with the katana. The Dark Archer merely pauses mid step for the wide arc to pass him by, and then he throws his weight into her, sending her sprawling backwards, and the landing sends her katana flying from her grasp to clatter to the floor some feet away. Felicity rolls sideways this time in a feeble attempt to put some space between them, and then she begins to rise. The archer is too quick, though, because he’s right there again. He gets the end of the bow limb against the crook of her ankle as she’s lifting it to readjust her footing, and then he pulls it back, hard and swift. Felicity is sent back to the ground for a third time, this time on her stomach, and she’s too dazed to roll away for a third time.

She almost doesn’t recognize the threat in time when he crouches down on top of her and slips the loose drawstring of his bow under her chin and around her neck, and she only barely manages to slip her hand through before he, holding onto the loose end of the string with one hand and the bow shaft with the other, tightens the noose. It nearly breaks her wrist, she’s sure, and Felicity would’ve cried out if more than a minimal amount of air had been permitted through her airway.

Right now, her wrist is the only thing keeping her alive, but it won’t last long. The force he’s applying to the drawstring will tear the ligaments holding her wrist together, and then he’ll be able to close her airway completely. She’s groping behind her, looking for anything she can use to hit the Dark Archer with, and she’s sure she’s more of an amusement to him than anything else at this point. Her sword is too far away, and her gun is on the wrong side of her body, what with her dominant hand being the hail mary that had saved her--at least momentarily--from strangulation.

As far as deaths go, suffocation isn’t the worst, she supposes. She could be burned alive or ripped apart or starve or bleed out slowly, so the relatively quick sensation of running out of air shouldn’t be too terrible by comparison. There are worse things.

But, then Felicity’s hand lands on something. It’s not so much the archer’s boot that catches her attention as it is the knife he carries in that boot, and she wastes no time before drawing it. She puts the blade to the string beside her bound hand, which has started to lose its feeling--though, she supposes that’s better than the excruciating pain it was feeling before--and then she wrenches the knife outward with a sharp twist.

The string snaps, thank God, and the force he’d been applying to the noose sends the archer backward and to his feet. Felicity allows herself to splutter for air for all of two breaths before she lifts herself up onto her forearms and launches her foot back. This hit actually lands, even she’s surprised to find, hitting the evil archer in the stomach and pushing him further back. She uses the forward momentum it gives her to tumble, trying to get her body to move again after the shock of nearly dying, and she’s pretty graceless this time when she rises to her feet.

Felicity turns to find the Dark Archer is already pacing a few steps away, keeping his shrouded eyes on her, and she grips the knife in her hand a little tighter. That he simply discards what’s left of his bow is further indication to her that marksmanship is by no means his only skill.

He’s baiting her, keeping his distance. He wants her to attack first.

She wishes she could use that pistol on her waist. Oh, how she wishes she could use that pistol. But, at least right now, he’s toying with her. The instant she pulls a gun on him, it’s over for her. He’s too fast. Felicity’s only hope in this instance is that he might be underestimating her just enough.
She also knows her chances of getting out of this alive drop dramatically if she waits for him to move first. So, wielding nothing but the knife she stole from his boot—it’s clearly meant for use by someone with a much larger hand and is a little awkward for her to hold—Felicity goes onto the offensive. He’s expecting this, which she knows, but there’s no way she’ll be able to counter any of his moves. She stays back far enough that he’s just on the edge of her range. Even with the knife in her hand, however, his reach is naturally greater than hers, and it’s infuriating how quickly she finds herself outmatched.

With his hands soon clasped behind his back, the Dark Archer avoids her attacks with ease, tilting expertly and no more than necessary to avoid each slash of his own knife, and if she was amusing to him before, now she’s just a joke. He’s not attacking. He even manages to get her gun from her at one point, slipping it through his cloth belt at the small of his back, and she wonders then if she should’ve just taken her chances with it.

And, it’s just so very insulting, on so many levels, when he starts giving her tips.

“Your form is good, but you telegraph your moves when you hesitate,” he says to her as he sidesteps a vertical slash. “And you really shouldn’t hesitate against a trained killer.”

Felicity knows this. She’d always been told her hesitation to wound would get her into trouble, and it’s so true in this case. As she attacks again, the archer merely ducks to avoid the knife and spins on his heel in the same motion. He grabs her wrist right out of the air mid sweep, twists her arm painfully upwards to the point where her knuckles just about touch her own shoulder, and then he’s standing behind her, his other arm wrapped around her front to ensnare her. The knife drops from her hand as her already pained wrist screams in protest and the nerves in her arm are pinched by the unnatural posture. Felicity thrashes a little, trying to throw the evil archer off, and she pulls to no avail at the hand that’s trapped her to him.

The moment allows her to look at Oliver, though, because he’s now in front of her just a few paces away. He’s conscious again—or he never actually fell unconscious and is just moving again. Still crumpled on the ground with a hand clutching his ribs, he’s clearly tried reaching for his bow, but it’s too far. He’s watching, struggling just to stay awake, and Felicity can’t even imagine the pain he must be in.

Has either of those arrows nicked his spine? Oh, she desperately hopes not.

“Hm,” comes the curious sound from her captor, and Felicity’s attention is momentarily drawn away from the vigilante who’s quite potentially bleeding out right now. “A woman.”

Dread fills her as the evil archer muses this thought aloud, and the equal surprise she feels matches the surprise she can see in Oliver’s eyes as they widen a little under his hood. It’s that arm the evil archer has wrapped around her front that’s surely allowed him to notice certain physiological signs of her gender. The whole point of this getup of hers is to be completely anonymous, not even gender or skin tone discernible, but it seems at least this facet of her cover has now been blown to those present.

Felicity also tries really hard not to be offended by how surprised the Dark Archer sounds.

Just for good measure, she takes this chance to throw her head back. Her enemy must be more distracted by this revelation than she realized because the hit lands. The Dark Archer’s grip falters just enough, and Felicity manages to yank her wrist out of his hand. She pivots and lashes out with her foot.

But, damn, his reflexes are quick because he takes half a step back, just far enough that he doesn’t
get hit, and pushes her foot aside to throw her off balance. With one large stride forward, the Dark Archer then enters her personal space again, but it’s more the hand that clamps around her throat that catches the majority of Felicity’s attention.

“You’re out of your depth,” the archer growls so deep that she’s not sure if it’s the voice modulator or his actual voice she’s hearing, and if she focuses really hard, Felicity thinks she can barely make out his eyes under his cowl now as he draws her close.

What she can see of those eyes sends a chill down her spine.

“You should’ve stayed home, girl.”

He’s going to kill her. He fully plans on it, and as spots flare before her eyes Felicity thinks briefly of the mother she’s only just started to reconnect with and the brooding teenage girl she’d convinced to move in with them—a girl who still has no idea that their meeting hadn’t been a coincidence, that she had in fact been sought out. If this man has his way, she’ll never see either of them again.

But, Felicity is full of tricks.

She honestly can’t say herself why the thought never occurred to her before that moment. Maybe it’s the fact that she can see his eyes that she remembers now or maybe it’s because she’s finally acknowledged that she has a home to fight to return to. Her vision is starting to fail as his vicegrip around her throat restricts her windpipe even more, so, if she’s going to do it, now’s the best time. With a choking sound she’s not proud of, Felicity reaches into her pocket, and the relief she feels is palpable when she finds the device hadn’t fallen out during the previous—very one-sided—altercation.

With a gasp that fails to draw in much air, she somehow manages to choke out, “Hood…” and, “Eyes…”

Felicity hopes Oliver understands what she’s trying to say, or rather what she’s trying to warn him about, and she brings that device as close to the evil archer’s damned eyes as she can. It helps that he’d glanced at Oliver when she’d called to the vigilante because her enemy is thus completely unprepared when, as he turns back to her, she presses her thumb firmly down on the device’s activation switch.

She doesn’t see it, what with her own eyes being clamped shut, but when the Dark Archer shouts in alarm, Felicity knows the flash went off. The chemical reaction is brief, so it’s already safe for her to open her eyes by the time she hits the ground, and it’s fortunate how disoriented the man is because she spends several moments just lying there, trying to catch her breath. The Dark Archer stumbles back, a hand braced in front of his eyes far too late for it to do him any good, and he actually stumbles and falls onto his knee.

Note to self: make more.

Felicity turns her head to the side and finds she must have stumbled backwards before falling because Oliver is right there next to her. If she hadn’t been sure before, the knowledge that he is indeed Oliver Queen can hardly be refuted anymore. He’s looking right at her, and she has a brief recollection of the man who had once looked at her through cell bars.

“Do you think I’m a monster too?”

Felicity remembers the man who’d once gone against his orders one night, risked his life, just to bring her from that cell and lead her outside for a brief time where she could get some fresh air for the first time in weeks. She feels a pang of guilt as she thinks of this and of their present situation. It’s
a little unfair that she gets to know his identity--both now and then--while hers still remains secret to him. But, she doesn’t want to be known this way. That’s why she sent him to her at QC earlier that very day. He can know her as her and not this poor attempt at a vigilante she’s concocted.

Speaking of which…

Turning away from Oliver and back to the Dark Archer, she finds he’s thankfully not yet recovered, and she wonders briefly if she’d done her calculations correctly on the chemical ingredients she’d used to make that flash device. Had she carried that decimal place far enough…?

None to self #2: double check work later. Flash grenades may blind.

She’s not taking any chances with this guy, though, so Felicity grabs the first thing she can find--an errant PVC water pipe that was trimmed from a longer piece and left lying around--and then she’s on her feet again. She rounds on the Dark Archer with the unconventional weapon in hand, and she hits him twice across the face with it as hard as she can. In retrospect, she probably should’ve used her dominant hand despite how much it’s hurting in that moment. Her left, no matter how it tries, just can’t seem to put in the force needed to bring the man down.

That he snatches her wrist when she goes to hit him a third time only serves to reinforce the issue. This day is just refusing to go her way.

The archer launches to his feet, and the fist he throws into her stomach hits home hard enough to double her over. Felicity drops the water pipe, and her knees would’ve buckled too, she’s sure. But, then he’s got his hand around her throat again, and he lifts her as he surges forward with a synthetic roar. Her feet leave the ground, and she’s not entirely sure how far back they go because she blacks out for a moment--lack of oxygen can start to do funny things to the body. By the neck, he slams her into the ground, and she hits the concrete hard enough that she’s pretty sure she just felt one of her ribs crack--how’s she going to explain that one? She can’t even cry out in pain because she doesn’t have enough air. The Dark Archer lingers above her. His eyes, though squinting as he struggles with the after effects of her flash grenade, have a rage in them she hasn’t seen in years, and she’s pretty sure at this point that he’s going to relish watching her suffocate. She must’ve really pissed him off.

Because he’s completely ignored Oliver.

The vigilante, dragging himself along in a way that makes Felicity want to weep knowing the agony he must be inthinking of the agony he must be in, jams one of his flechettes into the evil archer’s calf the instant he’s in range. The man cries out and lets go of Felicity again--seriously, how many times is he going to try to strangle her?--and he turns on instinct to face Oliver. The good archer throws his fist across the Dark Archer’s shrouded face, and, despite having two arrows in his back , the hit certainly isn’t wanting for power like hers had been. It sends the cruel man’s torso twisting.

And suddenly, there’s the gun he’d stolen from Felicity just moments before. She doesn’t hesitate this time. She takes the gun in hand and pulls it from the back of his belt, and the man realizes his mistake a moment too late. Felicity pulls the trigger as he turns, and the bullet rips right through his shoulder--the dominant one, if she’s not mistaken.

With a hand clasped to the wound, the man retreats from his place crouched above her, and then he’s running off. Felicity’s so relieved that she’s somehow managed to survive that she can’t even bring herself to be concerned yet that a dangerous killer is getting away.

Her panic is back when Oliver goes down with a weak grunt of pain--a grunt that seems to be the only sound he can muster. Felicity knows the ‘I almost died, and why oh why do I ever get out of
bed in the morning’ breakdown that she’s been fearing for nine months will have to wait until later even as she feels it beating upon her psyche. She pushes herself up, ignoring the pain that surges in her back, and kneels next to the archer who’d just saved her life.

He’s going in and out of it, and, honestly, she’s a little surprised he isn’t faring worse. Seriously. He’s been bleeding for, like, almost five minutes already. She’s no doctor, but even she knows that’s not good. She’s got nothing on her one would traditionally use, so she sheds her jacket and uses that to try and staunch the bleeding. And now he knows she’s caucasian since she’s wearing short sleeves underneath, so she’s not even sure herself why she’s bothered with such a concealing disguise. Her plans all seems to be falling apart, but at least she can still wear the head gear.

Felicity tries her best to press the jacket down around the two arrow shafts because she knows pulling the weapons will only cause him to bleed out faster. Oliver winces, his hands twitching as the action from her causes him pain, and she apologizes. Then his eyes start to drift shut again. This is one of those things where she’s supposed to try and keep him conscious, right? She hopes she’s not making it worse, but she feels better when he’s looking at her and not falling asleep. Her feelings don’t change facts when his eyes slide closed completely. Her boss just ‘came back from the dead’, and now here he is dying in front of her.

Maybe she just yearns to stick it to fate—which is so cruel in what it does to certain people—but Felicity really doesn’t want him to die.

“Oliver!” She accidentally uses his real name because she’s terrified, but it seems to do the trick anyway. It’s his distrust of her that then keeps him conscious as he levels her with an uneasy stare, she knows, but hey, she’ll take it.

“Stay with me, okay?” she knows she sounds panicked, even through her synthesizer, but she hopes the hand she places on his shoulder is at least a little comforting to him.

She’s so focused on trying to keep him from bleeding out that Felicity doesn’t notice when Oliver’s eyes focus on a scar on the outside edge of her right wrist, a bullet graze that hadn’t ever healed quite right. It’s an angry red scar that she usually hides under long sleeves, but now she’s only wearing her gloves and her gloves and the black tank top she wears under her hooded jacket—it can get seriously toasty under that thing during the heat of combat.

The buzzing that sounds nearly startles Felicity right out out of her bones, and it takes her a moment to realize it’s the buzz of a vibrating cellphone. She’s thankful for her headgear for wholly other reasons then as she pats down Oliver’s person, scouring for the source—how flushed is her face right now?—and she comes up with a truly impressive looking cellphone from an interior pocket on his chest. She doesn’t even want to know how much it cost him. Is this model even on the market yet?

The Caller ID picture on the screen is of a man she only barely recognizes as Oliver’s bodyguard, and the knowledge has her answering without hesitation.

“Hey,” the man’s voice sounds through the device. “I’m outside. Where are you? Tell me you brought that bastard down.”

Clearly, he thinks Oliver has answered the phone.

Awkward…

“Um…”
Felicity’s not entirely sure what she should say. The man *seems* to be aware of Oliver’s nightly activities, however, so maybe the best option is to just say it how it is.

“Who is this?” The man is even more alert now, and the distrust she hears probably has something to do with her voice modulator and the fact that it isn’t Oliver who answered the phone.

“That’s not, um…” It’s really not important right now, but he probably won’t take it well if she says that. “He’s been shot, and I can’t carry him.”

Felicity winces. Is completely avoiding the question better or worse than giving a cryptic reply? She’s not sure. She also hopes she wasn’t thinking out loud again. In the end, she supposes this also doesn’t matter because the man seems to ignore the crypticism and whatever she may or may not have inadvertently blurted out in light of the situation.

“Where are you?”

And so began the arduous task of getting Oliver out of a building swarmed by police cars without being seen.

Felicity thinks she can stop it, push it back for yet another day. She’s gotten quite adept at shoving all of these dark things down deep enough to where most people can’t even tell they’re there. But, there have been too many ‘tomorrow’s since she got back, too many days of pretending like her life hasn’t been crap or that this wasn’t the first time she’d almost been killed. Although, it *is* the first time in a long while that she’s wanted to live when faced with the possibility of the alternative, and she knows this is monumental in its implications for her--it’s amazing what something to live for can do to a shell of a person. But, all the same, it’s made the night’s events just so much worse because with it comes the fear of losing something.

After the two men are gone, John Diggle following his only viable course of action in taking Oliver to the hospital to treat his very serious injuries, Felicity feels the darkness creeping in, remembers those cold eyes under a dark cowl as the Dark Archer tries to suffocate her, and she’s filled with a sudden and very real panic because she has no idea where he is. The man had run off to lick his wounds, and she could be walking right into his path without meaning to. He’s proven how lethal he is, even while injured, and Felicity is looking over her shoulder the entire way to her car, keeping to the shadows and fighting the urge to duck into every hidey-hole she sees in order to just sleep there for the night, prey hoping it had concealed itself well enough from the predator hunting it. All it takes is one serious brush with death, and then she’s back on the island, a ball of nerves and instincts, hiding and fighting for survival. When she finally makes it home, barely having the sense of mind to leave her most damning gear in the car, she hardly makes it in the door before she loses that hard-fought battle she’s been waging with herself.

To think, she usually has such an aversion to heights, yet she’s built herself up pretty high just for that fall.

Cindy thought she would wake up to a day like any other. Donna would be sleeping after returning from work several hours earlier. Felicity would either be working on homework or getting ready to leave for her day of work. Cindy would finish the homework she’d been procrastinating on. Why High School was the condition of her living there, she would never know, but she’d always been
curious about it, having had to teach herself everything she’d known before. Sure, with her penchant for ‘confrontations with bullies’, they’d turned to homeschooling, but she was still learning a lot. She might head down to QC later if the sciences kept giving her trouble, though, see if Felicity had any spare time to offer help. Then she would head down to the Glades, check on that martial arts class her friend was trying to start up. With any luck, it would be starting up soon. There were a few guys she knew of down there who could do with a little pain thrown back their way.

What she found when she walked out of her room, however, was so very far from what she’d expected, and all of those plans quickly fell away.

Donna was standing at a counter in the kitchen, looking unsure and as worried as Cindy had ever seen her. The woman had her sleep attire on, but it didn’t look like she’d ever actually gotten around to sleeping, what with the dark circles under her eyes and all. When she glanced over to a corner of the living room, Cindy understood why. It wasn’t so much the clothing that stood out, although the jeans and dark jacket were something often more suited to Cindy than the chipper blonde.

Now there were no smiles, no easy jokes or snarky quips or humor twinkling behind her spectacles. Cindy had experienced the ‘after’ of her nightmares, but all of it paled in comparison to the broken person sitting in the corner. Felicity was catatonic, huddled on the floor against the wall and staring straight ahead at their only window with her knees drawn up to her chest. More than just that, though… As long as Cindy had known her, Felicity had always hyper-aware of her surroundings. It was just something she had come to understand, and it was something she attributed to Felicity’s time stranded on that deserted island--an ordeal and result something of which the blonde never actually spoke. But, as the teen slowly crossed the room, Felicity didn’t even blink or turn to acknowledge the movement in her peripherals. It was unnerving to say the least.

“What’s wrong?” Cindy asked Donna in a whisper as she joined the older woman in the kitchen area. Donna shook her head, a hand held over her mouth as she stared out at her daughter, seemingly unsure of what to do.

“I don’t know…” she said, and if it seemed like she was on the verge of tears, Cindy wasn’t going to call her out on it or fault her for it. “She’s been like this since I got home. I made her favorite…”

Donna had never had much money or been much of a cook, so, growing up Felicity’s favorite dinner food had been Spaghettios with slices of microwaved hotdog mixed in--she could never stand the stuff herself, but her daughter had always seemed fond of it. The bowl now sat untouched, and unnoticed, on the floor a pace from her petrified little girl.

“But, she hasn’t even looked at it,” Donna shifted on her feet and folded both of her arms across her chest. “It’s never been this bad before, and I don’t know what to do…”

She swiped at an errant tear that fell as she turned toward the sink, and then Donna tried her best to preoccupy herself by cleaning the few dishes that were piled on the counter. Cindy watched the older woman for a moment before ultimately turning to approach Felicity, who was still sitting catatonic in the corner. Cautiously, she stepped out into the living room. She hadn’t noticed that bowl of Spaghettios earlier, but it was a little difficult not to now. It must have been there for a while because the sauce had started to congeal, leaving the whole thing looking entirely unappealing. She tried not to focus on it.

“Felicity?” the teen asked quietly as she neared, but she didn’t get so much as a blink or a twitch in response.

She was ignorant as to how ill-advised the action was when she crouched down and reached out to place a hand on Felicity’s shoulder, but Donna, who glanced up then from the clamor of her
dishwashing task, was clearly not.

“Cindy, don’t!”

But, it was already too late. The instant Cindy’s fingertips made contact with Felicity’s shoulder, the blonde’s eyes went wide. Before Cindy even knew what was going on, her wrist was snatched in a vise grip, her arm was twisted painfully. The next thing she knew, she was flat on her back, and Felicity’s other hand was around her throat. The blonde’s eyes, usually amused or thoughtful, were a frightening degree of feral, and it was as if something wild had taken over the normally docile woman. If Cindy hadn’t seen it herself, she never would’ve believed that a computer nerd could ever have that kind of look in her eyes.

There was a beat of utter silence, and then Felicity’s eyes went wide. She released Cindy, and the blonde threw herself back into the wall which impeded any further retreat; though she certainly seemed to be trying to push her way through it if only to put more distance between them. Neither of them consciously noticed when Felicity’s hand briefly flew to her own throat, to a forming bruise she would have to hide—fortunately, it was winter, so at least she wouldn’t look terribly out of place in a turtleneck. For her utter surprise at the blonde’s violent reaction to a simple touch on the shoulder, Cindy simply lay where she was, wide-eyed and staring, until Donna came up and helped her to her feet, checking her over for any serious signs of injury.

Felicity’s hands were clamped over her own mouth, and she looked on the verge of both a panic attack and needing to empty her stomach.

“I-I’m so sorry, Cindy. I-I didn’t mean to.”

Rubbing at the sore skin of her throat a little, Cindy gave a dismissive shake of her head and slowly straightened.

“It’s alright,” she said with as much certainty as she could muster. “I’m okay.”

Felicity didn’t seem to believe her because she averted her gaze in shame. She pressed her lips together, and then she removed her glasses and set them beside her and pressed a hand over her eyes as she tried to keep her emotions in check. When this failed, she dropped her forehead onto her knees as she clutched the back of her head with both hands, trying to calm herself down via a seated variation of the fetal position, but it too seemed to do little good because her hands never stopped shaking.

Cindy was frozen in place, completely unsure of what to do because she’d never seen Felicity break down like this before. Donna, however, wasn’t immobilized at all. She eased herself down to the floor to carefully seat herself beside her daughter, although she seemed careful not to actually touch Felicity.

“Felicity, honey, what’s wrong?” she asked softly. “You’ve been doing so well recently.”

Felicity didn’t move, and when she finally spoke her voice was very small and muffled by her knees.

“I guess… some days are just worse than others.”

Donna was still for a moment after hearing this, but then she finally reached out. Felicity flinched when her mother rested a hand on her back, but she didn’t draw away as Donna seemingly expected she might. Instead, Felicity sucked in a sharp breath just before the last of her composure slipped away, and her shoulders shook. Cindy wasn’t sure, but she may have been crying—a first, as far as she’d ever been aware.
With a hand now on either of her daughter’s shoulders, Donna urged her to sit up with a softly spoken, “Baby girl, come here,” and Cindy saw that she was indeed crying. Felicity didn’t reject the offer of comfort. She just curled up next to her mother and held onto her tightly as she broke down. Cindy hesitated only a moment longer for her utter surprise before she wedged herself between Felicity and the wall of the corner. When she, throwing caution to the wind, threw her arms around the younger blonde’s middle with a pointed enthusiasm that was meant to say she wasn’t upset about the earlier incident, Felicity gave a sound that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh and covered her arms with one of her own, so maybe the bear hug was a good option.

Cindy wasn’t aware that this was the first time since her return from the island that Felicity allowed herself to fall apart either alone or in front of anyone, even her mother. Nine months since her return. Nine long months, during which time she’d never let herself dwell on everything that had happened, not for long enough to fall apart and grieve for the pieces of herself that she’d lost. She’d thrown herself into school, into work, and--secretly--into vigilantism, afraid of that horrible but ultimately inevitable point where it would all build too much. She kept pushing it back, hoping it would never come if she worked at it long and hard enough.

But, of course, sometimes a fractured bone had to be re-broken before it could heal properly.
The Youth

Chapter Summary

This week on “Under the Hood”… It’s been almost two months since our hero’s defeat at the hands of his arch nemesis, and his continued silence might’ve just cost him one helpful, if slightly vertically challenged, sword-toting ally. Is it possible that this dark teen with a gnarly chip on her shoulder is his hooded friend, or has he overlooked the obvious answer in bright fuscia? Will this sharpshooting vigilante always be so blind? Only time will tell!

May 28th, 2008:

They had been lead by Mr. Tactical to where he had apparently made camp on the island. Or, whatever the term equivalent was to setting up your living quarters inside the mutilated shell of the plane you crashed in. It was large. Huge, even, and gaping holes in the sides offered non-customary doorways. It looked like it had once been some sort of military transport plane, but Felicity couldn’t say for sure. Crates were stacked against the inside and outside walls with what looked like military insignias printed on the sides. Probably munitions of some kind. The plane was large enough that there might be enough room for all of the survivors to fit inside at night. After all…

Only fifteen of them had made it…

That first day, Mr. 9-to-5 from the beach had approached Mr. Tactical before the man had even gotten to set foot inside his ‘home’.

“Is there a way off this island?”

Mr. Tactical had frozen, and even Felicity, still a little in shock at the time, had been able to pick up on how tense the air had become as he’d slowly turned.

That had not been a friendly look.

“Oh, gee,” Mr. Tactical probably couldn’t have made his tone sound any more sarcastic if he’d tried, “I’ll just get right on that. It’s never occurred to me before this very moment to look. I’ve just been sitting here twiddling my thumbs for the past twenty-two months! But, now that you recommend it, I think I’ll see what I can dig up.”

9-to-5 had shied away after that, and, really, who could blame him. Mr. Tactical’s arms could be featured on one of those workout television shows for their size. Although his response had been a grim sort of amusing, Felicity had to admit, he hadn’t been the most gracious of hosts in the two days since then. Although, to be fair, the survivors couldn’t expect him to feed all fifteen of them. So, he’d given them a few knives and some rope, and three of their troop went out everyday for a little spear fishing while a couple others made routine runs to the river to keep their water canteens filled.

The air marshal who had been instrumental in Felicity surviving the fall from the plane, identified upon her inquiry as Steven Trevor, had been the most proficient of the group at spearfishing, and he was probably the only reason they hadn’t all starved already--Felicity certainly wasn’t much help. He had sort of become the unofficial leader of the plane crash survivors, and everyone seemed ready
enough to follow his orders, trusting he would get them all through this whereas their host seemed less inclined to care. Felicity liked Steven. Not in a cheesy High School ‘I like you’ kind of way or anything, but he was nice. And, he’d saved her life, so there was always that to bolster her opinion of him.

Everyone else had been introduced as well, but she only remembered a few of their names. 9-to-5 was Derek something-or-other, and he worked for some real estate company in Boston—he was also moderately okay at the spearfishing, something about hunting with his father as a child. They had a small-time movie actress whom Felicity didn’t recognize, Carrie Fisher. A business woman, Maria something, One of the flight attendants, Pamela. A male vacationer, Carl, who’d lost his wife—he’d kept mostly to himself the entire time. A couple of female vacationers, Aubrey, and something that started with a K. Four China locals who spoke little English. A pharmacist, Eli Cotes. Last was a teenage girl who had lost her twin sister in the crash. She’d been in tears since they’d all arrived at the fuselage and refused to speak or eat anything. Someone was always sitting with her.

Their less than gracious host, identified only as Slade, and Mistress Archer—mistress in the sense that she was all sure of herself and seemingly quite proficient at using that bow, not in the sense that she was supposedly sleeping with a married guy, which Felicity wouldn’t know—otherwise identified solely as Shado, had segregated themselves from the rest of them, much to the consternation of a number of the survivors. Almost nonstop, the two had been in cahoots, talking in hushed whispers, and both always fell silent whenever they noticed any of the survivors looking their way. Felicity couldn’t say she wasn’t curious as to the topics of their conversations, and she could tell Steven wanted to find out as well. He instead focussed his efforts on his de facto leadership role, but Felicity couldn’t staunch her curiosity as well as he. Whatever it was Slade and Shado were discussing, it was serious. Call it a hunch, but the blonde had a feeling it had something to do with the armed gunmen who had tried to kill them all on the beach. Just a wild guess.

Thinking of the two dead men in the forest, however, Felicity had been too afraid to ask what their plans were.

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January 23, 2013:

Oliver wondered briefly if this would become a habit of his. He wasn’t used to relying on people. He wasn’t used to needing to rely on people. But, his time away hadn’t exactly focussed on the ins and outs of technological-know-how. He could do research on the web, sure, but anything more than that strained his understanding to an infuriating and exponential degree. Hacking into a security group’s secure files was apparently higher on that list than he’d anticipated.

He’d tried asking his anonymous friend for help in cracking it, but the only response he’d gotten was a brief, Bring it to our IT friend. As he walked through the surprisingly crowded floor of QC’s IT department, Oliver thought that perhaps his radio silence had been offensive. The kid had saved his life, and yet he hadn’t once reached out in almost two months, not even to thank him—or ‘her’ as it turned out.

But, if working with people was a foreign concept to him, then gratitude was an even more elusive a companion of his these days, and he wouldn’t—or perhaps just couldn’t—bring himself to say those two simple words. He preferred to think that this stemmed from his lacking capacity to trust, something not aided by the fact that he remembered the kid saying his real name shortly before he’d passed out. The truth was that five years of hell had turned him into a man who was unable to express his gratitude, at least for something as substantial as saving his life.
Oliver also couldn’t deny his lack of disappointment when he was told to give the odd young blonde woman in IT another visit. The vigilante allowed himself one brief moment to ponder over when the last time had been that he’d looked forward to someone’s company—someone who wasn’t either family or intrinsically tied to his past, that is. He’d come to almost appreciate the presence of John Diggle during their time working together, a startling realization, but he didn’t often seek the man out for anything other than matters of vigilantism. It was true, his visit to IT was ultimately to further his current mission, but there was a vague distinction in the back of his mind that told Oliver he might enjoy his time there, even if but a little.

The vigilante was a little surprised, although he himself wasn’t quite sure why, to find that Felicity Smoak was not alone that day when he made it to her small cubicle. She had all of those impressively imposing books open on her desk again, or maybe these were different ones—would this be a new semester?—but the blonde’s amused focus was instead on the teenage girl currently leaning against her desk.

His own attention was quickly drawn to that youth. She was roughly the right height, her attire was similar, and he meant no disrespect by it when he thought she looked like she might be able to handle herself in a fight—it was in the way she carried herself. Oliver recalled how it had been revealed to him that his Anonymous Friend was in fact female, and he thought briefly that this young girl might be the first real prospect he’d come across as a candidate. That she was speaking with Felicity, whom his friend had put him into contact with, only added to the list of supporting reasons.

Felicity noticed him first, and, given that her chair had been turned to put her back to him, Oliver noted this as odd until he remembered that she’d been stranded on an island for almost four years—four years that had probably seemed much longer to her than to others. Some instincts, especially those dealing with survival, weren’t so quick to fade with time.

The smile the woman gave upon seeing him again was earnest—in a way he previously would’ve thought impossible for a person who’d been through what she had—and Oliver thought Felicity looked a bit better than she had the last time he’d seen her. Time back in civilization must’ve been doing her some good because she seemed to be carrying a little less proverbial weight on her shoulders. He appreciated the fact more than he should have—he’d only met her once, after all.

“I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever see you again,” Felicity said in greeting, and now the youth beside her looked up upon realizing the two were no longer alone—or as alone as two people could be on a crowded office floor. The amused smirk she’d previously been wearing slipped away.

The look she then gave Oliver didn’t speak highly of her opinion of him, and he thought again of how he’d failed to thank his friend for saving his life.

“Cin, this is—”

“Oliver Queen,” the girl said with so much lacking enthusiasm, it almost seemed like a conscious effort. “Even lowly street kids like me know about Starling’s Lost Heir.”

Felicity gave the girl an odd look, her eyebrows furrowed and her lips pursed just a little in thought.

“Right…” she mused aloud, and she observed the youth silently for a moment longer before getting back on track with her introductions and turning another smile on Oliver. “Well, Mr. Que-er, Oliver, this moody teen here is Cind—”

“Sin!” the girl insisted as she cast a mild glare in Felicity’s direction, and the subtle roll of the teen’s eyes told Oliver this had not been the first time the blonde had failed to introduce her as such.
Felicity breathed out a small sigh, but she was grinning as though amused. “Sin,” she relented with an even subtler eye roll. The girl hardly seemed appeased, and Oliver wondered if it was his presence alone that had completely soured her mood—she’d been smiling as he’d approached. “She was just—”

“Leaving.”

The girl’s sudden and curt declaration seemed to surprise Felicity because her eyes, once with a faint twinkle in them, lost that mirth in lieu of confusion and mild irritation. Oliver stepped aside as ‘Sin’ brushed past him without even a sidelong glance, hefting a backpack onto her shoulder as she went.

“Wait—” Felicity called after her, looking like she had no idea how the situation had curdled so quickly, and then she cast an apologetic glance Oliver’s way. “I’m sorry, I’ll be right back.”

Oliver nodded his head in approval at her slightly pleading tone, and then the blonde was off, hurrying after the young girl.

“Cindy,” she called, and he heard the footsteps of the teen’s sneakered—shoes were not unlike Converse—feet come to a halt, shortly followed by Felicity’s flats as the woman reached her. “What about your homework?”

“Nah, it’s cool,” the girl dismissed, and Oliver could almost hear the shrug in her tone. “I’ll just do it later or something.”

The girl turned to leave then, which Oliver glimpsed as he discreetly glanced over his shoulder, and he saw Felicity catch Sin’s arm before she could take so much as a step.

“No, don’t—” Felicity sighed again as her shoulders dipped a little, and this time the sound was devoid of mirth. “This meeting shouldn’t take very long, okay? Just…” She motioned for the girl to wait a moment, and when she received a nod of approval, she turned back towards her desk.

Oliver looked up at her approach, trying to pass off the notion that he hadn’t been eavesdropping, and Felicity offered him a nervous smile as she passed him by, which he returned politely. She crouched down and retrieved her purse from where she apparently kept it stashed under her desk. She removed what appeared to be half of the minimal funds lying inside, and then she was retracing her steps back to where Cindy, or ‘Sin’ was waiting.

“Go get something to eat,” Felicity said as she held out the money. “I’ll let you know when we’re done.”

Cindy hesitated but ultimately nodded and took the bills, and then she turned to leave.

“And you’d better get me one of those burgers,” Felicity called after her, and she looked at the girl over the top of her glasses as she pointed with a playful threat, “or I’m hunting you down.”

Cindy actually laughed. “Yeah, I will.”

Interesting. They almost seemed like… family, and yet he didn’t recall seeing note of any siblings during his background check on Felicity.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Q—Oliver,” Felicity said with an embarrassed laugh as she approached her desk again, and he turned to her.

“It’s no trouble,” he said with one of his charming smiles, quirked a little on one side more than the other, and the blonde blushed a little before sitting at her desk, swivelling her chair to face him.
“Friend of yours?”

“I guess you could say Cindy’s more of an adopted sister,” Felicity said with a smile. “She likes to be called ‘Sin’, as you heard, which is utterly ridiculous to me, so I compromise and call her ‘Cin’.”

Her cheeks colored in embarrassment as she realized the catch 22 in this statement.

“I know they sound the same, but they’re not,” she was quick to explain, clearly flustered. “One has an ‘S’ and the other has a ‘C’. It’s the only way I can say it with a straight face.”

She looked ready to continue on about the subject, but then she took one look at Oliver’s brow—quirked in something he realized was almost akin to amusement—took a deep breath and said, “Anyway, she comes down for help sometimes when her homework gives her trouble.”

Oliver wondered briefly if homework was the only thing the teen went to the computer specialist for help on, but he kept the question to himself.

“Speaking of which,” Felicity said, and then she straightened her back a little and ran a hand over her slacks as if smoothing out a wrinkle that Oliver couldn’t see. “What can I help you with?”

Oliver gave her his perfunctory business smile, all teeth and devoid of mirth around the eyes, and pulled the Blackhawk security fob out of his pocket. The mysterious device sparked intrigue in the blonde’s eyes, and she quirked her head a little to the side in a subconscious motion of curiosity.

“Well, a buddy of mine is running a scavenger hunt,” the vigilante began, and Felicity actually seemed a little amused by this.

“Is this the same friend who’s all into archery?”

Oddly enough, the look she was giving him, as well as that twinkle of something nondescript in her eye, gave Oliver the distinct notion that Felicity knew more than she was letting on. And then he realized something he really should have noticed sooner. If Cindy was indeed his Anonymous Friend—which was still an ‘if’—was there a chance…

Could Felicity know who he was?

“Are rich people really that bored?”

Oliver’s suspicions didn’t fade when she asked this. Not entirely. He was nothing if not cautious, and he resolved silently to ask if his friend had told Felicity last Christmas that the Hood would be bringing an arrow by. It had, after all, not been the Hood who had paid her a visit. And, just after that visit, his friend might have used his real name—he still wasn’t entirely positive on this last part because he’d been struggling at the time to remain conscious, and Cindy’s dislike of him could be just that.

“More like, ‘hard to entertain’,” Oliver supplied aloud. On the off chance that Felicity didn’t actually know about his nightly crusade, he needed to keep up his charade. “Anyway, the prize is a case of Lafite Rothschild 1982.”

Oliver was distracted from saying anything further when Felicity, eyes wide, mouthed an awed ‘Oooh’.

“Sorry,” she breathed out with a nervous smile when she realized she’d inadvertently interrupted him again. “I love red wine.”
She sounded so earnest about it that Oliver quirked his head a little in mild surprise that she would just offer up this admittedly small piece of information to a man only slightly more than a stranger. It did, however, give him an idea.

“I tell you what. If you can get into the drive, one of those bottles of wine is yours.”

Felicity’s eyes went wide. “Are you serious?” When Oliver gave a simple nod in response, she got this expression that said she couldn’t believe her luck. “Alright, you’ve got a deal. Let’s do it before you change your mind!”

Oliver didn’t hear it at first. It seemed Felicity, however, had because her eyes went wide, this time in horror, the instant the words left her lips.

“Oh my God! I just heard how that might sound, and I swear I wasn’t-”

Felicity was waving her hands in front of her like she was trying to ward off his wrath.

“I don’t want you to think I’m trying to in any way make a pass at you or anything.”

Oliver couldn’t help but quirk his eyebrow up a notch because he just then realized how she must have heard her own previous comment, and she clearly misunderstood this expression from him because she continued, greatly flustered.

“I mean, that’s not to say you’re not attractive ‘cause, y’know,” she said with a motion to his person in general which she probably thought was enough clarification on its own—and if he was being honest, he knew perfectly well what she meant. “It’s obvious why girls tend to fall all over you, and-”

Oliver’s eyebrow went up a little higher, and he was pretty sure he was even grinning. Not one of the multitude of facade-furthering but ultimately fictitious smiles he was used to giving, but an honest, sneaks-up-on-you-when-you-least-expect-it smile. Felicity, on the other hand, looked absolutely mortified. She took in a deep breath, clasping her hands in front of her face, and in a mutter she slowly counted back from three.

“I’m sorry. Please, can we forget everything I just said?”

Oliver gave a small nod, aware that he was still smiling a little, but he couldn’t quite seem to stop. Felicity’s shoulders sagged in visible relief. The pause that followed was slightly awkward, though only because Oliver felt like he should say something but wasn’t quite sure what that something was. In the end, he decided he should leave before he, heaven forbid, started to make small talk.

“Well, I should probably make myself scarce.”

Felicity couldn’t quite hide her disappointed when he said this, and Oliver tried not to read too much into it. How much of a recluse was she, he wondered, if she appreciated his mute and admittedly ridiculous-favor-oriented company?

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t want to keep your friend waiting.”

“Oh…” Felicity hid her dejection better that time but only marginally so. “Well, I’ll let you know when I’ve cracked this thing,” she said as she held up the security fob.

As he turned to leave, after offering a quiet farewell, Oliver glimpsed a picture on Felicity’s desk,
one that hadn’t been sitting there last time he’d visited. It was obviously taken by Felicity herself, who was also in the shot with the ‘moody teen’ and an older blonde woman he could only assume to be Felicity’s mother given the vague familial resemblance. In the picture, a ‘selfie’ if he understood the term correctly, her assumed mother was posing with pursed lips, and Cindy, or ‘Sin’, was in between them rolling her eyes while Felicity appeared to be cheering while pointing to a Menorah that took up most of the space over their heads, all candles lit. It was in that moment that Oliver learned that Felicity Smoak was probably Jewish.

The young girl, however, Cindy, captured most of his immediate attention. She was curious… He had encountered people like her before, people who disliked him because he’d had the fortune of being born into an obscenely wealthy family, but he found himself wondering if there wasn’t something more to the mild disdain he’d seen in her gaze the moment she’d set her eyes on him. After all, the girl was just about the right height. She’d known his name instantly, a fact that wasn’t so extraordinary on its own but added to his suspicions when in context with everything else. And she was clearly acquainted with Felicity, the woman his anonymous friend had sent him to—and thus the only link between them beyond that stripped laptop. Not to mention the fact that she could be learning about software engineering from Felicity, explaining how his friend had skills in that area but deferred to Felicity for seemingly more complicated tasks.

He would look for further signs that this ‘Sin’ could be his Anonymous Friend. He’d certainly encountered stranger things than a girl her age possessing above average skills in combat.

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May 28th, 2008:

On the morning of their second day stranded, Felicity was returning to camp from the river with a meager peace offering of water, which she rarely saw either Slade or Shado retrieve. She found them inside the fuselage, seemingly finished with their scheming for the day, but the gruff Australian was clearly irritated, his arms folded harshly across his chest and a scowl twisting his rugged features, as their resident bowoman sat hunched over a table, working intently on something Felicity couldn’t see.

“I told you, that radio’s not going to work,” Slade snapped, and instantly Felicity was alert. She’d never heard something quite so beautiful before.

She’d had a radio.

Trying to peek around Shado, who seemed to be pointedly ignoring Slade’s frustrated comment in lieu of her focus, she saw that it was indeed true. Sitting on the table was a large radio system that was in possibly the saddest shape she had ever seen—it was painful just to look at it.

“Not even your father could get that thing working, and he was much better at it than I am. I highly doubt they covered radios at doctor school, so what do you hope to accomplish?”

Filing away the slightly horrifying knowledge that a woman who could fire arrows into people with a startling degree of accuracy was supposed to become a **doctor**, Felicity stepped forward and cleared her throat. She regretted it instantly when Slade and Shado both whipped around, Slade pulling a large and angry looking knife from his hip while Shado pulled a simpler yet surely just as deadly knife from her boot. Felicity hastily retreated a step, hoping desperately that neither of them could tell how close she’d just come to soiling herself as two proven killers turned weapons on her. They both recognized her in short order, however, and lowered their death threats.
“It’s not wise to sneak up on anyone who’s armed, kid,” Slade said, his sourness from his irritation with Shado turning on her now.

At the same time, the look Mistress Archer was giving her told Felicity that she didn’t like her very much, although at least she was silent about it. Then again, maybe they were just tired and in a sour mood given that they were all stranded on an island with nameless gunmen who were trying to kill them. Felicity was certainly not ready to parade through the forest in celebration of this unplanned vacation from hell. Either way, it was of ill-consequence, so she paid the woman’s mild glare and Slade’s more open one little mind. Turning her attention back to the radio, the MIT almost-graduate knew they had bigger things to worry about than personal disputes.

There was a broken radio that needed fixing.
Tonight on Under the Hood… Our hero comes face to face with his anonymous friend again. Will he ever ask her to go steady, or will this budding vigilante be so stubborn that he’s forced to go stag to all of his crime fighting events? Does it matter when Felicity invites herself to all of the gallas and armored car robberies anyway? Or is it possible this crime fighting duo is already exclusive without even realizing it?

May 28th, 2008:

“Let me look at it,” Felicity said. Then she flinched and quickly added, “The radio,” just in case there was any possibility whatsoever of any confusion over what she meant by ‘it’.

And she might’ve said that last part out loud given the squinty-eyed look she got from Mr. Great Arms Tactical. Fortunately, he made no comment, much to her dignity’s alleviation.

Slade folded his impressive arms across his also quite massive chest and gave her a look that, although not disliking as the woman’s was, didn’t speak highly of his opinion of her value in terms of potential contributions. To be fair, his only real impression of her was a horrifyingly cliched loss of footing and a mild mental breakdown.

“No offense, kid, but what will even an MIT applicant be able to do that hasn’t been tried in almost two years by either me or my friend?”

Felicity tried not to be offended. She really di- No, that was a lie. She was offended, and she had every right to be.

What was it with people and fixating on her age?

“I’m not an applicant,” she all but growled. “I’m not even an undergrad. I’ll have you know, I bought this shirt when I was a Freshman three years ago. I got my Bachelor’s Degree last fall, and I’m set to get my Master’s this semester!”

Slade’s eyebrow slid upward along his temple at the bravado of her unintentionally challenging tone. No, really, no need to go all ‘grr’ on the little computer girl. She was just a little snippy, and it gave her ‘tude, especially where her qualifications were concerned. So, really, no need for trouble.

Yet, Slade actually seemed impressed by something--either her accomplishment when coupled with her age or the gusto in such a little girl taking such a defensive tone with his very intimidating self. Even Shado’s scowl let up for a genuine look of fascination.

“How old are you?” she asked, and Felicity shifted on her feet, a familiar sense of self-consciousness creeping up on her.

Always the first question…

“Eighteen,” she supplied, but she was quick to add, “Almost nineteen. …In a month.”
Right… Her Birthday was coming up, and here she was… She really hoped she wouldn’t still be stuck here by then, but if this guy had been stranded here for almost two years…

Slade at last gave a slight nod of approval and began to turn as he said, “Alright, kid-”

“Felicity.”

The man paused and then blinked, thrown for a loop, and he turned his eyes back on her.

“What?”

The man honestly didn’t seem to understand what was irritating her, and Felicity folded her arms over the large proud letters of ‘MIT’ printed in bold white font on her shirt before answering him with a slight eye roll.

“Stop calling me, ‘kid’. My name’s Felicity. Felicity Smoak.”

The man paused a moment after that, and Felicity knew she was being sized up then. It was… unsettling to say the least, but at the end of it he seemed to hold her in slightly higher regard.

“Slade Wilson,” was his reply in kind, and-

Seriously?

“Wilson?” Felicity couldn’t keep the disbelief from her tone. “Your name’s Wilson, and you’re stranded on an island?”

The man was clearly confused by the small amount of amusement she found in this fact.

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason,” the blonde quickly amended. After all, the man had a gun—and a sword, she had since noticed—so it was probably a good idea to avoid offending him if at all possible. “Just… wondering if you’ve got Tom Hanks stashed in one of those crates.”

He didn’t seem to get why this was funny to her because Slade gave her another odd look—or rather, a look that said she was odd—and turned to his busted radio as Shado vacated her seat. She didn’t seem tickled by the laughable coincidence either, and the blonde sighed.

Then again, no one ever seemed to get most of the things Felicity said.

She knew he wouldn’t be bringing it to the police. A part of her is still bummed that his scavenger hunt story turned out to be just that—though, to be honest, she shouldn’t even be allowed to look at a wine that expensive let alone drink it. The armored truck company, on the other hand, had filed a report with the police the night previous. Apparently, Oliver had managed to take one of the thieves down. The man had been carried offsite by his buddies, according to the report, and the simple fact remains that they had gotten away. Oliver ruined their payday, so logic holds that they’ll try again as soon as possible. They might even be a man down.

That’s why she’s doing something drastic.

Observing the route that would be taken by the truck, she’d discovered that it was to drive under a low overpass just after a turn. It was moving slow, and the drop wasn’t high enough to set off a panic
attack—one boon, she supposes, to having somehow survived a fall from 10,000 feet. She’d always loved science experiments growing up, and the passion never quite faded entirely—though she still prefers her computers. Felicity only hopes this electromagnetic handle she made from that junkyard microwave’s transformer won’t give out on her.

There isn’t really another handhold on top of this truck.

She’s not sure when the Blackhawk guys—which is a super lame name, by the way—will make their move. They must have detected her hack the day previous because they stopped putting their plans up on their online database. Which they shouldn’t have done anyway because they were just begging to be caught by someone like her. Anyway, the point is that she’s not sure how long it will be until-

Oh, hey, that’s probably their guy out in the road now. Who else would be standing in the middle of the street, right? Now, where are the other-

Wait, don’t they use grenade launchers to bring the trucks down?

Frak.

Of course, it’s as Felicity realizes this that the truck driver swerves in hopes of avoiding any attack from Grenade Guy. She loses her grip on the electromagnetic handle—but, hey, it doesn’t fail, so ‘yay science’—and tumbles over the side as the driver swerves again to avoid the cars parked along the side of the road. She barely manages to get her feet under her before she hits the ground, although her sideways momentum turns the landing into a graceless sideways tumble, and her back collides hard with the rear wheel of a black van. The screeching of wheels as the armored truck peels away makes one thing clear to Felicity.

But, why hadn’t Grenade Guy pulled the trigger?

Felicity turns over onto her stomach and shakes her head to clear some of the dizziness before she props herself up on her hands and knees and looks up.

Oh. It seems her impromptu—and magnificently graceless—fall has surprised Grenade Guy. He’s staring at her and, at least for now, that explosive ordnance launcher is pointed at the ground. Felicity doesn’t want to take her chances that this will remain the case, however, so she quickly draws and levels on him her .38 glock. Of course, this only lasts until he, in response to this action from her, removes his gas mask.

Mr. Diggle?

To say Felicity hadn’t been expecting this is like saying she was surprised to learn that Michael Jackson had died while she was ‘away’. Surprise doesn’t begin to cut it.

Before she can begin contemplate the reasons as to why Oliver’s bodyguard is involved in armored car heists, the doors of the van she’s crouched next to are opening. Felicity hides her gun under her arm to keep any light from glinting off of the ejection port and ducks her head, thus making herself appear as a mere shadow in the van’s side mirror. Too much movement will draw attention to her, so she just has to hope they’re upset enough with Mr. Diggle that they don’t notice her.

They don’t, thank her lucky starships.

One man gets out of the driver’s seat, and a second and then a third hop out of the back of the van—she’s really surprised one of them didn’t notice her—but it’s when a woman, bound at the wrists and vaguely familiar to her, gets out behind them that Felicity realizes what must be going on.
“You shouldn’t have done that, Dig,” says the second man, an impressively tall African-American, as he snatches the woman’s arm and removes a pistol from his hip holster. She squeals, and Felicity has absolutely no right to judge her when the woman begins to cry as the pistol’s muzzle is placed against her temple. “Now you get to watch me kill your pretty little girlfriend.”

Oh, hell no.

Threatening-the-hostage Guy—or rather, TthG, as he will be forever known to her--goes completely still when Felicity places the muzzle of her own glock against the back of his head--or at least as well as she can given how freakishly tall he is and how vertically challenged she is by comparison. It’s fortunate for her that he’s in the back of the group. The other two put some distance between them as they continue to approach Mr. Diggle, not even notice she’s there.

Well, not until she speaks, that is.

“Evening, boys.”

The two men spin around, automatic rifles at the ready, and Felicity is glad she’s mostly concealed behind their guy because they don’t notice the way she flinches. TthG seems to misinterpret her flinch because he grits his teeth as she inadvertently presses her firearm a little firmer into the back of his head, but then maybe this is to her advantage because the other two guys go still, thinking it a threat as well.

“I hate to interrupt, but- No, wait, that was a lie.” Felicity gives a small, synthesized laugh, and Mr. Diggle furrows his brow a little. “I mean, how often do you have the chance to get the drop on a Special Forces guy, which is what I’m assuming you all are. Hey, Mr. Freakishly Tall,” she addresses her own hostage because he’s getting ideas, she just knows it. “Drop it.”

After a reluctant pause, he does so, his pistol clattering to the ground at their feet. Thankfully, the safety is on, so the very rare chance of it going off on impact is nullified.

“You know,” Felicity says then, slightly amused, as she watches Mr. Diggle smirk, “you guys really shouldn’t be paying attention to me.”

“Why’s that?” says the older of the two other Blackhawk guys from behind his scope.

“Well,” Felicity offers a shrug, “I’ve only got the one gun.”

“And because you gave me the grenade launcher.”

Felicity is so happy Mr. Diggle has taken her verbal cue. She can’t even express how happy she is. Now she sort of gets why superheroes make jokes. It distracts the enemy, and it’s super fun and amusing for her.

The men realize their mistake too late, and seriously? They gave him a friggin’ grenade launcher. It’s just poetic justice when he uses that very weapon on these morons. The grenade blows at the feet of the two other men, and, wow, even the gas grenade packs quite the punch because even Felicity, TthG, and Mr. Diggle’s girlfriend are sent stumbling back. TthG loses his grip on the woman, and she flees--hooray! Felicity has her gun up again and trained on TthG as he turns to her, but she should really look into getting something less damaging because she never wants to use it.

The older Blackhawk guy—the younger one looks down for the count—although disoriented, manages to make a break for it, running after the woman. Mr. Diggle moves to follow, but he hesitates when he sees Felicity’s standoff with TthG.
“Hey, don’t let me keep you,” she says.

Mr. Diggle hesitates only a moment longer, and then he’s sprinting after his girlfriend and the Blackhawk guy. This leaves Felicity alone with the largest man in the trio, and she thinks briefly that she might come to regret sending her only ally away.

“I don’t suppose you’ll just handcuff yourself for me? Make my job easier?” she asks, and this amuses TthG because he seems to realize she was never actually going to shoot him—with his body armor, her only viable target to bring him down is his head, and she really doesn’t want to accidentally hit an artery in any limbs.

He moves to pick up the pistol he’d dropped, and, with a frustrated groan, Felicity shoves her own weapon back into its holster. TthG seems less amused when she pulls the sword from her back, and he draws back with a shout of alarm and pain when she slashes his arm that’s reaching for his fallen weapon, cutting through his sleeve with the sharpened tip of the blade and slashing the skin beneath. But, he catches her next slash with his hand because, hey, he’s wearing heavy-duty military gloves, and the rest of the blade is pretty dull. He tries to wrench the katana from her hands, and he almost succeeds, but Felicity delays the action by sweeping her leg around and hitting that tender nerve in the back of his knee—well, anyone’s knee, not just his, but it’s his in this particular case. TthG’s knee buckles, and the hooded blonde punches him in the face with her admittedly non-dominant hand—she still has to hold on to the sword, after all.

_Damn_ , his jaw is solid. Not to mention he knows how to take a hit and thus doesn’t go down. Felicity’s hand, alternatively, is numb where it isn’t on fire. Then TthG takes his turn at a punch, landing a solid fist in her stomach hard enough to double her over, and he shoves her back into the side of a car, slipping the katana from her slackened grasp as he does so. She bounces off the car and lands on her back on the pavement, and lights flash before her eyes as Felicity struggles for a moment to catch her breath, which had just been forcibly vacated from her lungs.

TthG stands and wipes a little blood from the corner of his mouth, courtesy of her meager punch. He then casts a cursory glance to the confiscated sword in his hand before tossing it aside, and he slides his automatic rifle out from behind him. It’s literally _strapped_ to him, and she wonders why he hadn’t gone for it before. Felicity reaches for the flash grenade in her pocket, her only way to get out of this now. She gets her hand around it and is ready to pull it and press the activation button even as she realizes she’ll be just a fraction of a second too slow in doing so.

But, then an arrow hits that automatic rifle just before it’s level with her. The ricochet is violent, and TthG all but drops the weapon and shouts in alarm.

Oh, thank God!

With a deep sigh of relief, Felicity drops her head to the pavement in a brief moment of respite, and then she curls her knees up to her chest and throws her feet out. The momentum brings her upright in a crouch, and she lashes out with her foot in a counterclockwise sweep. She clips TthG in the back of that same knee again, and this time she hits him across the face with her glock instead of her fist—which is still a little numb. He hits the pavement hard, out cold, and Felicity breathes another sigh of relief as she bends to rest her hands on her knees.

She should probably start going to the gym if she plans on doing this more often.

“Thanks for that,” she says, still slightly breathless, as a hooded and leather clad Oliver Queen joins her, striding out of the billowing smoke of Diggle’s earlier grenade like a badass.

Which he is, and she’s never been quite so happy to see him before.
“What are you doing here?” he asks, and he’s using his ‘grr’ voice, the one he always seems to use whenever he’s ‘hooded up’. “I told you to leave this work to those with more experience.”

Felicity nods and stands, putting her gun away again and retrieving her tactical katana.

“And now I am,” she says as she sheathes the katana and turns to leave. “Have fun.” She has absolutely no desire to stay out here longer than she needs to, and now that she knows Oliver is here, she can go. “You should probably go help your friend. They ran that way.”

“I know,” Oliver growls, and he’s already heading that way when she turns around to look--he’s really got that Pepe le Pieu jaunt down, walking yet his targets never seem to outrun him.

She hears sirens in the distance, however, so Felicity hurries off into the shadows of a nearby alley to make herself scarce.

Diggle was staying with Carly to answer questions about the night’s events, about how John had been looking to help a friend in his business adventure but had then been blackmailed into helping when Blackhawk’s true schemes had come to light. Oliver had barely made it out of the area in time to avoid an altercation with the police, but disappearing into the shadows was something he was well-versed in. His bike wasn’t far, and he still had some time left that night to scour the names on the List for his most viable next target. With any luck, he could start on his recon before daylight struck.

“How’s the girlfriend?”

Oliver spun around, knocking an arrow in swift and practiced fashion and bringing his bow to bear, and he came face to face with his hooded ‘friend’ who apparently hadn’t left earlier as he’d originally thought. The girl had her hands up to show she was unarmed but otherwise gave no reaction to him pointing a weapon at her, no ducking orshying away.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on me,” the archer admonished as he lowered his weapon. “I’m armed. I could’ve killed you.” Just after he said this, he heard a breath of a laugh through the girl’s synthesizer, and he felt his eyes narrow because nothing about that statement had been humorous.

“You’re not the first person to say that to me, actually,” Sin said, and Oliver noted consciously how she’d since switched over to using overlapped female tones instead of the gender neutral ones she’d just been using out on the street--so, not hiding from him anymore that she was indeed female. “But, I really didn’t mean to.”

This implication, that she could make so little sound without meaning to, was of great intrigue to Oliver, and he wondered where someone as young as he expected she may be had learned such a skill.

“I guess small size has some perks after all,” Sin continued with a nonchalant shrug, but the archer was skeptical of her dismissal. “Anyway, you never answered my question. How’s the woman they kidnapped?”

“She’s fine,” Oliver supplied, short and succinct because this girl didn’t even know Carly, and the woman deserved her privacy after the harsh night she’d had.

Sin paused, seeming unsure, as if she thought he might elaborate, but when she realized he no inclination to do so, she switched tactics and asked, “How about you?”
That question being directed his way yet again after so many similar occurrences in the past two months quickly soured Oliver’s mood, but the girl didn’t seem to notice. His irritation shoved aside all of his previous concerns that his ‘friend’ may have been frustrated by his lack of communication— which it actually seemed like it might not have.

“I haven’t heard from you since the night with that archer from Evil Incorporated, and you haven’t been prowling the streets in all your leather-clad, arrow-shooting glory.”

This girl was strange, he noted briefly.

“How’s your spine?”

“It’s fine.”

Oliver’s tone was short and clipped, and Sin tilted her head as if this comment had irritated her a little bit.

“Well, don’t use all the words in the English language.” Even through her synthesizer, the archer could detect the undercurrent of monotonous snark in the girl’s tone, but the stubborn part of him reaffirmed the notion that he didn’t owe her anything, answers of his condition included. “It’s not like I need to see the medical records or hear of all the horrible jello you probably had to eat in the hospital, but you had two arrows right next to your spine. For a while, I thought you might’ve been paralyzed, and I’ve just been… worried, is all.”

This drew Oliver up short because her body language spoke of sincerity, even if the synthesizer kept it somewhat from her tone. Obviously, it made sense that she was curious. The girl had thrown her own life on the line for his, so naturally she would want to know it hadn’t all been for nought. But, for her to be worried? He’d been little more than dismissive of her when she served no purpose for his mission—he’d been quite an ass, honestly. He’d certainly given her no reason to concern herself with his well being.

Sin fidgeted as the silence between them dragged on, Oliver unsure of how to respond, and, as if embarrassed, she glanced away briefly.

“Not in a ‘worried girlfriend’ kind of way or a ‘you owe me an update’ kind of way, which you don’t because you don’t even know me, and I get that.”

Except that she’d saved his life, a voice in the back of his mind so unhelpfully supplied, stirring something unpleasant in him. Shame, his mind rebelled again to inform him.

“I do get it,” Sin reiterated then, stuffing her gloved hands into the pockets of her jacket to keep them from fidgeting further, silencing his thoughts. “For so long, you’ve relied on yourself, on just yourself, and the idea of needing help, of needing to rely on someone other than yourself…” She shifted, and somehow Oliver understood that these weren’t just hypotheticals she was speaking in. “It’s terrifying.”

This was something he had never let himself put into words, even in his own mind, and yet Oliver couldn’t argue with the validity of the notion. Because it was terrifying. He’d told himself for months that he worked alone because he couldn’t trust anyone else’s judgement. They would make mistakes. He couldn’t control them. Anyone else was a wildcard in his plans, and he couldn’t allow that. Even now, on the rare occasions that Diggle actually came out into the field with him, they were often operating separately, handling locations different enough to keep them out of each other’s direct path—say opposite sides of a warehouse that his adversary had holed himself up in.
The hard truth was that he was afraid to trust.

“I feel it too,” Sin said, and Oliver was a little surprised because she never gave any indications that this was true.

To his mind, she’d always seemed naively trusting, reaching out to him easily. He also found he was frustrated because he didn’t understand why the girl was doing this, offering up these little pieces of herself to him, little truths he had no right to. To build a rapport, find some common ground? What was her motive?

“Every time we meet up, a part of me expects a trap, expects that I’ll need to duck and run like I’ve had to for so long. But, then I remind myself that I don’t need to feel like that anymore, that this is the real world and not the purgatory I’ve been stuck in for years. I don’t need to hide from everything.”

There was a pause, and Oliver, even skeptical as he was, could feel the gravity of the words that followed even before Sin spoke them.

“I want to trust you,” she admitted.

This comment was a monumental one. Oliver knew this because he felt the same way. The side of him that wasn’t jaded and scarred wanted to be able to trust again. He wanted to trust his sister with little truths about his time away that she desperately wanted to know about, even if he couldn’t bring himself to share the horrible things that had shaped him the most into this damaged person he’d become. He wanted to trust his mother with the truth of his return, with the path his father had set him on in his last moments. He wanted to trust Tommy with Laurel because Tommy wasn’t broken. She deserved someone whose only respite from the emptiness and rage that often consumed him wasn’t found by throwing some of his pain back at the world. He wanted to trust Diggle with more than just his crusade, with what might be the stirrings of friendship, because there were few men he’d ever known to be as good. He wanted to trust this girl in front of him who, however unknown to him she was, had helped him whenever he’d asked and had even saved his sorry ass when the devil knew it didn’t deserve saving.

He wanted to trust.

“So, maybe just… try and remember that too?” It came out as a question, but the girl’s shades remained level with his gaze, implying the statement wasn’t as unsure as it had sounded. “You don’t have to do this alone anymore either. I want to help. And I’m guessing tall dark and handsome back there does too. Especially after you helped save his girlfriend.”

“She’s not.”

Oliver didn’t know why he said it, and the girl just seemed confused when he did.

“What?” Sin asked, tilting her head again but this time in befuddlement.

The archer hesitated. Why had he let that slip? The girl’s shades remained level with his gaze, implying the statement wasn’t as unsure as it had sounded. “You don’t have to do this alone anymore either. I want to help. And I’m guessing tall dark and handsome back there does too. Especially after you helped save his girlfriend.”

“She’s not his girlfriend. She’s his brother’s widow.”

There was a long pause, or maybe it just felt long to him because this was very unfamiliar territory. Sin just stared at him, and Oliver hated being unable to read her expression because it was like trying to shoot his bow with one hand tied to his foot. Was she just as surprised by his attempt at smalltalk as he was?
“Oh,” she eventually said. “Well… That’s awkward.”

Oliver almost laughed, and this too bewildered him because she was the second person that day to almost make him express any sort of amusement.

“It is,” he agreed, and he was sincere in this sentiment because Diggle situation with Carly was, among many other things, awkward.

For the first time, Oliver wondered if Walter had ever felt the same about pursuing a relationship with his mother, the wife of the man’s now deceased best friend.

A lengthy, tense pause followed because their conversation seemed to be drawing to a close, and Oliver no longer excelled at such things. Or, maybe he’d never been as charming as he’d thought. Maybe everyone had just bent over backwards to make him think he’d charmed them because of his family ties. There was no real way to be sure.

“Just don’t forget that some people really do want to help,” Sin broke the silence to say, reiterating her previous point, and then she shifted again before asking, “See you around?”

Oliver felt himself nod, and then Synth, the strange girl who had inserted herself into his life, was gone, walking off down the alley, apparently feeling no need to lurk in the shadows this time as she did so. He stood there for several more moments, lost in thought, until he heard the sounds of approaching voices, undoubtedly beat cops scouring the area for any traces of the vigilante duo who had intervened in the armed truck robbery. Oliver forced his mind to empty as he fled the area, and he made his way back to Verdant, still intent on finding another target from the List as per his earlier plan. In the end, however, he just sat at the desk, staring at his bow and lost in thoughts stirred by everything the girl had said to him.

Could he do it? Could he learn to put asside that cautious side of him, the side that had allowed him to survive the past five years? More importantly, would it compromise his mission to open himself up to other people? If so, did that matter as much as it should?

Did he want to try anyway?

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May 28th, 2008:

“So, you’re saying it won’t work.”

“I’m saying it can’t work,” Felicity corrected Slade. “I’m not exactly an expert on radio systems to begin with--I’m more of a computer girl, myself--but this thing’s been too damaged. I might be able to get it to receive a signal, but it’ll never get it up enough to send one again in the poor shape it’s in, at least not while I’m without my tools or viable replacement parts.”

Slade leaned back on his haunches and looked pensive as he folded his massive arms across his chest again.

“Maybe that’s for the best for now,” he said eventually, and Felicity turned an incredulous look on him. “Even if we were able to get a signal out, there’s still the problem of Edward Fyers’ monster machine. He’d likely shoot down any rescue that came our way. Witnesses are the last thing he wants.”

Oh, right…
“What do you mean, ‘monster machine’?” Felicity was almost afraid to ask, even though she already knew the answer and was just unwilling to accept it.

“You didn’t think it was an accident that brought your plane down, did you?”

And just like that, Felicity couldn’t lie to herself anymore. The affirmation was more gut wrenching than it probably should’ve been.

They had been shot out of the sky.

Almost two hundred people had been murdered.

“No…” Felicity said in soft resignation. “I supposed I didn’t.”

Felicity finds a box on her desk the morning after next. It’s a little longer than a shoebox and just as wide. She’s a little paranoid at first because she hasn’t ordered anything online, and she doesn’t know anyone who would leave her a gift. Hesitating like she thinks it will bite her, she reaches for the folded white card sitting on top. Her curiosity eventually beats out her cautious side, and she flips it open. Inside are three words, written in an italic scrawl that’s a strange mixture of messy and elegant, and she’s relieved when she reads them because the box isn’t from someone unknown to her.

Thanks anyway,

Oliver

Oh.

She can’t believe for a moment that he would bother to thank her for her minor role in the previous night’s events—as far as he knew, anyway—because he still hadn’t thanked her hooded counterpart for nearly dying on his behalf two months ago. Of course, she knows it’s the monumental things that are more difficult to broach as far as expressing gratitude goes, and there’s still a trust issue in that he doesn’t know who she is under that hood. But, she wonders if this is a good sign, him reaching out to thank someone who’s little more than a stranger to him, and she also wonders if it has anything to do with their parting conversation.

Then she’s confused because what could the box he’d left with the note possibly…?

Felicity’s eyes go wide as a thought hits her, and she all but throws off the lid to the box. Inside, nestled into a pocket of fine navy velvet, is one glorious bottle of Lafite Rothschild 1982.

Clearly, Oliver, with all of his money, has no idea about proper gift etiquette, that sending a very expensive bottle of wine to a woman could be wildly misconstrued as something she’s sure he hadn’t intended, but she can’t bring herself to care because, as she’d told him, she loves red wine. Whether he should or shouldn’t have sent it based on proprietary rules doesn’t matter.

Felicity stares at the bottle, frozen for several moments and waiting for it to disappear, but it naturally doesn’t since tangible objects aren’t inclined to do simply cease existing. When it simply sits there for several moments, she quickly shoves the lid back into place and glances around the thankfully vacant IT floor to make sure nobody has seen she’s in possession of such a treasure, and then she quickly stashes the box under her desk. It stays there, reserved for rare occasions and taken out only when she’s alone after staying late, until it’s finally depleted.
Felicity would feel guilty about not sharing any of it with her mother, but Donna Smoak would demand to know where her daughter had gotten it, and, knowing her, the woman would jump to the mortifying conclusion that it had come from a secret suitor. Heaven forbid she ever learn it had come from Oliver Queen, billionaire by day, prince in all but title, and secret leather-clad vigilante by night, all because she had performed a favor for the man, the details of which she couldn’t go into. Her mother would jump to all sorts of wrong conclusions, and Felicity would never hear the end of it.
This week on Under the Hood… Our hero’s mysterious friend manages to get him a meeting with a new player in the Glades: The Count.

January 30, 2013:

He needed to find this man whose poison had hurt his sister. This Vertigo supplier would come to learn just what kind of consequences came with his trade, and he would learn them harshly before he was ended.

But, first Oliver needed to find the man. He couldn’t say he was any kind of expert on how to contact drug lords, and he didn’t want to waste any more unnecessary time confronting all of the Vertigo dealers he could find on the streets. For his particular interrogative methods, he believed them when they said they had no idea where he could find their boss. He had, however, dug up a name from the dealer he’d accosted the night before.

Mr. Arrow: Do you know anything about a man called The Count?

His background check on Cindy, or ‘Sin’, hadn’t revealed much, but it had lead him to learn that, until six months ago, she’d been living on the streets in the Glades after her father’s unresolved disappearance almost four years previous. If she was his masked ‘ally’, she may know how to gather intel on the streets, indeed their own kind of Purgatory. It was still a safer task than running around trying to take down international hitmen, assassins, or ex-military armored car thieves.

Miss Ninja: I’m just going to assume that title isn’t followed by ‘of Monte Cristo’ and work from there.

Oliver actually vaguely understood this reference but not to any degree that made the comment amusing, as was probably intended. He also noted the girl had also named herself in the chat program with a name that was equally as obvious.

Miss Ninja: I don’t see anything concrete on the web. Do you have anything more to go on?

Mr. Arrow: He’s supplying a drug in the Glades called Vertigo.

There was a long pause this time, and after a moment of silence Oliver was going to walk away, assuming his friend to be delving into research, but the laptop beeped again just as he was about to get up.

Miss Ninja: Give me an hour. There will be a phone underneath a bench at the location I’ve just given you.

Unbidden by him, a map popped up on Oliver’s laptop screen with a marker hovering over the southern portion of a small park downtown.

Miss Ninja: I’ll call you. Don’t lose this one.
As he’d never been in contact with his friend over the phone, Oliver assumed this last comment referred to the police radio he’d ditched after his impromptu visit to Iron Heights back in October.

He memorized the location on the map and noted the pickup time in his mind. Since he had an hour, he figured that was as good a moment as any to go talk to his sister with Laurel about getting community service in lieu of jail time. With any luck, she wouldn’t put up much of a fight, but he wasn’t particularly hopeful of this fact.

Speedy had always been stubborn.

He hadn’t thought his meeting with Thea would take as long as it had, so he was running a little late—he should’ve anticipated the depths of his sister’s obstinacy. The phone was in the park where his ‘friend’ had said it would be, but he hadn’t expected the device to ring the moment he had it in his hand. He glanced around but found no one nearby talking on an overtly visible cell phone, and no one was paying him any extra mind let alone focusing on him. With a somewhat cautious look at the device in his hand, he turned on his voice modulator and hit the red ‘Answer’ button on the screen’s face.

“Hello?” he asked lowly to avoid garnering any attention with the synthetically deepened tone.

“It’s about time you got here, Mr. Arrow. I’ve got what you need,” came the overly synthesized female voice he’d heard the previous week.

He recognized the moniker the girl had used for him from their earlier conversation that morning and noted how the name wasn’t particularly creative. At least it wasn’t ‘Hood’, and, according to his research, the public had apparently taken to calling the girl ‘Synth,” which was equally as terrible.

“How did you know I just picked up this phone?” Oliver asked.

It was an impressive parlor trick, but he he had once heard that certain people could access the cameras on devices remotely. He wasn’t exactly in his hood given it was the middle of the day, and he wasn’t sure he could trust his Anonymous Friend enough with his secret identity. On the off chance she hadn’t used his real name that night he’d met the Black Archer--it was all still a blur of disjointed images and sounds--Oliver didn’t want to give his identity away now.

“Security camera on the building at your eight o’clock.”

True enough, the moment he turned and looked across the street on his left, the archer saw it, and he was relieved to find the camera was at a great enough distance that his face wouldn’t be overly recognizable to someone not looking for him.

“Smile.”

All the same, he turned and sat down on the bench, thus facing away from the camera.

“Aw, don’t be shy.”

This comment was almost flirtatious. He noted briefly how his friend seemed to be getting rather more brazen in her interactions with him the longer they were acquainted. He also wondered if this would be the case were she not hidden behind anonymity but cast this thought and the others aside as they were irrelevant to his current mission.
“You said you have something?” Oliver asked by way of ignoring this last comment.

A small chuckle sounded through the line, an odd sound to be sure for its electronic nature, but there was still somehow something earnest about it.

“All work and no play. Straight to business then, I suppose.”

“What were you able to dig up on the Count?”

“Oh, it’s much better than that, Mr. Arrow. I’ve gotten you a face-to-face meeting with him. Who you go as is completely up to you, though. Just make sure you make it good. I had to talk to some people who’re probably going to haunt me in my sleep to get you this meet.”

Now, who could that be, Oliver wondered?

“Will do,” he said aloud. “Where is the meeting?”

“Sending the information to your laptop.”

Oliver nodded and stood, preparing to hang up.

“You’re welcome.” Even under the heavy alteration of the synthesizer the voice was sarcastic, and a snapshot image of a huffy teen no longer seemed terribly far-fetched to Oliver. “Would it kill you to have some manners? I mean, all I’m looking for here is a ‘thank you’. It’s not like I’m saying you need to declare that we’re BFF’s or anything.”

Oliver actually grinned.

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t as difficult to say as he’d thought it might be. Then again, he was only offering his gratitude for this favor and not what he should really be thanking the kid for: namely, saving his life last Christmas.

“…Oh, um…”

She didn’t seem to know how to respond, having not expected him to actually express his gratitude, and somehow that amused the vigilante even more. It was a pleasant feeling, a stark contrast to his mood most of the time.

“Okay then. You’re welcome. Bye.”

And then his friend hung up without waiting for a reply, tone clearly flustered even through its digital tones, and Oliver managed a small laugh.

Of all the things he’d been expecting, finding the Bratva waiting for him at the location of the meet hadn’t even made the list of possibilities—although, in hindsight, the ‘people who will haunt me’ comment then made perfect sense. Aside from wondering how the kid even knew where to find the Russian mob, Oliver couldn’t fathom any reason as to why the Bratva would be cooperating at all. He highly doubted the kid had any sort of pull with them.

The scowl on the bald man’s face—clearly, he was the alpha here—as Oliver approached didn’t speak of an amicable arrangement, and his order to have Dig stay behind at the car was seeming better by
“You are lucky that child has insurance,” the man growled, “or we would kill you now as a message that we do not threaten.”

What exactly a kid had been able to threaten them with, Oliver had absolutely no earthly idea.

A man behind the alpha advised, in Russian, that they should kill Oliver anyway, that the kid’s threat was a bluff. Obviously, they had no idea just who he was in regards to their organization. Then again, the archer hadn’t exactly made his identity known to them since his return.

“I would advise against it,” he said to the second man, and his Russian was so impeccable in accent and fluidity that one wouldn’t guess it had been almost four months since he’d spoken the language consciously. The second man almost jumped in his surprise upon learning he had been understood by an American, but the alpha was much more collected. “You don’t want to do anything too rash,” Oliver then said, switching back to English. “I would hate to be forced to take drastic measures.”

The second man actually shied away a little under the harsh scrutiny of Oliver’s gaze, and the archer nearly smirked, finding a little admittedly twisted amusement in being able to intimidating this kind of criminal.

“For an American, you speak rather fluent Russian,” the alpha said with an almost curious, if threatening, air about him.

“Oliver Queen,” he introduced himself, and shifting the collar of his sweater aside to reveal the tattoo on his chest was all the further introduction he needed.

The alpha let up the sternness of his gaze, though only slightly. He would be double checking Oliver’s identity with his superiors the moment he got the chance.

“Alexi Leonov,” the alpha introduced himself with a curt nod. “Why would you not just come to us yourself, Captain? Why send the child?”

Oliver kept his expression even and clasped his hands behind his back as he stood with his feet shoulder-width apart, a daring stance that invited attack to his unguarded chest. It would also cement in Alexi’s mind the knowledge that they were no danger to him, and this would reinforce his station as a Captain.

“I’m well known in this city,” he said. “I couldn’t be seen reaching out to a Bratva contact. It could draw unneeded attention to your operation. I apologize for any of my associate’s brash actions. He appears to have gotten ahead of himself and pulled a rather disagreeable prank. He will be dealt with later tonight, I assure you.”

How had he gone from distrusting the kid to lying to the Russian mob for her?

Fortunately, any further prying by these very dangerous and vindictive men was cut short when a dark SUV pulled up and slowed to a stop but a dozen yards from them. With any luck, the kid wouldn’t be mentioned again, and they would simply trust that Oliver would ‘handle the situation’.

And then the focus of his wrath stepped out of the SUV’s backseat, and even he forgot about Synth. The Count.

“So, my mysterious client is none other than Oliver Queen, formerly presumed dead billionaire,” the man mused as he approached, showing an amusement that would not have been staying in place
much longer had Oliver been incognito in his gear.

Soon, however, this man would pay. and Oliver wouldn’t accepting money as tender.

“I must admit, I find myself surprised,” The Count said, and his eager grin spoke more to the fact that he couldn’t believe his luck.

If he was being honest, the archer mirrored the sentiment somewhat in regards to expectations. He’d thought the man would be taller.

Oliver’s plan had been working, up until the police had arrived to break up the drug deal. Then all hell had broken loose. The Count’s guys fired the first shots, and the SCPD, spearheaded by one very upset Detective Lance, had retaliated. In all the chaos, the Count had slipped away. No one else had seemed about to follow, so Oliver had chased after him, determined that the man who had harmed his sister with his poison—and who had apparently killed fifty-six homeless people while experimenting with his drug, a statistic he had bragged about—not get away.

A dose of Vertigo introduced into Oliver’s system via a syringe in his chest halted that plan rather instantaneously, and then the Count had truly gotten away.

On the other side of the worst trip of his life—and experiencing the worst hangover as an added bonus—Oliver had listened as Diggle recommended they chemically try to trace the Vertigo that had been left in the syringe. He wouldn’t have been the first to admit that he wasn’t at his best, but Oliver had felt like crap. Sitting even remotely upright had turned the world on it’s head, and he’d hardly been able to focus on what the man had been saying, too focused as he was fighting his body’s quite urgent need to expel the contents of his roiling stomach.

He’d hated admitting it to himself, but he’d been hard pressed to reject Diggle’s reasoning when he recommended first getting even half a night’s sleep before attempting to search out any leads.

So, four hours later found Oliver rising from the cot in the corner, possibly the best investment he’d made yet to the foundry because he didn’t need to leave to sleep. Diggle turned from the computer, clearly not pleased to see him already up and about, but he never got to say as much.

Oliver didn’t need a babysitter.

“Have you found anything?” he asked, diverting any comments from the man, whose expression soured slightly.

Ultimately, however, he shook his head, a smart man who knew any attempts to make Oliver rest further was a lost cause.

“No,” he said as he turned back to the screen, scrolling down the page of some acclaimed medical journal. “I’m not exactly a chemist. I’ve done a little research on how to run the tests, but I wouldn’t know what the results said even if we had access to the machines we need.”

And Oliver had very nearly flunked out of Chemistry in High School—he actually should have, in all honesty—so he would be even less help in this area.

“Do you know anyone we could go to, someone discreet or someone who owes you any favors?”

He did, as a matter of fact, and Oliver was about to say so. There was a particular blonde in QC who
might have a far better understanding of geographing based on chemical content than either of them.

But then the obvious struck him.

“Actually-” Oliver had to pause as he stood, fighting off a particularly potent bout of nausea that resurfaced in protest to the movement. “I have a better idea.”

Diggle’s curious eyes turned to and followed him as Oliver, more slowly than usual so as to keep his balance, crossed the room to him to pick up the laptop he’d stashed in the computer desk drawer. The ex-soldier stood to offer him his seat, to which Oliver accepted with more internal enthusiasm than should have been necessary, and then the archer flipped up the lid and pressed the power button to bring the device to life. The built in messaging system greeted him almost instantly.

Mr. Arrow : Don’t be mad.

“Who are you talking to?” Diggle asked from behind Oliver, peering at the screen over his shoulder.

“An anonymous friend of mine. We’ve been in touch several times.”

“Anonymous? Is that safe?” Diggle asked, always a voice of caution. “Have you been able to find out anything about them? What if they can’t be trusted?”

“Well, you’ve actually met,” Oliver returned as he leaned on one of the armrests with a hand over his eyes, retreating to the refuge of darkness as he waited for that beep that indicated a reply message--the absence of light at least lessened his migraine somewhat. “Last Christmas.”

It took a moment, but Diggle seemed to realize what he meant quickly enough.

“That girl who was there. The hooded one?”

Oliver nodded and said, “She left this,” as he tapped the laptop, “the night we confronted Lawton last October.”

“That was also her the night we took down Blackhawk.” Diggle said as he folded his arms across his chest, a subconsciously defensive gesture at the reminder of Ted Gainer’s betrayal. “Have you tried to find out who she is? Just because she’s helped us out doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be careful.”

The man was always a voice of caution, but Oliver’s paranoia probably trumped his many times over.

“I know,” he said with a curt nod, “and I have looked into it. I have a hunch about who she might be, a former street kid I’ve encountered, but nothing too concrete yet.”

And then the laptop beeped and drew his immediate attention--although his brain certainly wasn’t appreciative when he exposed his eyes to the light once more.

Miss Ninja : You lost the phone, didn’t you?

Mr. Arrow : Yes.

There was a long pause, and he was quite sure the girl was having a mild meltdown on the other end of the link.

Miss Ninja : This had better be good. Do you have any idea how long I slaved over that phone? It took me a week to get it into tip-top shape, thank you very much!
It had GPS so accurate that I could track it to within two feet of its global location.

Not to mention a rolling-encryption so sophisticated that not even I would’ve been able to hack into it.

Those aren’t features you can just pay for at your local Tech Village, you know. I had to program them in myself. I built that phone myself!

Oliver almost grinned, mildly amused as his assumption as to his friend’s poor handling of the news was confirmed. He also noted how swiftly she typed because she doled out these comments faster than he could ever hope to.

Mr. Arrow: I only need you to track it somewhere in this city, not the world.

There was another pause.

Miss Ninja: What do you mean?

Mr. Arrow: I slipped it into the Count’s pocket as he was getting away.

Sometime between getting stabbed in the chest with a drug that made him wonder why anyone would ever volunteer for the experience--let alone pay for it--and the Count running off. With all of the ruckus since, he’d actually managed to forget.

Mr. Arrow: If he hasn't found it, it could lead us right to him.

There was another short pause, and Diggle took the opportunity to ask, “You put a tracker on the Count?”

Miss Ninja: I apologize for my outburst. That’s actually quite brilliant.

Tracking now.

“I barely managed while he was injecting me with the Vertigo, but yes. Let’s just hope he’s still got it on him,” Oliver answered his partner in this crusade of his, and Diggle offered a nod, folding his arms across his chest and turning his attention back to the laptop they were both now waiting on.

“Agreed,” he said. “How fast does this girl work, exactly?”

The laptop beeped as if to answer this question, and Oliver did grin that time. A map had popped up on the screen with a marked location near an abandoned juvenile detention center.

“Quite.”

At last, he had his heading.

“I thought I told you to stay out of the field,” Oliver said to the short, hooded figure lurking in the shadows near one of the facility’s side doors--at the very least, though, she had been waiting for him instead of just barging in on her own.

“Morning, Barton,” she greeted. “And, I would, but everyone needs a healthy amount of ‘weird’ in their lives, right? So, I dress like an American ninja and poke fun at the bad guys. And you, well youuuu…”
She tilted her head as this last syllable dragged on as a brutal surge of nausea hit him, so Oliver must have swayed unintentionally.

“Wild night?”

Oliver took a deep breath, trying to settle his stomach.

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t recommend what this guy is selling.”

“I’ll spread the word,” the girl said. “I’m sure the blogosphere would love to hear about it. Should I use my imagination, or would you like to share your experience with the world. Anonymously, of course.”

“Like you’re burning from the inside, and you get to look forward to the world’s worst hangover once that’s over.”

In all actuality, the drugs the Count was selling were undoubtedly far less potent, more refined, but that point felt moot to Oliver, especially when he thought of his sister’s car wrapped around a tree.

“Now go home.”

The girl actually laughed.

“Please. Have you looked at yourself wobbling there?” She made a swaying hand gesture to accentuate the point, and just watching the motion made his stomach threaten to rebel against him. “You don’t even have your bow out. Can you even use it?”

Oliver didn’t dignify the question with a response. ...Mostly because he knew it was true, and “Synth” was the second person to tell him so in the past half-hour. Diggle, however, had used a colorful variation of ‘You’re crazy if you think you can fight like that,’ that had left them both in aggravated moods.

“See, compared to you right now, I might very well be an ASIS Agent.”

Australian Intelligence. An odd group for this girl to use as a go-to example. Oliver tucked the information away for later.

“Go home,” he said again, his voice such a low growl that he wouldn’t have needed the voice modulator to deepen it.

“No.”

Dissuading the kid would be no easy task, Oliver knew, and he was too woozy at the moment to keep arguing. Begrudgingly, he relented.

“Fine,” he grunted out, “but stay back and out of the way.”

It should’ve been a sign when he didn’t get an answer that Synth had no plans to follow this order. His migraine must have been worse than he realized since he didn’t notice.

“I’ve got the cameras running on loops,” the kid said instead as she approached the side door, “so they won’t even know we’re coming.”

If anything, at least they had the element of surprise going for them.

They were certainly going to need it.
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood… Our hero faces one of his worst enemies, gravity not included. He’s forced to tag team with the odd girl who seems inclined to invite herself as his date to all of his big events. Is this a match made in heaven or a bomb waiting to blow him over?

January 31, 2013 (before dawn):

They’d taken a few goons down quietly on their way in. The kid now used some sort of tranquilizer gun in lieu of an actual pistol. Oliver would tell her it was foolish to take chances, but he knew when his arguments would land on deaf ears. He didn’t have the energy right now to deal with it, so he would table that argument for another time. He did note again, however, how easily she seemed able to sneak around, getting the drop on a couple of guys he would’ve had to confront directly.

Now they were crouching on the balcony, looking down on the scene as the Count oversaw his operation. The twisted man grinned as he watched his “employees”, men and women clad in not but clear plastic sheets thrown over their underwear, synthesize more of his toxic narcotic.

Fifty-six people dead. His sister almost killed and her life nearly ruined. The Count would see his empire crumble tonight before he too fell. Oliver had become a very vengeful man over the past five years, and this drug-dealing psychopath would soon learn the full extent of this newfound fury.

“There are too many,” Synth whispered beside him, and in that quiet register Oliver thought he could almost hear her real voice—not that he could identify someone by a whisper.

“No there aren’t,” Oliver replied in a low growl, and then he turned to find a better vantage point from which to make his move.

A hand on his arm stopped him.

“Wait.” Oliver turned back to the girl to find her still looking down at the people below. “We don’t want these people in the crossfire,” she said, but then she seemed to hesitate and turned to look at him. “Do we?”

Even in this state of mind, Oliver wasn't stupid. She was asking if he condoned collateral damage.

“No.”

Synth’s shoulders dipped a little in nearly hidden relief, and Oliver knew his response had pleased her.

“Then I have an idea.”

And he had the distinct notion that this ‘idea’ was going to be somewhat drastic.

“I’m not going to like it, am I?”
Instead of answering, Synth reached into a pocket, took out a phone—not unlike the one she’d given Oliver the previous day—and hit the speed dial. Oliver’s sinking suspicion was then proven correct when, across the room, the Count’s pocket started to ring with that same song that had greeted Oliver in the park. He’d been so taken aback at the time since the device had started to ring as soon as he’d picked it up that he hadn’t paid attention to the song. Now, he had little else to focus on but the song the girl had chosen for herself.

‘I wear my sunglasses at night,’ it began, and Oliver felt like slapping his forehead out of pure indignation—not a common thing for anyone to see him do. The song was a joke, he noted without amusement because how was this in any way a plan, much less one that would get them at the Count without his soldiers overwhelming them? They would now be actively searching the pair out. The damage was already done, however, because the Count, recognizing that the phone wasn’t his, answered it.

“Knock knock?” Synth said.

Oliver groaned mentally as he watched the Count squint and bring the phone away from his ear for a brief moment to give it an odd look. Then he motioned for his men to do a perimeter sweep, and his expression almost turned curious as he brought the phone back to his ear.

“Who’s there?” he drawled into the phone, but Synth simply hung up without giving an answer.

Oliver could swear those were muffled giggles he was hearing from his companion as she failed to fully contain her mirth. They ceased instantly, however, when the Count dropped the phone onto the concrete and smashes it with his heel. The archer even found himself wincing as he thought back on the list of features the girl had described to him, and he felt a wave of pity for his strange ally.

The kid made a whimpering sound that suggested she might cry, and, in an unusual surge of compassion, Oliver dropped a somewhat hesitant hand onto her shoulder.

“My poor baby…” Synth hung her head, and if Oliver didn’t know any better, he’d think the kid had just lost something living rather than the hunk of plastic and circuitry it was.

On the other hand, the plan worked surprisingly well. Soon, it was just the Count and two of his cronies left, both of whom fanned out to patrol the large room. He moved over to the edge of the balcony, positioned along the path of one of them, and as the man crossed down below Oliver jumped down and rolled over the top of a nearby cabinet. He landed slightly less than gracefully as the world spun violently, and he almost missed it when his target spun on him.

A flechette to the thoracic nerve in his neck dropped the man rather instantaneously, and Oliver pushed on. The second man noticed him moving and raised his weapon to fire, but Oliver weaved in and out of the maze of cabinets and chemistry tables. In but a few seconds, he was upon the man. His reflexes were far below par with his usual skill, however, and the man had time to get off a burst of harmless rounds before Oliver disarmed him and knocked him out with his own weapon. He was about to kill the grunt, end the potential threat of him coming to in time to intervene. He was even raising his confiscated weapon to do so.

But an amused, “Well, now, that voice didn’t sound much like yours,” drew his full and immediate attention.

The Count was grinning as if humored by the intent to shut down his operation. It was almost as though he was simply... Bored. That all of this was mostly just something to keep him occupied, and the thought that this scum had hurt his sister just for something to do...
It burned Oliver up inside, made him nearly choke on the rage that boiled up in his chest. The archer
turned and raised his new weapon, but the Count drew a pistol on him just a moment earlier--damn
the Vertigo clogging his system!

“The strange thing is,” the odd man continued, unaware of the deep growl that escaped Oliver’s
throat. “Everyone seems to think you work alone. Perhaps I should invest in better intel.”

The man fell silent as, out in the hall, a series of loud shouts erupted. Oliver would’ve taken the
opportunity to pounce on the man while his attention was turned, but his reflexes were slower than
he realized. By the time he moved to do so, the double doors behind him burst open. He spun, purely
on instinct, just in time to see Synth was the flying object that had thrown the doors open wide. The
kid landed on her heels, but her momentum carried her further and left her rolling to a halt several
yards from the now open doorway. A very large and livid man stalked into the room after her, and
the copious amount of blood that was dripping from his nose told the vigilante that Synth had
enraged the man with several deceptively solid punches to the face.

She, however, was taking her time in rising, and Oliver wondered how badly the man had beaten her
before tossing her into the room. It was as he thought this, however, that her enemy neared her, and
Synth rolled over onto her back. Two tranq darts to the man’s chest caught him by surprise, and he
collapsed just a moment after he yanked them out.

Whatever was in those darts was just as potent and fast-acting as that which Oliver used, which
surprised him since he used a very rare herb that had been supplied to him during his time in China.
He quickly dismissed the voice in the back of his head that suggested it might be the same substance.
The odds of that were too small to even consider with any feasibility.

Synth, unaware of his internal musings, sagged in relief the instant her adversary hit the ground,
panting from the hinted excursion that had gone on out in the hall.

“Ah, this must be our other guest.”

It was amazing how fast just the sound of the Count's voice could ignite a burning fury inside
Oliver’s ribcage. Synth rolled over onto her stomach to look at the man when he spoke and lifted
herself up onto her knees, tranq pistol in hand.

“I expected someone bigger.”

Synth’s shoulders sagged as she appeared to sigh underneath her mask.

“Why does everyone always fixate on my size?” the girl complained, and something must have
happened to her voice modulator during the scuffle because it was only using female tones again. “I
mean, what is that?” Synth complained, highly affronted. “Is there some rule where you have to be
‘so’ tall to fight crime? Because I missed that memo.”

The Count, rather than respond to the rather ridiculous rhetorical question, seemed intrigued.

“A woman?”

The girl bristled instantly.

“Oh, don’t you even start with that, you chauvinistic-”

The instant Synth stopped speaking mid-rant, Oliver knew he’d made a grave mistake. This was
proven true when he turned from his enemy to find the girl had been accosted from behind, and the
barrel of a rifle was held flush to her back. With his single-minded focus on the Count, the archer
hadn’t noticed the man’s last remaining underling sneak in. Neither, it seemed, had Synth, but her
last excursion may have left her dazed and thus unfocused. She now sat with her arms held out wide
in surrender, keeping the man from viewing her weapon as a threat by making an exaggerated show
of lift her finger from the trigger.

“Lower your weapon, or I shoot the girl,” the henchman said.

Oliver turned back to the Count who seemed very pleased by how the situation had played out,
certain that he had just won himself a victory. The way the vigilante saw things, however, he had
two options. He could risk Synth’s life by taking his revenge on the man who’d hurt his sister, or he
could disarm for the sake of the kid who had helped him on several occasions, even saved his life.

He was struggling with the decision more than he should’ve been.

Then he glanced over his shoulder to see Synth’s shoulders dip again in apparent exasperation, and
she shook her head as though she couldn’t believe the ridiculousness of the situation. Oliver could
just imagine her rolling her eyes, and her captor didn’t even take it as a threat when she dropped her
arms to her sides.

“Honestly, it’s like you people think I’m helpless.”

Even Oliver was taken by slight surprise when, with her free hand, she raised a device up to her
shoulder. The henchman surely regretted his carelessness when she activated the gadget, and he
came face to face with what appeared to be a directed version of her flash devices, almost like a
blinding flashlight.

The man yelped, and he squeezed off a burst of rounds, but by the time he did, Synth had already
used his poor reaction time to roll to the side. She kicked the inside of his knee as she went and was
on her feet again just as he was landing on his knees with a surprised grunt. He was quickly downed
by a tranq dart in the neck, and as Synth disarmed the henchman Oliver turned back to the Count.

He revelled momentarily in the man’s reaction, his look of amusement having slackened into one of
surprise and. More importantly, however, he’d dropped his guard, and Oliver advanced quickly. The
Count noticed the danger to him a fraction of a second before it was too late, but the archer swatted
aside the pistol even as he was raising it again. Having discarded his confiscated rifle for one of the
man’s two-pronged Vertigo injectors that was sitting on a table, Oliver grabbed the man’s shoulder
and kicked the back of his knee as he stepped around him. He dug the needles far into the man’s
arm, and the Count grunted before futilely trying to pry his hand away.

Oliver took great pleasure in pushing down on the plunger very slowly.

“Enjoy the fruits of your labor!” he growled into the man’s ear, quite sure that nothing tasted so good
as revenge.

The drug was incredibly fast-acting, however, because the man didn’t even turn to look at him as he
spoke. Halfway through the syringe, and he was already catatonic.

The second half would surely kill him.

“Stop!”

Oliver froze, recognizing the warning that underlined Synth’s voice even through its digitally altered
tones. He looked up and was thus staring down the barrel of a very real pistol, not the tranquilizer
one she’s insisted on using before. Whether the girl had taken it from one of the Count’s goons or
been carrying it as well as the tranq gun hardly mattered. All that mattered was that she had the
wholly lethal weapon trained on him and not the Count. Even the vigilante was surprised by this turn of events, and he turned his full attention from the man who was no longer a threat to the ally who shouldn’t have been one.

It was those morals again.

“He’s too dangerous to be left alive,” Oliver tried to reason with her, but the weapon Synth had trained on him didn’t falter for even the briefest of moments. “This ends now.”

“No!” the girl screamed, stepping more directly in front of him just as Oliver was planning to finish the Count— that she could read this intent from a man so subtle did not go unnoticed by Oliver. “No killing!”

Honestly, this girl… He was beginning to realize she may have to learn these cold truths the hard way just as he had, that he simply couldn’t get through to her by explaining it again and again. All the same, he tried.

“If he lives, others will die,” Oliver reasoned aloud. Surely, she had to at least understand this. Sometimes a single death is all it takes to save dozens, even hundreds.”

“And whatever you do on your own time is your business,” Synth snapped. “But, if you want to kill him now, with me here, you’ll have to put me down first.”

Whatever could be said for her naivete, Synth’s bravado was applaudable, even if the intent to kill from her wasn’t an earnest one. While she was trying to convince him of the contrary, Oliver knew she wouldn’t pull the trigger.

So, why was he hesitating?

“There’s more than one way to save a city. You don’t have to kill to do it.”

Oliver pondered over his options for a moment. He could kill the Count and rid the city of any future danger he would level on it. This, unfortunately, would surely lose him an ally— one he was frustrated to realize had been quite useful to him during their short time working together. But, he could crush the notion in her mind that he was anything other than what he was: a tool to incise the corruption from Starling City. He could be that cold truth she needed to learn from. On the other hand, he could give in to the demands of a rather foolish girl and leave the city wide open to future narcotic attacks.

The logical decision was the first option.

“So?” Synth asked. “What’s it going to be?”

In that moment, the answer seemed less clear to Oliver than logic would dictate. End future corruption at the expense of the opinion of one girl. It should have been a simple choice. In hindsight, it was the sudden recollection of a girl in a dark hood kneeling over him, imploring him to stay conscious as he bled out, that changed things. In the moment, Oliver didn’t know why the memory returned to him when it did, but he later thought it was because she sounded similar. Something in her voice reminded him of that night in December. It was almost like… she thought that by keeping him from ending the Count, she was somehow saving him.

It was a curious thought, and he was inexplicably starting to lose his intent to kill when six SCPD officers poured in through the open doors in the back of the room.
She sees his resolution begin to fade just before half a dozen cops pour in from the door at the back of the room all shouting at them to disarm, and then Oliver is back on high alert, using the Count as a shield against all of those guns that are now pointed at him. Some are also pointed at Felicity, who is standing between the pair and the police officers, but she knows they won’t shoot so long as she keeps her own gun trained on Oliver and the Count.

She hears a laugh from behind her, and then a deep—though not Hood-deep—voice says, “What, did you put an ad out in the paper or something?” with a humored and mocking laugh. “Hoods Wanted?”

The officer seems to think this was funny, and Felicity had to admit, the image of Oliver in his vigilante getup, sitting in the news station as he pays for ad space in the paper was slightly amusing.

“Kid’s got a gun on you, so you must not’ve vetted ‘im very well. Having trouble finding someone as cold of a killer as you are?”

It must be their cultural bias to assume all unknowns as male coupled with her small size that makes everyone assume she’s a child, Felicity thinks. Although, this has come in handy before, made people underestimate her. She just can’t speak right now, or that edge might be lost given her malfunctioning voice modulator.

“Now, put that needle down, or I will shoot you, you sick bastard.”

Now, that sounds rather personal.

Oliver doesn’t move, and he doesn’t respond. He simply stands there, taking all of these harsh words with that same stoicism she’s come to expect from him, and he doesn’t even bat an eye when the threat is voiced. He’s just staring over her head, likely at the speaking officer.

“Put it down!” the man behind her shouts, and Felicity really thinks Oliver ought to consider following this order or the cop might just shoot him through his hostage.

Oddly enough, the vigilante’s eyes flick briefly down to her own before he says, “He deserves this,” and it’s almost like he’s trying to justify it to her.

But why would he suddenly care what she thinks?

“Not according to the law, he doesn’t,” Officer Friendly says, and then he pauses. When he starts to speak again, his voice is lower, sort of ominous, and this time she knows his hunt for the Hood is somehow personal. “People think you’re a hero. I bet that’s how you managed to rope this kid into these schemes of yours.”

This time when Oliver’s eyes meets hers, there’s a weight behind them she can’t understand.

“I’ve heard of him,” the officer continues, and this news surprises Felicity.

She thinks then that she should probably keep an eye on the news to watch what they think they know of her.

“Fights street crime. Leaves evidence to help prosecute. Only inflicts minor injuries to get the job done. Now, I don’t condone any form of vigilantism, but I’ll take him over you any day.”

“You’re no hero, no matter what my daughter says.” Felicity sees Oliver’s jaw tick, and she thinks this is something personal for him too.
Wasn’t Laurel Lance’s father a Detective? Was it possible this happened to be said Detective who was standing several paces behind Felicity? Whether he had a hunch who Oliver was under the hood, the blonde had no idea, but the fact remained that Laurel’s father seemed to be on a personal manhunt for her hex boyfriend.

Awkward.

“You’re a killer, just like I’ve always told her. Just like this kid will learn.”

This time, Oliver’s jaw clenches, and Felicity is sure it’s because he doesn’t want Laurel to see this side of him, the killer circumstances had turned him into. He can’t stand his former sweetheart knowing this dark side of him that he views as necessary, and Felicity thinks it noble of him to be willing to forego Laurel’s opinion for what he thinks is best for the city.

But, perhaps that ‘what he thinks is best’ can still change because his intent to harm the Count falls completely before he glances back down at Felicity and gives a very subtle signal that she quickly understands. She doesn’t know how they don’t notice it, but the cops around her must be so focussed on Oliver that they don’t stop her from reaching into her pocket. It’s the last one she has with her, but she can’t think of a better use for it.

The police don’t realize their mistake until she drops the cylinder behind her. The sound of metal striking concrete draws their attentions, and then all the officers shout in alarm as the flash device activates.

She and Oliver are gone from the room when the officers can finally see a little again, a catatonic yet breathing Count left behind to be charged for his horrible crimes.

They’ve made it more than a block away now. Oliver clearly has no intention of stopping, and Felicity realizes he intends to return to his hideout. That’s probably for the best because he still looks terribly pale to her--if the loss of mental faculties as a side effect isn’t enough to deter her from narcotics, than his current condition certainly is. He looks like he could use some serious bedrest.

Still, Felicity can’t help herself.

“Thank you,” she says quietly, and Oliver draws to a halt. Felicity follows suit, a little surprised herself that she’d said the words aloud.

Oliver doesn’t turn, but he asks in that digitally enhanced, low voice of his, “For what?”

He sounds like he honestly doesn’t know. For her penchant for blabbering, even Felicity doesn’t have much to say in turn. The reason is simple and succinct.

“You didn’t kill him.”

She’s seen enough of that, and she’s glad he hadn’t add to the list.

“They would’ve shot me if I did,” Oliver tries to belittle the situation as he says this, tries to logic it away, but she knows that in the end his decision had nothing to do with logic. “I still have a mission to complete. That doesn’t end for the Count.”

He starts to walk away, and he probably thinks she’ll drop the matter. Clearly, he doesn’t know her very well, but then again that’s the whole point of wearing a mask, isn’t it?
“No,” Felicity says, and he stops again--perhaps even a small part of him wants to listen, she thinks. “You weren’t forced to. You decided not to kill him.”

Whatever reaction Oliver has to these words, she can’t see it, but she hopes she’s starting to get through to him, at least on some level.

“I saw it. If you’d still wanted to, you could’ve done it while we were getting away, while the others were blinded.” She reasons aloud. “I think she would be proud,” she continues, and she sees Oliver’s fingers twitch for reasons she doesn’t know since she can’t see his face. To clarify, she adds, “The daughter he mentioned.”

Oliver doesn’t respond, but then again, she doesn’t expect him to. He just lifts his head like he’s going to look over his shoulder. He doesn’t, and then he dips his head, squares his shoulders, and walks away, still a little uncertain on his feet but hiding it well. This time, she lets him go. He has enough to think on for now, and he’s quite understandably exhausted.

Felicity, on the other hand, can’t stop thinking about that small book she has stashed in her car.

…

How on earth is she supposed to tell him his own mother might be aligned against him?
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood... Our hero finds himself blindsided by an unexpected house call. Has he just been thrown out of one frying pan and towards another? Will he be one scrambled vigilante, or will that second frying pan just hit him on the head and tell him to cease and desist with his mistrustful ways? Talking skillets aside, what is he to do when he’s betrayed by someone close to him? It’s too bad he doesn’t have a scorching, completely hypothetical and unreal frying pan of his own to swing around!

January 31, 2013:

Mikenna had been one of the detectives sent to bust his deal with the Count the night before, and, unfortunately for him, she had recognized Oliver. Lance had taken the opportunity to bring the information straight to him the following morning. To what end, the vigilante wasn’t sure, but that was how he found himself sitting in his office at Verdant with two SCPD officers seated across his desk. Laurel’s father was clearly just taking any chance he could get his hands on to give Oliver a hard time. There had been no exchange of funds to arrest him for, and the Count had been captured earlier that very morning. He didn't need Oliver to ID the man, but of course Oliver wasn't supposed to know about the arrest. Thus, he had to play along, hoping for the strength to resist attacking the man for his currently short temper bestowed by his head trying to pound its way through his skull.

“I was checking into the Count,” Oliver said, giving his reason for setting up the drug deal the previous night. “He’s the guy who made the drugs that were sold to Thea. I figured I could find out what he looked like to give your sketch artist something to go on.” Lance didn’t believe this, but then again he never believed anything Oliver said, so this was of little consequence. “I paid a lowlife with a Russian accent an obscene amount to arrange a meeting.”

Lance scrunched up his nose and narrowed his eyes, clearly skeptical.

“And that’s it?”

Something in the detective’s tone set Oliver on edge. He hadn’t just come here for an explanation. That much was clear.

“Yes,” Oliver said, taking in a calming breath as he willed his irritation away, and he held his eyes shut for a brief moment in a vain attempt to ease his growing migraine. “But, I didn’t get to see him before you showed up and chased him off.”

Beside Lance, Mikenna was still quiet. She seemed appeased by his explanation, but her partner sat pondering for a moment before he shifted in his seat to lean forward and to rest his elbows on his knees.

“Where were you this morning?” he asked, and this took Oliver by surprise.

“Why?”

This couldn’t be good. The man looked like a wolverine, ready to pounce, and Oliver knew he had
to proceed carefully or risk getting caught. Lance didn’t respond, but then again the vigilante hadn’t really expected him to.

“I was here, Detective” Oliver lied easily. “As I’m sure you can see, I’m not exactly feeling very well, so I came down here to crash in my office for a few hours before getting some work done here at the club. We open soon.”

Lance wasn’t dissuaded.

“And I’m sure you have proof of this? We’re not just supposed to take your word for it, are we, Queen?”

Oliver squinted, suspicious because he now realized why that glint in Lance’s eyes was familiar.

“What is this about, Detective?”

The man was all too eager to explain.

“Well, it just so happens that, after your little soiree with the Count last night, someone tracked him back to his lair this morning. We got a tracker on his SUV, and guess who we found when we went in?”

Lance leaned forward a little further, a familiar hunger in his eyes. Of course he hadn’t let it go. Oliver would consider him a fool if he wasn’t also absolutely right.

“Do you have an alibi?”

“I thought we were past this, Detective.”

Oliver scoffed.

“Why? Just because you managed to weasel your way out of it last time? No, no. You’re not gettin’ off that easy.”

Interesting to note was how Mikenna seemed surprised by this line of questioning—which was likely Lance’s entire purpose for wanting to track him down in the first place, drug deal or no drug deal.

Oliver was just debating his limited options when the detective’s phone started to ring. Lance smirked, clearly amused.

“Saved by the bell,” he quipped, and then he flipped his cell open and leaned back in his chair. “Lance.”

It took all of five seconds for his grin to vanish.

“Who sent it?” he demanded, and he must’ve cut off whatever the response to this question was because it was only seconds before he snapped, “Well, check it again. Thoroughly. Find out if it’s been doctored in any way. I’ll take a look when I get there.”

And with that, he slammed the flip phone shut more harshly than was necessary. Oliver couldn’t deny that the man’s frustration was a tad satisfying for him.

“Trouble, Detective?”

Lance turned back to him, a furious scowl having settled over his features.
“My guys just received a video, security footage that shows you entering this building last night. You
don’t step out of your office until we arrive.”

The detective promptly stood and turned to leave, but not before he growled out an accusatory, “I
don’t know how you did it, but rest assured that I’ll find out.” Mikenna jumped up to follow him
after offering Oliver an apologetic wave, and Lance groused over his shoulder, “Try to take down
another drug dealer, and you’ll see the inside of a cell.”

Lance threw the door open and brushed past Diggle in the doorway, Mikenna hastening to keep up
with his agitated and brisk pace. John, surprised by the hasty exit, stepped in with a curious
expression. He didn’t get to ask his question before Oliver was already answering.

“The police just received a video that clears me for last night. Did you send it in?” he asked as he
stood from behind his desk.

As expected, Diggle shook his head, and he opened his mouth to respond when Oliver’s own cell
started to ring and cut off whatever he’d been about so say.

‘Blocked Caller’ was printed in bold on the face, and Oliver felt his expression pull into a frown. The
timing was too convenient, and it reminded him far too much of the phone call in the park. He
showed the caller ID to Diggle, who seemed to understand instantly what he himself had, and Oliver
answered the call. He said nothing as he held it to his ear, and Diggle folded his arms to settle in and
listen to Oliver’s end of what followed.

“Well, I guess the cat’s out of the bag,” came the overlapped female tones of the synthesized voice
that proved the archer’s suspicions. “...That’s an odd saying, isn’t it? I mean, what does a cat have to
do with figuring something out? You know, unless you didn’t know it was a cat inside the bag, in
which case you would be figuring out-”

“Enough,” Oliver snapped, in no mood to be toyed with.

“Sorry…”

Synth had said his name that night back in December. Before, the vigilante had been unsure,
thinking it just his delirium that made him think so, but now he had his proof. He’d assumed the
worst as soon as the memory had resurfaced, but when he hadn’t heard from the girl on the matter
since, he’d begun to second-guess. That had been a grave mistake, it seemed. The playing field was
tipped egregiously in her favor because Oliver only had possible leads as to her identity, and even
those were circumstantial. Oliver didn’t like stacked odds. They put him immediately on the
defensive, which was not his best mode of operation. He was used to calling the shots, and when he
was taken from that position, he became brusque--Diggle would say how it was his way of trying to
intimidate whoever had the upper hand in an attempt to gain some control back.

“So, is this the ‘I know’ call?” Oliver all but growled into the phone. “Am I supposed to do favors
for you, or is this when I leave a nondescript duffel under a park bench?”

Inexplicably, he’d come to rely on the girl over the past several weeks, even to trust her as much as
he was able, but his self-preservation instincts were currently running on full-drive, telling him he’d
been a fool to let his guard down for even a moment.

The girl, however, actually laughed as though the idea was honestly amusing to her.

“Relax, Mr. Queen. There’s no need to go all ‘grr’,” Synth said rather calmly in response to his
quietly angered tone. “If I wanted something, you would’ve heard about it long before now. I don’t
know about you, but I’ve never heard of any blackmailers waiting a month-and-a-half to cash in. This is just me letting you know that I’m watching your back.”

The reasoning made sense, even he in all of his paranoia had to admit, and her final comment took him by such surprise that Oliver felt his scowl lessen without his accord. He was still digesting the news when the girl continued.

“Not in a creepy or suggestive way, just in an ‘I’ve got your back’ kind of—That’s not much better, is it—what is it with the sayings people use?” she muttered, and then she asked, “But, you know what I mean, right?”

Oliver decided to ignore the rambling, and, although there was a naggling in the back of his mind that suggested it was somehow familiar, he ignored that too as his brain gave an angry and painful throb in protest to his continued state of consciousness. He really needed some sleep…

“I know there was something in that footage that would’ve incriminated me,” he insisted, however; sleep was always one of his lowest priorities. “I was in my gear during that near overdose, and I know at least one detective who would’ve loved to see me entering the building like that.

The kid laughed again.

“Oh, it was easy.” The archer could imagine her waving her hand in dismissal with the easy statement. “I just spliced some footage from a few days ago up until the detectives arrived. They can look at it all they want, but they’re not going to find any signs of my tampering. You’re just lucky the cameras are of narrow views inside the building. Vanishing cars or moving bar stools are sure to draw attention. The video should keep the detective occupied for at least this incident.”

Oliver honestly didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t even asked the girl to do this, but she’d predicted the need and acted regardless.

“Thank you,” he said, the words somewhat unfamiliar on his tongue, and this time Synth’s laugh was softer.

In front of him, Diggle gave him an odd look, surely owing to the archer’s dramatic change in demeanor throughout this conversation, but Oliver paid it no mind.

“What’re friends for?” Synth asked, and the vigilante was again unsure of how to respond.

A friend… It was what she kept insisting, and for the first time, Oliver was finally starting to believe it for what it was.

Could you be friends with a person and not definitively know their name?

“I’m just glad it all worked out,” the girl continued, and Oliver was drawn back to the present, “At least now I won’t lose sleep over nothing.”

And just like that the archer was reminded of the individuals who had set up the meeting with the Count the previous night, individuals a street kid shouldn’t know.

“How do you even know the Bratva?” Oliver asked. “Or where to find them?”

“I met one of their guys once, although I didn’t actually know that at the time… But, a girl hears things on the streets, you know? So, I tracked them down, not in person, of course, and gave them a little… incentive to set up last night’s meeting.”
This gave Oliver pause because he simply couldn’t fathom the brazen absurdity of what Synth had just implied. He couldn’t decide if it was bold or just foolish.

“You threatened the Russian mob?” Even he had trouble controlling his tone in light of this news, and Diggle looked just as surprised by the knowledge when he glanced up at the man.

“Not the Mob. Just… you know, some of its money,” the girl replied, and Oliver ran his fingers harshly over his brow to ease his migraine which had just multiplied in intensity because this plan was certainly no less dangerous than threatening the mob itself. “I told those guys that I could make it look like they were the ones who took it, and after a quick show and tell during which one of them may or may not have looked ready to soil himself, they agreed.”

This girl was exhausting sometimes…

“Can it be traced?” Oliver asked because that was the most important thing to know.

“Of course it can’t. Who do you think I am? Tech Support? Well, average Tech Support because some of those people are outrageously overqualified for their jobs. Speaking of which, our friend in IT wants to meet with you tonight.”

Oliver had trouble switching gears as quickly as Synth did, so it took him a moment to go from ‘the mob can’t trace my actions’ to ‘Felicity Smoak wants to meet with you’. Once his brain had caught up, however, a thought occurred to him given the timing of the request that concerned him more than it should’ve.

“…Did you tell her who I am?”

Somehow, the thought was disagreeable beyond simple caution. He couldn’t even explain it to himself, but Oliver didn’t want the woman to know he was the Hood, merciless avenger of Starling City.

“No,” Synth said, and the archer breathed out a silent sigh of relief, “I didn’t. I suppose I should be more specific. She wants to meet with Oliver Queen, not the Hood--or whatever it is you call yourself.”

“I don’t call myself anything,” Oliver returned, hiding well from his tone the relief he felt. “Why does she want to meet with me?”

“Said she has something she needs to show you. Anything else, you’ll have to ask her.”

Oddly enough, after the long couple of days he’d had, the idea of meeting with the strange blonde wasn’t as troublesome an idea as Oliver would’ve thought.

“When and where?”

It was a little cafe he’d never heard of, just a few blocks from the outskirts of the Glades. The people walking by the large, street-facing window seemed to fall somewhere into that small--and shrinking--category that put them between poor and rich. They didn’t walk like they owned the very ground they walked on, nor did they seem guarded or on constant alert as one would be in the Glades. Oliver wondered briefly if Felicity fit into this category.

Obviously, she was guarded--with reason--so that made it a tad more difficult to read hints of her
living situation based on her body language. Oliver honestly had no clue what his father’s company paid its IT department, but the state of her clothing implied she at least lived comfortably. The thought was a pleasant one, a little more than it should’ve been considering he’d only met the woman twice. The way he saw it, however, someone who’d been through a plane crash and been stranded on an island for four years should be allowed to live without the fear and stress of losing her home. That, and the thought of her living in the Glades was unpleasant to him.

It was as he was pondering his strange attachment to the admittedly strange woman that she walked by the cafe window in front of him. Felicity gave a little wave that he returned and a nervous smile that made him grin, and he shook his head in bafflement as just this small interaction made him feel a little bit lighter. At some point, he’d have to figure out what it was about her that did that.

When she entered the cafe, she gave a quiet and slightly breathless, “Hi,” that matched the nervousness in her expression and posture.

“Hi,” Oliver said in turn, and she rubbed her hands together.

“Sorry about all the cloak and dagger,” she said as she continued to fidget with her hands. “And thanks for meeting me here. I was… nervous to come to your house. Or your castle, as is a more apt description.”

The thought of this nervous girl being uncomfortable around his family’s wealth seemed somehow fitting, and it made Oliver laugh a little because he himself felt less at home in that ‘castle’ as time moved on.

But, then Felicity’s smile dropped a little, and the archer remembered she’d asked him to meet her for what was probably a rather serious, if undisclosed, reason. Subconsciously, she put a hand on her bag, and Oliver couldn’t help but be curious.

Oliver is the Arrow. The Arrow is targeting people on the list. The list had been found in the possession of Oliver’s mother, and it isn’t likely because she too is hooding up at night to take them down one at a time. This situation is so very far beyond complicated. But, he deserves to know.

That doesn’t mean telling him had been easy.

Felicity had been concerned at the prospect of bringing the information to him, especially after the day he’d had, but she also knew she’d chicken out again if she didn’t tell him now. And, although Oliver is clearly quite adept at concealing his reactions outwardly, once his eyes had landed on the book, his jaw had done this shifting thing that Slade’s used to do whenever he was hiding just how much something was troubling him. He hadn’t been able to hide the pain in his eyes when she’d told him the book belonged to his mother, and Felicity can’t even imagine what must be going through his mind—that he’d asked in that loaded way where Walter had gotten the book tells her he’d already been suspecting his mother might be involved.

Having delivered all the information she’d been able to dig up, Felicity is about to leave. She’s only a few steps from the door, in fact, but something draws her back. When she turns to face him again, Oliver shifts his previously unfocused attention back onto her, his eyebrows raised in distracted curiosity, and his gaze makes her hesitate.

Felicity talks a lot. This is so very true, and she would never be able to deny it and leave herself with any kind of credibility. But, she actually doesn’t talk to people all that often. She’s usually just
talking *around* people, and they’re forced to listen to her because people can’t just turn off their auditory senses—although that would be a nifty little skill to have sometimes.

“I know this might be overstepping some boundaries,” she begins, stepping a little closer again and wringing her hands as she’s internally assaulted by a potent bout of nerves, “but… you seem like someone who could use a friend?” Her uncertainty over the feasibility of what she’s trying to say makes it come out as more of a question, lilted and unsure, but then Felicity hears the words, hears how they might be perceived, and she blanches.

Oh, good golly Galactica, has she just insulted her boss? Sure, he’s not her boss boss, but, she’s pretty sure he could get her fired even though he’s not actually working for his family’s company.

“-That’s not to say I don’t think you have any,” Felicity tries to amend quickly. “I mean, I’m sure you’ve got friends. You’ve probably got plenty of friends, what with the whole ‘super rich’ thing.” Her flustered smile turns into a flinch because she’s just making it worse. “Not that you only have friends because you’re rich. Because that’s just… not true, I’m sure. You probably run into those phony people a lot, people who only want to be your friend because, *good god*, your family has a lot of money. But, I’m sure not all of your friends-”

Oliver has that look. That single eyebrow raised, eyes a little wide, ‘when do you find time to breathe?’ look she encounters so often. Although, he honestly seems more amused than impatient, which is another common thing. The impatience, not the amusement, because amusement is actually very uncommon—and, *wow*, she’s even starting to babble inside her own head now. Felicity clasps her hands together in front of her face and closes her eyes, and then she takes a deep breath and counts back from three really slow until at least some of the jitter has eased from her system.

“All I’m trying to say,” she says as she brings her hands away from her face, drawing out her words as she re-practices saying things at a normal pace, “is that, if you… need anyone to talk to, or…” Or what? Even she doesn’t know what she’s trying to say at this point, and Oliver’s staring at her with an expression she can’t identify much less read, so that’s no help. “I don’t know, I just… I can’t say I know what you’re going through or what you’ve been through, and I don’t know how much you know about me, but I do know what it’s like.” Breathe… A little better. “H-hard times, I mean.”

Oliver holds her gaze for a moment, but then he draws his mouth into a thin line and looks down briefly, and a pit forms in Felicity’s stomach because she recognizes that look too.

It’s why she doesn’t tell people.

“I know.”

His words almost sound like an apology as he studies his hands with more intensity than is necessary considering they’re his hands, and he probably sees them any number of times everyday. And, boy, his face sure does say that he knows exactly what she’s talking about. That’s just… fantastic… Felicity gives a laugh that’s half nerves and half disappointment.

“Of course you do. Why wouldn’t you?”

She sounds a little snarky, and she’s ashamed of that. It’s not his fault that he knows. Well, it might be his fault that he knows in the sense that he probably looked her up and found out, but it’s not his fault that there’s anything to know. Felicity averts her gaze and groans, slipping her fingers under her glasses to cover her face with her hands because she suddenly feels so very tired and yearns for a dark space to decompress a little.

She needs to go home…
“Well,” she says as she removes her hands and corrects her glasses on her nose, drawing herself up straight and careful not to look Oliver in the eye. “It’s been… a long day, so I’m gonna’ go to bed.”

Felicity winces the instant the words leave her mouth.

Mentioning your bed… How highly does that rank on the list of ‘awkward and inappropriate things you might accidentally say to your boss’? It’s so exhausting being her sometimes…

“Not here, of course.” And now she’s back to flailing and jittery speech, so that’s just great… Oliver probably thinks she’s crazy. He’s only met her--actual her--twice, after all, and apparently she doesn’t make a very good third impression. “And not that you need to know anything about- You know what? I’m just gonna’,” she makes a slashing motion with her hands and starts to retreat, “stop talking and go.”

And then she’s just about running to the door--or rather, she’s running on the inside because walking out calmly in reality is the only way to save at least a little of her dignity.

What she doesn’t expect is for Oliver to stop her just as her hand lands on the door handle.

“Hey,” he says in that quiet way he often does when he’s not under a hood, and Felicity winces. So close…

Slowly, she turns back to face him, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth because there are so many pieces of her mortifying little schpeel that he can focus on. And many of them she has absolutely no desire to backtrack to.

He doesn’t, however, seem irritated or angry when she finally gets up the courage to look, so she relaxes a little bit. Oliver stands, slides the book into his inside jacket pocket, and then he approaches her slowly, closing the distance between them until he’s but a few paces away. When he lifts his gaze to meet hers, there’s something loading his eyes that she thinks might be understanding borne of shared experience in matters that royally suck. And, if anyone would understand, Felicity supposes it would be him.

You don’t just wake up one day and decide to risk everything by taking on crime outside the law. Something has to drive you to it.

She knows this personally.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Oliver says with so much sincerity, and Felicity gets the feeling that he means it. Truly means it. That, although he’d managed to find out, no one else would be learning of her circumstances from him, even were they to put him on the spot and ask him directly. Then he dips his head a little and softly says, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

She almost tells him then, almost tells him who she is--who else she is… That swell of emotion in her chest is imploring her to. The words even begin to form.

…

But, something stops her. In the end, Felicity just gives a smile, which is a little watery, and she has to turn her eyes to the floor because he’s making her want to cry. She knows that if she looks at him, sees his kind understanding much longer, she probably will, so looking at her shoes is her solution.

Though, then there’s a soft pressure on her arm, and when she looks, it’s Oliver’s hand. He almost seems hesitant given how gentle his touch is, and the notion is so foreign to her given all she knows
of him that she can’t help but look back up at him.

She’s not quite sure what she sees in his eyes this time, but, whatever it is, it’s compassionate, and it makes Felicity lose that internal battle she’s been waging. One tear falls, and then another down the other cheek. With a shuddering breath in, she manages to stop the waterworks then and there, and this is fortunate because she would be absolutely mortified if she’d started balling her eyes out in front of this man. Bouts of hysterics don’t make for very good third impressions either.

Quickly, she swipes the tears away and averts her eyes again as she sniffs.

“Thank you,” she says, and she’s not sure herself if she’s trying to bring some levity to the situation when she gives a small laugh--although, it’s probably just nerves bubbling out of her.

Felicity glances up to see Oliver give a small nod to accept her gratitude, and then she’s retreating through the door. She looks at him one more time as she’s walking past the window, and she almost gives another one of those nervous laughs when he lifts his hand in a small wave that’s so strange to see from him. She can’t help but return the wave, nor can she keep herself from smiling at him as she feels a familiar fluttering in her chest, and that’s when she first realizes.

Oh, Gawd…

She has a crush on Oliver Queen. That’s just what she needs…

Cindy had been curious. Growing up on the streets, she’d learned to read people pretty well. Felicity had practically been vibrating nervous energy before she left, and she’d been completely mum as to her reasons for leaving so late. How could it be ‘too quiet to study’, anyway? Just the other day, she’d asked Cindy to keep the TV off because she couldn’t think with it on. Unless her studying needs changed day by day, Felicity was being horribly inconsistent.

That, and she hadn’t even grabbed her book bag before heading out.

So, Cindy had put on her favorite dark hoodie and followed her. She tailed the blonde to a small coffee shop-thing that was just over a block from their apartment, and this solidified in her mind the knowledge that this was probably a date--Felicity’s nerves had been her first clue. She kept her hood low just in case Felicity happened to look over her shoulder, and Cindy crossed the street to an alley to get a look inside the shop. If her friend was finally getting out there and dating, she wanted to watch out for her. The blonde had finally started to heal, and the protective teen didn’t want some guy ruining all of the progress she’d made recently.

That’s when the former Glades kid saw that Felicity was meeting with none other than the ‘Prince’ of Starling City: Oliver Queen. She very nearly blew her cover then and there by running across the street, storming into the shop, and demanding why her friend would do such a thing, waste her time on a man whose reputation screamed for any self-respecting woman to ‘stay away’.

But then Starling’s ‘Prince’... smiled? From what Cindy could see, this wasn’t one of those fake, meant-to-charm-the-clothes-off-a-woman smiles either. Oliver Queen… seemed genuinely happy to see Felicity, and that was enough to surprise Cindy into inaction.

Felicity was fidgety as she approached Oliver’s seated position at the cafe’s window—that the seat faced that window was fortunate for Cindy’s spying needs. The blonde said something, and Prince Ollie laughed, which seemed to ease some of Felicity’s nerves. They started to talk, and Cindy began to realize that this probably wasn’t the date it appeared to be at first glance. Felicity didn’t even sit
down. Whatever they were talking about, it was serious, and then Felicity pulled something out of her bag, and Oliver tensed. His expression and body language shifted completely as the blonde held the object out to him. With a frown, Oliver said something as he took it, and Felicity said only two words in response. Those words might as well have been ‘you’re broke’ given the way Starling’s Prince looked like he’d been suckerpunched in the gut.

So, not a date.

Felicity turned to leave, and Oliver looked down at what she’d given him moments before, pondering something. But, then the blonde paused at the door and ultimately turned back around, and he gave her his attention again. This next conversation, although Cindy’s favorite computer nerd was clearly rambling as was her prerogative, was just as serious as the last. Oliver got a look of guilt, and Felicity looked down at her shoes, clearly upset. Cindy again almost crossed the street as the blonde turned to leave again, sure that the rich boy had insulted her somehow.

Then Oliver spoke to get her attention, and when Felicity finally looked at him he stood, tucked the item away in his jacket, and approached her. He said something then leaned a little closer to her and said something else, and, after a moment, the woman smiled before looking down.

Cindy thought she might’ve really misunderstood the guy when, almost nervously, Oliver’s fingers twitched before he rested his hand gently on Felicity’s arm. The blonde looked up, and for a third time, although for completely different reasons, Cindy nearly interrupted them when she saw her friend begin to cry. But, Felicity wiped the tears away quickly, a testament to the strides she’d been making recently, smiled as she said something, and then she left the coffee shop. Oliver’s eyes trailed after her, and Felicity looked back once and returned his wave before she left his eyeline. As Cindy watched them part ways, she knew she’d completely misunderstood their conversation, and she couldn’t deny that she was curious as to its real contents.

As it turned out, however, her initial instinct that night might not have been so far off as she’d thought. Felicity stepped into the first alley she came to, and she leaned back into the wall with a hand on her stomach like she was trying to settle butterflies in her stomach. In that moment, Cindy knew the hunch she’d had when Oliver Queen had approached the blonde’s desk at his father’s company a couple weeks ago had hit pretty close to the mark. Felicity’s smile that day when she’d seen him had been the first and very telling clue, and now she had no doubts.

This may not have been a date, but Felicity clearly had a crush on the Prince of Starling City. Unrequited, it was the ultimate cliche, but when Cindy looked at Oliver as he stepped out onto the street, she realized it might not be as much of a cliche as initial assumptions would suggest. She didn’t like Oliver Queen, and she would be the first to admit it had something to do with circumstance, not just a personal dislike.

But, there was something in his eyes as he looked after Felicity that caught her off guard. His gaze was locked down the street, on the mouth of that alley as though he somehow knew where Felicity had gone, and if Cindy didn’t know better, she’d say he wanted to follow, to check on the blonde. In the end, however, he rubbed his fingers together, dropped his eyes to the sidewalk, and then turned to walk the other way down the street. She didn’t know why he’d chosen this option, but Cindy began to realize something.

Perhaps the situation wasn’t so cliched after all. It wasn’t as comforting of a thought as some might think it to be, and she frowned deeply. With one last look at Felicity, who appeared to have been aware where Oliver had just been looking given her head was turned toward the street as if to listen for him, Cindy stepped out of her own alley to follow after Oliver. Neither of them took notice of her.
Rather than head north, as she had expected him to, he headed west, and Cindy wondered for a moment why Starling’s Prince was heading to the Glades. That was, until she remembered he was opening some sort of club there. While surprised at how well he seemed to know the streets, Cindy still managed to use a shortcut to get ahead of him, and she waited in that alley until he crossed in front of her.

“I’ll give you one warning,” she said, and Oliver paused and turned, not as surprised to find her lurking there as she would’ve thought.

He took in her appearance, recognition lighting his eyes, and Cindy ignored the look that said some suspicion of his had been proven. Stepping out of the alley, she lowered her hood, so he could see just how serious she was when she said what followed.

“Don’t hurt her.”

This warning seemed a tad curious to him if nothing else.

“Felicity’s been through enough.”

Prince Ollie sounded and looked perfectly earnest when he said, “I don’t know what you-”

“Don’t,” Cindy cut him off, and he went quiet, “hurt her.”

For a moment, the man simply stared at her as though he was assessing what she meant. Or perhaps he was simply taking her threat at face value even though he might not understand the implication she was hinting at. Eventually, he gave a single nod.

“You have my word.”

Now it was Cindy’s turn to stare, to search his eyes for any hint of deception. When she was at last satisfied—oddly enough, this didn’t take long, and she was surprised at how quickly she was ready to believe him—she returned his nod. Then she turned, drew up her hood, and walked back down the alley.

Even if he wasn’t aware of it, which it seemed like he may not be, Oliver Queen’s obvious attachment to Felicity would only lead to the blonde getting hurt. Cindy was sure of this, and she sure as hell wasn’t just going to stand by and watch it happen.
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood… Our hero seems to have come down with a nasty case of the vigilante flu. While some simply refer to this as a gunshot wound, the fact remains that he’s forced to some rather drastic action. As his steward, one John Diggle, tries to save his life, he learns that some surprising things come in strange packages. Just who is Felicity Smoak, and where does a computer expert learn trauma surgery?

January 31, 2013:

It was a rash move, he knew. Oliver wasn’t prone to moments of spontaneity, but he needed to leave quickly. He couldn’t drive his motorcycle, not with a hole ripped through his chest, and Dig was too far away. His options of extraction were thus limited to one. He had absolutely no idea how she was going to take the news, and yet trust was somehow never a factor of his unease.

As he waited in her car, a small red vehicle that was rather suited to her for the oddity it was and which he had seen easily in the nearly vacant lot, he noted the irony of the situation. The only way to continue his crusade was for him to reveal his identity to someone whom he had hoped never to. To focus on something other that the blood seeping from the gunshot wound given to him by his own mother, Oliver focused his attention on the car and what it might say of its curious owner. There was little to glean, however, because one facet of her life had muted everything else.

With an almost desperate need to gain some measure of control in her life, Felicity Smoak had thoroughly and almost relentlessly cleaned every surface of the interior of the vehicle. He might even say she’d just bought the car had the purchase not been one of the few things on her he’d been able to dig up in his background check on her last Christmas. There were no receipts littering the console, no stains to describe eating habits, and there was an impressively small amount of debris on the underfoot rugs; he could still smell hints of the bleach from the thoroughness of her cleaning. The only thing in that car that said anything of Felicity personally—other than that she had gone through something traumatic and thus currently wished to control anything she could—were the computer parts he could see sticking out from under the passenger-side seat.

Truly ironic was that if he had been able to search more thoroughly, looked in the trunk, for instance, he would’ve discovered a truth about Felicity that would surprise even him; familiar gear stashed in a hidden, secondary compartment. Alas he had neither the inclination nor the strength to look there, so he remained ignorant.

It was as Oliver was beginning to muse that perhaps calling Diggle would’ve been faster after all that the door at his feet was thrown open. He looked down his bloodstained chest to see Felicity standing there with a hand inside her purse, likely to reach for some sort of weapon used for self defense. Her look of utter surprise told him she had already recognized him. From her angle, she could surely see underneath his hood, and the overhead light had turned on the instant she’d opened the door, lighting the shadows underneath the identity concealing headwear.

“I’m not gonna’ hurt you, Felicity.” He ground the words out through harshly clenched teeth as he shifted to lower the now useless hood.
She understood his meaning and removed her hand from her handbag, and then she stepped closer to the door to get a better look at him.

“Oliver, you- Oh my God, you’re bleeding.” He gave her an incredulous look, and she blushed, embarrassed. “Which you obviously know because you’re the one-” She cut off her own ramble, thankfully enough, because time was a factor here. “What do you need?”

Oliver had seen many things in the past five years that had surprised him, and yet this moment, her eagerness to help with no explanation needed, stuck out in his mind as noteworthy.

“I need you-”

He grimaced as his wound pulled painfully, and his vision went black for a moment. He was going to pass out soon.

When he looked back to the open door, he found Felicity to be gone, and he was confused until he saw the trunk pop open over the backseat. He heard her rummage around for all of three seconds before she slammed it shut again in her haste and then ran back around to the door. She held a clean workout towel out for him, and although surprised by her insight he accepted it with quiet thanks and held it to his shoulder to help stop the bleeding.

“I need you,” he continued his earlier statement, “to take me to my father’s factory in the Glades.” Felicity nodded and made as if to retreat from the door. “And please,” he said, more desperately than he had intended, and she paused, likely not expecting to hear him say this, before bringing her face back into view to look at him. “Don’t take me anywhere else.”

He was going to pass out. He wouldn’t be awake for the trip or likely any of what followed. He had to be sure he was going to the foundry.

Felicity stared at him for a moment, taking in the gravity of his words, and then she nodded. Oliver was instantly relieved, and he wondered if he should be concerned by his inexplicable trust in this woman whom he’d only met on a few brief occasions.

“Watch your feet,” she said somewhat gently, indicating his feet which were hanging out of the open door--his tall frame wasn’t exactly built for such a small space--and he quickly complied, pulling them back inside the vehicle, so she could close the door.

He was already starting to fade out when Felicity took the driver’s seat and started the car.

Just before he blacked out, he saw her turn in her seat to look at him and say, “Hold on, Oliver. Stay with me, okay?”

The last thought to go through his mind before he lost consciousness was that something about that statement from her seemed awfully familiar.

Oliver Queen is bleeding out in her car.

Oliver Queen is bleeding out in her car.

Felicity speeds through three red lights because, let’s face it, the streets are empty, and she’s in a bit of a hurry. In a brief moment of consciousness, he mentioned the club’s side door and it’s access code, and this is fortunate because she otherwise wouldn’t have been able to explain away how she
already knows both. By the time she finally pulls around Verdant, he’s gone deathly pale, and she’s in a nearly full-blown panic.

It takes her two tries to key in the code correctly because her hands are shaking so badly, and then she’s leaping down the steps two at a time--thankful she wears modest heels, when she wears them at all.

When she enters the giant space underground, John Diggle is already out of his seat with his weapon drawn because, let’s face it, she probably sounds nothing like Oliver on the stairs. But, as soon as he recognizes her he gets this look of complete bafflement that might amuse her under different circumstances.

“I can’t carry him,” is all she says, but it’s all she has to say because the man is up and bounding over even as she’s turning to head back up the stairs.

With Mr. Diggle supporting most of Oliver’s weight, they somehow manage to get the wounded vigilante out of the backseat of her mini, down the stairs, and onto a metal gurney; or maybe it’s just a table, but Felicity doesn’t care enough in that moment to give the question another thought.

John says Oliver has a ‘Zone 2’ wound. She doesn’t know what that is, but judging by the amount of blood, it probably means it’s bad. A bullet barely missing the carotid artery will do that, she supposes. He’s talking, something about ‘no hospitals’, and the blonde suppresses a catty “Duh,” because the man is explaining this to ‘simple computer nerd Felicity’, not ‘secret vigilante Felicity’. Normal Felicity should want to take Oliver to a hospital despite the questions it will arise in the populace of Starling City. Vigilante Felicity knows that’s not an option.

Gunshot wounds have to be reported to the police.

Felicity doesn’t hear much of what John says. She’s too focused on the amount of red on her hand as she holds a cloth to the bullet wound and how pale Oliver has gotten. If he doesn’t get more blood in him soon…

But, maybe she should be paying more attention because that’s just the issue John is trying to address. Felicity--still a little in shock, she admits--lets the man take her place in applying pressure to the bleeding hole in Oliver’s chest, and he sets a bag of ‘O-something’ blood on the table--focus, brain! As John lifts the cloth to examine the wound, Felicity takes a step back. Her hands are shaking quite a lot, she notes numbly.

There’s so much blood on them…

She wills the images not to come, but they do anyway. She fights against them, and this leaves her with disjointed fragments that still impact her heavily. She’s in two places then: standing in the secret base of a friend who’s bleeding out and on a burning freighter off the coast of a forsaken island.

She can’t stop looking at the blood on her hands.

Then she hears John say, “Damn it…” in that quiet yet foreboding way he does, and she’s suddenly back in the present.

“What?” she hears herself ask, although she doesn’t actually remember saying the word.

“The bullet is still inside,” the man informs her, and Felicity knows instantly that this makes matters of mending the wound infinitely more difficult--they can’t close it with the bullet in there, or the risk of long-term complications will be even greater. It means the bullet has to be removed.
And, just like that, her hands stop shaking as a wave of inexplicable calm washes over her.

She knows what she has to do.

John is saying something about his army training, but Felicity’s still not listening--she’ll apologize later for how utterly rude she’s being. In a blur of movement, the blonde is beside him, snatching up a pair of rubber gloves and hastily putting them on.

“I can do that,” she says.

Despite the situation, John Diggle finds the time to stop and look at her like she’s just sprouted a second head--gawd, she can’t even imagine the babbling if she could talk to herself. To be fair, it is an odd thing for her to claim, but a spot just off to the side of her stomach gives a phantom throb to reinforce the matter.

“Felicity, are you s-”

“Yes!” She says it a little harshly, and now she’ll really have to apologize to him later because she shouldn’t take that tone with a man who just wants to be sure that his friend isn’t being treated by one of those “I read about it on the internet” doctors.

Still, John moves aside for her, and Felicity grabs two pairs of calipers. She takes in a deep breath to calm herself and ease the shaking of her hands until they’re still. If the bullet is as close to Oliver’s carotid as John suggested, she could puncture it while removing the offending bullet. She’ll have to be careful. Perhaps building computers from scratch is more help in this regard than it seems at first glance, however, because steadiness is important for both.

It certainly helped her last time.

May 28th, 2008:

“I don’t think I can do this,” Felicity said as she looked down at the enemy campsite--with the sun down for about an hour, the site was lit only by a few lights hanging on posts and more stars in the sky than she had ever seen back in Vegas.

Who was she kidding? She didn’t know anything about that thing. How was she supposed to shut it down? It wasn’t like she had the schematics in front of her, and there weren’t exactly classes at MIT geared towards how to program your personal missile launcher.

“And I won’t force you,” Slade said beside her, and she was relieved for a moment. “But, kid, I don’t know the first thing about that beast, and neither does Shado. You’re the only one with a real shot at taking it down.”

She saw memory flashes from the plane, people getting sucked out after a hole was blown into the side, and Felicity knew Slade was right. It had to be stopped. Fighting a powerful wave of nausea, both for her memories and for her fear, she gave a nod.

“Like I said before,” Slade continued, placing a hand on her shoulder, “you’re not actually going down there, kid. You just have to-”

“Use the radio,” Felicity finished for him, nodding along. They’d gone over this on the way over. She took a deep breath to settle her roiling nerves. It didn’t work especially well. “Alright.”
“Are you sure?” Felicity got the distinct impression from his tone, however he tried to hide it, that Slade was getting impatient with all the waiting. On her other side, Shado was a stark contrast of silent passivity. “Because we’ve likely only got one shot at this. As soon as they realize we’re here, they’ll pull all of their men back here with the rest, and then we won’t have a hope of getting to it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure.” And, if she didn’t sound it, then who was he to judge? “Let’s get this over with. I have an interview to get to. Though… I think it was actually yesterday. Maybe they’ll let me reschedule. I mean, not everyone has the excuse that their plane got blown up, right? They can’t just ignore—” Slade and Shado were both staring at her in that way, so Felicity clamped her mouth shut. “Sorry.”

“Then, let’s do this.” Slade moved right onto business before she could change her mind again, and when Felicity turned to look at him, he was already gone.

“Whoa!” She looked around, peeking into the surrounding brush, but she couldn’t see him anywhere. “Frickin’ ninja, here. Can I learn that?” she asked no one in particular, and beside her Shado smiled her first smile since the death of her father.

In the end, the girl managed the task with a heavy sigh of relief, straightening with a bloodied and mangled piece of metal tweezed between the calliper prongs. Diggle was quick to take her place then, and in moments he’d stitched the wound shut with little trouble. Felicity had done good work. Oliver’s carotid was still well in tact, and there were no further complications as he sewed the torn skin together.

Once they’d finished treating Oliver, Felicity asked where the bathroom was. She ended up taking a while, so he went upstairs briefly to check on her. When he heard her puking through the door, however, he decided it was best to give her some space. His questions could wait.

While he waited, he went down to keep an eye on Oliver, relieved that the heart monitor he had hooked up moments before was still beating out a regular cadence. He checked the man’s vitals again, which were already a touch stronger with the blood transfusion in place. Everything was looking good, all things considered. The one thing Diggle couldn’t treat was the fact that it was Oliver’s own mother who had shot him. He wasn’t sure there was even any licensed professional who would be able to touch that mess.

When Felicity finally made it out of the restroom and back downstairs—her hands red from what must’ve been a lot of scrubbing to get Oliver’s blood off—John had patched the wound completely, had wrapped it after applying heavy antiseptics to fight off potential infections from the foreign body that had been in his bloodstream. When she saw this, Felicity seemed a bit more relaxed, and he thought it a wonder she’d been able to fish the bullet out of Oliver’s shoulder with such finesse just moments before when she clearly had a strong dislike for the sight of blood. And, as she meandered around the lair, taking in all of the odds and ends of Oliver’s secret life, she didn’t seem particularly surprised by anything she saw.

The girl was an oddity in more than just her speech, it seemed.

“Where did you learn that?”

Felicity turned, a tad surprised to hear him speak, and John realized by the circles under her eyes just how tired she must be--finesse while in such a state was another odd facet to consider about her. She didn’t seem to follow his line of thought, so Diggle inclined his head towards Oliver. Realization
dawned in Felicity’s expression, but it was quickly replaced by a look so guarded and closed off that he struggled to reconcile the girl with the chatty, chipper one he’d briefly met at QC when Oliver was there visiting his mother some weeks previous—the girl had been delivering something to Walter Steele at the time. Felicity averted her eyes and folded her arms across her chest.

“Let’s just say I learned a lot of first aid while I was away.”

Diggle was instantly confused by this comment.

“Away?” he asked, and Felicity turned back to him, taken aback by something.

She looked surprised before, as her gaze slowly drifted over to Oliver, her eyes softened into an expression he would later recognize as trust.

He doesn’t know.

It’s the conclusion Felicity quickly comes to as she observes John Diggle’s curious expression. She’s not quite sure how to take the news at first, and she finds moments later that her eyes have strayed over to Oliver, still unconscious on the slab. On the one hand, she now has to explain what happened to her to John Diggle, to fend off his curiosity over her unusual skills if nothing else. On the other hand…

He’s kept her secret.

Something flutters inside Felicity’s stomach as she watches Oliver slumber, and she has to take a breath to settle it. But, then she realizes she’s been caught staring by the man’s partner, and she blushes, averting her gaze.

Of course, when she says, “I was stranded on an island for four years after my plane went down,” her undoubtedly obvious crush on the vigilante is surely the farthest thing from John’s mind.

“You were~” he stops himself short. He’d heard her correctly, and he knows it. Now he’s just working on the transition between the stages of hearing to comprehension.

“I’m still finishing up my Master’s right now because of it.”

Silence falls after these admissions, and Felicity knows she’s being sized up because of them. It’s not the first time this knowledge has made people reconsider her. She sometimes wonders what it makes them think, but she never asks.

She doesn’t want to know that people pity her.

It was early into the morning when Oliver finally began to rouse, and John glanced over at Felicity. She was seated in front of the lair’s computer, her feet propped up on the chair with her and her knees drawn up to her chest as she observed the progress of some sort of computer diagnostic she’d set in motion. Her head was tilted to rest on her shoulder, and he would think she was asleep if she hasn’t been in that very same position hours before. John had thought her asleep then as well, but the instant Oliver had gone into a seizure, Felicity had been up on full alert far too quickly for any sleeping person. She then proceeded to save Oliver’s life when, after his heart stopped and the
defibrillator malfunctioned, she’d worked some of her tech magic to get it functioning again. Even after the stress of the night, however, John still got the feeling that she, like himself, was unable to sleep despite the exhaustion he’d seen in her hours earlier.

“Felicity,” he said, and his hunch was proven correct when she spun around the instant he said her name. She was on her feet the instant next and approached Oliver alongside John.

Oliver looked up at the ceiling, blinking several times to adjust his eyes, and then he turned as he heard the pairs’ approaching footsteps. That he didn’t instantly go on high alert told John that he’d recognized his surroundings. When he saw John, he was relieved, but when he saw the small, odd blonde woman whose help he had rather recklessly enlisted, his expression and posture shifted into something completely different. It was something John had never seen from the man before; he was pleasantly surprised to see her there.

John glanced at the woman once more, wondering again just who Felicity Smoak was but this time in the context that she was someone Oliver had clearly sought out in a moment of weakness—as to whether Oliver realized this fact, John doubted it because the man was dense in all matters that didn’t involve where to shoot his arrows next. He probably also failed to notice the way his carefully barred barriers seemed to fall just a little bit.

On some level, John called it in that moment. Stranger things had certainly happened.

“You stayed,” Oliver said, his voice hoarse and dry.

Beside John, the girl gave a nervous little smile as she fidgeted with her hands, which were still a little red from her earlier overly harsh scrubbing.

“I did,” Felicity said quietly in turn.

Oliver smiled then. It was small, but it was one of the few earnest smiles John had seen from the man.

“I’m glad.”

Oliver couldn’t deny the small bit of disappointment he felt in Felicity’s lackluster response to joining the team.

“Well, anyway, I’ll help you find Walter,” she had said, “but then Felicity Smoak goes back to her boring internship Co-op with QC. Deal?”

The way she’d phrased it had caught Oliver’s attention as odd because he’d thought himself the only one to ever refer to himself in the third person—Diggle had been right when he’d said it was strange. But, he had accepted her counteroffer, and Felicity would be back the following night to do more work on his systems. Her hasty insistence that she had been referring to his computer systems had mildly amused him, and he thanked her before bidding her goodnight, thinking how he may appreciate having her around for more than just her abounding skills with technology.

Diggle, however, didn’t wait long after the door up the stairs had closed behind her to voice his concerns.

“Oliver, you just asked that girl to throw herself into the wolf’s den. Don’t you think that’s a little reckless?”
“We can protect her, Diggle,” Oliver countered, honestly trying to tell himself this as much as he was his compatriot because the thought that this line of work may place the woman in danger… unsettled him.

He didn’t like to be unsettled.

“And if we can’t?”

The question was a loaded one, and Oliver didn’t have any viable response other than to reaffirm what he’d already said with a falsely sure, “We can.” John, a moral compass the archer was starting to rely on, seemed less than certain.

“We need her,” was Oliver’s next argument, and Diggle nodded without argument.

At least he agreed with him on this.

“Are you sure she can handle it?” John asked next, and the archer was about to respond when he was cut off. “And before you answer, let me be clear. That girl has clearly been through a lot. She told me about what happened to her, about her being stranded.”

“She told you?” Oliver was a little surprised.

He denied the little voice in the back of his head that said he was jealous, that said he himself hadn’t been told, hadn’t been trusted with the information--although Felicity might’ve told him herself the previous night if he hadn’t informed her that he’d already known. Felicity had only just met John, and yet she’d already told him her darkest secret. It shouldn’t matter to him whether Felicity trusted him in this way, so Oliver pushed these thoughts aside, shoved the childish jealousy into his mental compactor for subsequent demolishing and shoved it into a back corner of his mind with all of his other personal baggage.

John nodded and said, “Mm-hmm. Just after she pulled that bullet out of your neck--which is another thing we should talk about sometime because I have no idea what kind of deserted island forces you to learn trauma surgery. But, right now, what I worry about is her mental situation.”

Oliver was still trying to fully understand the first part of this statement, that it had been Felicity to remove the bullet from him, when the second pushed that thought onto a backburner.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and Diggle sighed.

“I mean that I’ve known a lot of soldiers after they came back from the war, Oliver. Some of ’em appear fine for a while, but it’s only when a trigger is found that you realise anything is wrong.”

Oliver was ready to respond, to say Felicity wasn’t a soldier and to ask what he was trying to say, but John beat him to the punch with the answer to that very question.

“I’m talking about PTSD, Oliver,” he said, and this quieted the archer and his growing irritation quickly. “Probably undiagnosed, but I recognised the symptoms tonight when she had your blood on her hands.”

Oliver tried to reconcile those two--three--things, Felicity and PTSD--and his blood on her hands)--but the relation rebelled in his mind for a moment. Until he thought of how quick to startle she’d been when he’d first met her and how alert she always seemed to be each time since, almost like she was just waiting to be set off.

“I’m saying,” John reinforced, not continuing until he knew he had Oliver’s full attention. “We need
May 28th, 2008:

The plan wasn’t going as it was supposed to. Slade had managed to lure most of the guards away, leading them on what she was sure was a merry romp through the forest. But trying to talk someone through disabling a device she wasn’t familiar with over a glorified walkie-talkie was more of a challenge than Felicity had anticipated. Shado managed to find the onboard terminal, but they then spent so long trying to figure out how to communicate what they needed to that Shado had been spotted. So, off she went too, chased by the remaining soldiers, and then Felicity was alone in enemy territory. The biggest part of her wanted to just curl into a ball and hope either Slade or Shado would come back for her.

But a much smaller part of her, the part that was pissed at the world and prone to righteous fury, thought of the plane. She thought of 200 murdered people. She thought of the survivors, of their grief; the man who had succeeded his wife by the most horrible means and the girl who was so distraught by the death of her sister that she’d yet to even speak. After tonight, these soldiers would move this thing back to where they couldn’t get to it, and who knew what they would do after that? How many more planes did they plan to bring down for reasons unknown?

Ultimately, it was this last thought that got Felicity moving.

So, the blonde slunk from her hiding spot and did her best to sneak down to the monster machine that had caused her so much grief. The terminal was still open and active, so she got right to work, scouring its files for what she needed.

“Alright, Scylla, talk to me.”

It took longer than she would’ve liked, but the system was unfamiliar to her, and she had to keep checking her surroundings to make sure no one had returned yet. Finally, however--her watch told her it had been just over five minutes--she found a promising directory. It brought her into the launcher’s targeting files. She didn’t have time to keep searching for another way to bring it down, so she ran with it. After hacking in--hey, those skills were still useful after all--she scoured the code for something she could tweak that would make the thing useless for downing any more aircraft. In the end, she added just a few lines to the code, short but devastating. The launcher would still lock onto its target, indicating nothing was wrong, but seconds after it fired the missile, the missile’s online guidance chip would invert its vertical coordinate axis.

Up would be down.

She didn’t want to risk the missile managing to hit something else if she just altered its course a little, and the vindictive part of her was going to get a kick out of this logical alternative. If she couldn’t let the missile go up, she would make it go down, and the only thing down to hit were the very soldiers using it.

She was going to get a kick out of-

“Hey!”

“Freeze!”

Damn…
Felicity had gotten so immersed in the code that she hadn’t noticed a few soldiers return to the area, and she’d been spotted. She quickly exited to the home screen of the terminal to keep anyone from easily noticing what she’d altered, and then she held up her hands in surrender. The three men were shouting at her, and as Felicity followed their orders to back away and kneel on the ground, she couldn’t help but cry because these past few days had just been so cruel to her.

But, at least her last act would be turning Scylla on its masters.
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood… our hero finds himself stepping out of his little box at the behest of the team’s newest official member. When this member is granted the vigilante badge of honor of having one’s life threatened by a villain, he himself is surprised by the depths of his protectiveness.

“Why?” Felicity growls, well aware that she’s approaching the point of irritation where she fails to notice just how loud she’s being--it’s when she uses her ‘loud voice’. “Why is that so ridiculous? I get it. The people on that list are full of bad juju for Starling, but not every baddie in this city is on there. You went after the Count. How is that different?”

Oliver has ‘grr’ face on, but Felicity is far from intimidated. After facing down a madman with the Mirakuru, she’s seen much scarier.

“Because his poison had nearly killed my sister.” Oliver is trying to control his tone, but that tic in his jaw tells the blonde it’s a battle he’ll soon lose. “Those were special circumstances.”

Felicity knows this. Having never even seen them interact, she knows his sister is a sensitive topic for Oliver, that he’d go to the ends of the Earth just to cheer her up. Honestly, it’s that he went after the Count, deviated from his ‘all-important’ course, all because his sister had been hurt tells Felicity this much. Yet, during her time working with him, she’s started to hope that maybe he could see what kind of good he could do for his city if he stopped ‘playing favorites’ with the bad guys.

“Oh, so you’ll deviate,” the blonde groused, more insulted than she should be when she already knows how single-minded he is about this subject, “but only for personal reasons.”

“Yes!” Oliver ‘shouts’ in indignation--although maybe that’s as loud as his voice actually goes. “I think you’ve misunderstood what exactly it is I do. I’m not a hero, Felicity. I came back to hunt down a specific group of people. If you can’t handle that, then there’s the door!”

Oh, his voice definitely goes louder. Felicity doesn’t say the first--or third--thing that comes to her mind. She doesn’t want to burn this bridge Oliver has extended to her--or, to ‘maskless’ her.

But, she’s still pretty pissed that he’s turned on her like this so quickly just because she tried to make him really think about what it is he’s trying to accomplish.

“You know what?” she asks, and she throws her hands up in defeat. “Fine!”

And with that, she turns and storms over to and up the stairs that lead out of this dungeon he’s made for himself. He doesn’t call after her to apologize for his rudeness, but she doesn’t expect him to. Oliver isn’t the ‘regret his opinions’ type of person. When she glances down the stairs as she’s opening the door, however, she sees him rub his brow as he stares down at his feet with a hand on his hip. She thinks he might’ve at least regretted his tone, and it makes her feel a little better about the entire situation.

She’ll keep on him about it all and hope she might start to burrow some of these thoughts deep
enough into his thick skull, that he could do so much more with his skills and his drive, that he could be so much more than an assassin in all but name.

And if it brings him back a little bit from that darkness she can tell he’s been living in, then she won’t complain.

It wasn’t that Oliver was a cruel man. During his time back in the States, his conscience had begun to return to him in little pieces, sometimes painfully for how resistant he was to the change, and he knew a lot of the reason for his changing had to do with the people with whom he was spending his time. They helped reassert him into a world he’d thought he could never belong to again, and they constantly challenged the more stubborn aspects of what remained of his harsh time away, made him do some serious self-reflecting about the kind of man he wanted to be.

But, this was the piece of his new self that he was most adamant to hold onto. It was what made him the hunter he was, the hunter he needed to be. He knew it made him seem cold from the outside, ignoring the pain of so many to further the crusade he’d inherited, but it wasn’t without reason. He had come back home for a single purpose, to right the horrible wrongs of his father—and, as it turned out, his mother—by taking down the poisonous elite who had been allowed to fester for far too long in his city. He couldn’t spend all of his time treating the symptoms of the illness when he had a map to the causes in his possession. In his opinion, that would’ve been the cruel road for him to take, to prolong the suffering of the city when he was the one in the best position to excise the malignant tumors that were the source of all the pain.

Diggle had made a good point, however. While he didn’t agree with the man about the potential dangers Felicity posed by knowing who he was, Oliver knew he couldn’t just let her walk away. They rather desperately needed someone on the team with her skillset, and… he liked having her around. Not only could she honestly amuse him—an impressive feat all its own—but she gave him hope with how well she appeared to be adjusting after her own ordeal, hope that he wasn’t as lost of a cause as he’d initially thought. So, he wanted her to stay on the team, and maybe it was a little selfish of him because of the secondary reasons why.

Ultimately, he decided that the occasional step outside of his crusade would be worth it to keep her with them.

She thinks the plan is a good one: lure Willick Norton, otherwise known as the Dodger, out with a broach that Oliver purchased for the charity auction. The tracker she’d placed inside would ensure the man didn’t disappear this time. As they mill around with the other patrons, waiting for the event to begin, Felicity is scanning the faces around her while trying to ignore how much the long-sleeves of her modest dress are removed from the elegant and sleeveless ‘show as much classy skin as possible’ gowns of the women around her. Short-sleeves are out for her, have been for a while. The style isn’t worth the questions that would come when everyone saw the scars on her arms, so she considers in an acceptable loss.

In a few minutes, they’re all finally being told the auction is about to start, and Felicity turns to her new partners, raring to get to work.

“Ohay!” she says as she claps her hands together. “Ready to auction off the family jewels?”
And she immediately goes quiet as all color drains from her face because she certainly hadn’t meant it that way. She regrets the comment the instant she says it, and now she can’t get the image out of her head of Oliver, holding a number card with one hand and a heart-shaped box of chocolates in front of his ‘family jewels’--but he’s otherwise naked--with the other, and a rose is clenched between his teeth as he arches one eyebrow in a suggestive manner.

She hopes desperately that they mistake the flush that takes over her cheeks for embarrassment.

“Not- Not as in-” she tries to amend, but the damage has already been done. They clearly know she hadn’t meant what she said based on how it came out, but Oliver and Diggle are also clearly amused by how flustered she appears--Diggle moreso than Oliver, who’s also trying to hide how uncomfortable he is at the notion of selling his-Moving on.

“Anyway,” Felicity tries to force them all back on track, and she blesses their hearts when the boys comply, and then she turns to follow the crowd as they all file into the spacious room where the event is being held.

Gawd, her brain phrases things in the worst possible ways sometimes.

“We don’t know when this guy might show up,” Oliver says. He’s in Arrow mode now, and this is an instant relief to Felicity. “Or even if he will, so our best bet is probably to split up to search the room.”

“He’s getting away,” Felicity says.

She should’ve known it wouldn’t go as well as the plan suggested. This is just her luck.

Oliver doesn’t wait long to ask, “Are you okay?”

And, let’s face it, she sounds a little lethargic. She’ll admit that. Getting tazed with a shock stick does that, she supposes, and it’s certainly not helping her walk very quickly. She hasn’t been this poorly coordinated since High School Gym class--although, to be fair, she’d been five years younger than her classmates.

“Well, he sort of got the tracer off the broach,” she says as she tries to calmly make her way through the sea of very rich people who are unaware of the danger they’re currently in just by their sheer proximity to her, “so I kind of had to confront him to get another one on him.”

Slipped it right in his pocket as she’d grabbed his arm to stop him from leaving.

Oliver asks where she is, but she avoids the question. She has to keep them away. She can’t let them find her. She just has to find a hole to crawl into. Reduce the collateral damage of her stupidity to hopefully just herself.

She should’ve remembered about the volt baton.

“Felicity!”

Felicity slips inside one of the side rooms, one that’s clearly in the early stages of setup for another event because there are rows of tables lined up all the way to the back of the room. She supposes it will do. At least it’s vacant of all occupants besides herself.
“Over here, Oliver!”

Damn…

Felicity makes her way to the other side of one of the long rows of tables, leaning heavily on it for support because her legs don’t quite seem like they want to work correctly just yet, just as John enters through the door it seems he’d seen her stumble through.

“No,” she tells him as she holds her hand out to him in a halting gesture, and John goes still as his eyes drop to her neck.

“Oh, damn…”

Oliver enters then, but when he sees the same thing John had, he instead surges forward as the force of nature that he is.

“No!” She’s more insistent this time because he--everyone--has to stay away.

Of course, when he jumps the table--it’s so unfair that he doesn’t have to wear heels--and lands inches in front of her fleeing form, putting her hand on his chest is the only way Felicity can stop herself from running headlong into him. She tries to back away, but the archer's hands on her upper arms halt her.

“No, Oliver, you have to go! He’s getting away, and you have to evacuate the building. More importantly, you have to leave this room!”

His jaw shifts as his eyes momentarily drop to the bomb collar around her throat, but part of her knows he has no intention of leaving her there. Still, she has to try to convince him.

“I’ll stay in here. Make myself a little fort of tables in case-”

“That’s not going to happen, Felicity,” he says firmly as he gives her a gentle shake so as to make her look him straight in the eye. She hopes he doesn’t notice that shiver that goes up her spine.

Dying alone isn’t an option, it seems.

“Let me look,” John then says as he slides over the table to land beside them and Felicity feels bad because Oliver’s eyes on her like that had somehow made her forget the other man was in the room with them.

As he looks at the device, undoubtedly trying to understand its functionality, Dig gruffs out to Oliver, “Go get this bastard. You won’t be any help here.”

Oliver’s eyes are on her. She can feel them as she stares at a spot on the wall over John’s head, and Felicity just knows he has his ‘grr’ face on. She wonders if he’s waiting to be sure he’s actually of no help or if he’s waiting for her say-so.

“But, when John shouts, “Go!” the man is off in a flash, and she then thinks that maybe, for a reason she can’t name, her situation had briefly stalled him into a state of inaction.

She supposes he doesn’t want to lose her skillset so soon after adding it to his arsenal.

This bomb is more sophisticated than many of the explosive devices John had probably seen while in active duty, and that furrow that quickly forms in his brow doesn’t speak well of his chances of disarming it.
Soon, however, Felicity realizes she’s having trouble breathing, and her stomach drops because she recognizes the sensation in an instant.

John has clearly noticed something is wrong, however, because his eyes are on her instead of the bomb around her throat that could blow and kill both of them at any moment.

“Felicity? What’s-”

He goes silent when she covers her eyes with her hand, retreating into the dark in an attempt to get a handle on her breathing. It doesn’t work. She gulps down a lungful of air that helps just as little.

Nothing ever works.

“There’s a bomb stuck to my throat…” she says, “and I’m having a panic attack, oh my God!”

Realizing this somehow just makes it so much worse. Her chest gets even tighter, and then it’s hard to breathe. This is the worst possible time for her to break down—not that there’s ever really a good time for such a thing.

“What’s going on?” Oliver asks in their ears, and John growls in frustration as he gives up on the bomb. “Talk to me, Diggle!”

“Stay on target, Oliver! The only way to disarm this thing is that control the Dodger has on him.”

Felicity feels like she’s suffocating because of the thing around her throat, and then she’s back on Lian Yu, trying to get Slade to calm down because he’s choking the life out of her. Then she’s lying on cold concrete with a gloved hand clamped around her throat, and Slade’s cold, unresponsive eyes are replaced by the livid and hungry, shrouded gaze of the Dark Archer as he looks forward to watching her die. Unintentionally, Felicity whimpers. It’s not something she’s proud of, and she would take it back if she could just breathe. She doesn’t hear much other than a general murmur of white noise, and her head feels light, almost like it will just float away from her—which would actually solve the whole ‘bomb around neck’ issue, but she rather likes her head where it is.

Between the spots in her vision, she can vaguely make out the concerned expression of John Diggle. She can see he’s trying to say something, but all she manages to catch are a few sparse words that don’t mean anything when summed together. Then he gives her a subtle shake, and her mind clears a little, just enough for her to make out what he says next.

“Felicity, you need to breathe out. You’re breathing in too much.”

She can see that he’s being serious, and it’s in that moment that she realizes she’s also hyperventilating. She nods to tell John that she understands and tries to do what he’d said. It’s slow progress because it seems so counterintuitive to force air out when she feels like all she needs in that moment is to breathe in, but she manages a few pitiful exhalations that make her feel marginally better.

Then she sees the Dark Archer’s eyes again, and she flinches harshly away. With his hands still on her arms, however, John holds her steady.

“Felicity, stay with me,” John says, and she finds his eyes again through the haze of memory flashes battling for supremacy. “Don’t go there.”

Felicity’s denial must be ingrained in her at this point because she doesn’t even really hear herself say it when she asks, “Go where?” as if she can get him to think he’s mistaken what’s going on.

“Wherever it is you’re going. I don’t need details. I just need you to stay here. Focus for me,
Felicity. How many lights are in the room?’

It seems so ridiculous at first that Felicity actually laughs. Or, maybe she just thinks she laughs. Either way, she finds it funny in an ‘are you being serious?’ kind of way.

“How many-”

“-lights are in the room?” John finishes for her.

Although she still thinks it a little silly, she turns her eyes up to try her hand at counting. She ignores the glimpse of dark cell that her mind summons, accompanied by a vengeful throb in her stomach.

Five by eight is-

“Forty recessed ceiling lights. One lit chandelier with… ten fake candle lights, which I’ve always thought is a little cheesy. Uhm…”

As she turns her eyes to the lights on the walls and thinks about how there are an awful lot of light fixtures in this relatively small room--she didn’t want to know what their utilities bill looked like--Felicity realizes that she’s having a slightly easier time focussing, and her breaths are a little calmer.

“Whoa,” she exhales, stunned, and John chuckles.

It was a grounding question.

“Yeah, that’s the idea.”

As Felicity is about to respond, a click sounds in her ear, signalling that Oliver has reactivated his mic, and she knows John heard it too because he’s looked sideways towards his ear and has gone stiff.

“Everything okay?” Oliver asks.

“For the moment,” John says. “Oliver, what’s-”

“I have the detonator.”

They’re the best four words Felicity has heard in a long time. She hears a beep, and then the necklace bomb’s lock disengages. Air floods into her lungs, and she sags onto the tabletop behind her. With her trembling hands, she covers her eyes as her breaths come in shaky, and she just takes a moment to let her body come to the realization that she won’t be dying today.

It had been the most efficient way to end the conflict. With that nerve severed, Willick Norton wouldn’t have even be able to twitch his fingers, much less push the button on the detonator to kill his victim. It was just the logical decision to make.

But, when Norton had mentioned the ‘inquisitive blonde’, Oliver had remembered the look he’d last seen on Felicity’s face, the barely suppressed terror with a redness to her glistening eyes that spoke of building tears. And, he’d remembered her say something over the comms about a panic attack during his chase of the man who’d put her in that position. He felt a degree of morbid satisfaction in knowing the excruciating pain Norton would later be experiencing as his median nerve tried to repair itself. As an added bonus, the man would likely never regain full functionality of his hand.
As he walked back into the auction hall, Oliver paid little mind to the fact that no one was any the wiser to how very poorly the night could’ve ended for them. His attention was solely on his destination. The fight was over, the threat dealt with, but only when he walked into that side room and saw Felicity sitting on a table, wearily staring down at her now shoeless feet but otherwise physically alright, did Oliver feel his body relax. John rose from beside her and crossed the room to join Oliver at the door, and Felicity finally looked up from her feet to meet the archer’s gaze.

As their eyes locked, he realized he wanted to say something, which was a notion he was entirely unaccustomed to. He was used to silence, welcomed it as his most frequent ally. And, yet, he felt words forming in his chest, a jumble of things he would trip over if he tried to give them voice.

He was sorry, sorry she’d been put in danger after agreeing to help him in his crusade and sorry that he’d been unable to keep her from being put in harm’s way when he was the one who had asked it of her.

He was curious and worried about what had happened while he was chasing down the Dodger. All he knew was it probably had to do with the PTSD John had mentioned only a few days ago that she likely had. Was she alright now?

He was concerned. Had he made a mistake in asking her to do this? Would it all prove to be too much for her?

But, he was also relieved.

On the drive back, he’d been expecting anger from her, outrage for his utter failure, and he had expected her to rescind her offer to help them the instant she set eyes on him. She had every right to, had every right to just walk out of his dangerous life. He wouldn’t stop her. He might even encourage it.

Instead, she just smiled.

A pressure in Oliver’s chest let up, and he only noticed then how difficult it had been to breathe before.

“Did you get him?”

Oliver was snapped from all of these internal thoughts, and he turned to find John Diggle, the source of the question. He nodded.

“The police should be arresting him about now.”

Diggle exhaled a sigh of relief and ran a hand over his head. In his mind, the matter was done. Oliver, on the other hand, knew he should’ve ended the matter permanently, made it so Willick Norton wouldn’t ever make another bomb. He knew the cost of sparing killers, and he knew that whatever blood they spilled in the future would be on his hands also. But, he hadn’t killed him because he had been asked to avoid lethal means.

Asked by a naïve kid in a hood.

And asked by Felicity.

Subconsciously, his eyes turned to the woman as his mind did, and he found her eyes on them as she was probably curious about their conversation. Oliver found himself suddenly agitated and in need of a reason to leave because it was one thing to tell himself he would avoid killing in order to enlist the help of the computer expert and the kid who was affiliated with her.
It was another thing entirely to avoid killing for Felicity.

“Take her home,” he said curtly as he turned his eyes squarely back onto Diggle, and the man seemed surprised by the sudden shift in his tone and demeanor. “I’ll take the bomb.”

Oliver held his hand out as he said this, and Diggle hesitated only a moment before handing it over.

“What’re you going to do?” John asked as the archer was already turning.

An internal voice said he was going to get it far, far from Felicity.

What he said aloud was, “Shoot it.”

And, he did. He drove up the coast, far enough that he was out of town, and when he was sure the roads were empty, he threw the bomb out over the ocean and shot it clean through with an incendiary arrow. It blew, and then he was frustrated by his own satisfaction in this, so he shot a few more of the shards before the husk fell into the roiling sea below. He told himself he’d shot it to keep it from blowing where it could still cause harm, and it was the only explanation he let himself dwell on. He drove back with his old friend, silence, but this time that emptiness allowed for too many troubling thoughts to tumble around in his head, things that left his fingers twitching on the handles of his bike and left his brow ever furrowed.

Was he making a mistake in expanding his operation?

Would he be able to track down the Dark Archer even with the help of his new allies?

Were they making him soft, weak in his dealings?

Should he instead embrace their influence as part of finally returning to the world?

Did Starling actually need a surgeon, a cold hunter, or did it need something else?

What if they did manage to defeat the Dark Archer?

Lastly…

When had Felicity Smoak become something else for him to lose?

Oliver was surprised when he stepped down into the Foundry a little over an hour later to find the space not unoccupied. Then he was irritated because this, sitting in her desk chair and swaddled in a blanket with her feet on the cushion and a mug of something--he could smell a faint scent of cocoa that suggested it was hot chocolate--held between her hands while she watched something run on the computer, wasn’t what he had meant when he’d told Diggle to take Felicity ‘home’. He took his phone out to call the man and demand an explanation, but then he noticed the odd angle of Felicity’s head over the top of the chair and the lax nature of her grip on the cup of cocoa. Silently, he rounded to get a proper look at her.

She was asleep.

Oliver was stunned into inaction for several beats before he turned to stow his bow on it’s stand, his entire reason for returning to the Foundry. He sent a text to Diggle instead, asking for an explanation via silent means.
His only response was, *Said she had to run some program on the computer. Girl wouldn’t take no for an answer.*

Oliver huffed in exasperation and tucked his phone away, wondering how a one-hundred-and-twenty pound girl could make the former soldier do *anything*. Then that very computer gave a happy little jingle, and he turned to find a ‘Diagnostic Complete’ notice appear on the screen. Felicity shifted, waking more slowly than the archer ever did. Her eyelids slid open just a little, and then she must’ve seen the notice because she blinked a few times and tried to straighten a little. She slipped a couple fingers under her glasses to rub her eyes, looking far too exhausted to be making herself wake up for something that could undoubtedly wait until the following day. She shook her head a little and pulled up a log for whatever she had just ordered the system to do. With her hand over the top of the mug of cocoa still in her lap, she absently held the mug out to set it aside on the desk, not noticing how it was still half over the edge as she was about to release it.

If he hadn’t set his hand on hers, the mug would’ve fallen and spooked her, but Felicity jumped at the sudden contact anyway. Her eyes flew to him with a fright, and Oliver internally berated himself. Perhaps it would’ve been better if he’d just let the mug fall. Then Felicity relaxed as she realized it was him standing there—he probably shouldn’t be a person to set anyone at ease, he thought. She looked to the mug and noticed her mistake and then pushed the mug fully onto the desk.

“Thanks,” she said quietly, her speech partly slurred as the fogginess of sleep lingered over her.

Oliver didn’t respond, just removed his hand from atop hers and shoved it into his pocket to keep himself from making any more mistakes.

“Why did you come here, Felicity?” he asked. “Go home.”

She looked down and said, “Well, I won’t get much sleep tonight anyway, so I figured I’d come here and make my insomnia worth something.”

Oliver noted internally how she had just been sleeping, but he didn’t call her out on it. Location, he knew, made a big difference, and an underground bunker probably felt a little more secure than the average Starling apartment.

“I told Dig to go make up with Carly,” she said then, and Oliver turned, taken aback by the sudden change in topic. “Speaking of which, what went wrong on your date?”

Felicity turned her curious eyes on him, and the archer shifted for a reason he couldn’t identify—he later decided he was just unaccustomed to discussing such things. The blonde had been ecstatic the previous day to learn that Oliver and Diggle had agreed to ask out the respective women in their lives: John with his late brother’s widow and Oliver with his old friend, McKenna. Neither date had gone well, and Oliver wasn’t eager to repeat the experience anytime soon. Whether he felt like he owed Felicity something after the night’s earlier events, owed her something else to focus on, or he just wanted to tell someone, Oliver wasn’t sure, but he found himself admitting the truth about what had happened the night previous.

“She kept asking me about my time in China, even after I made it clear that I didn’t want to talk about it.”

It still left a bitter taste in his mouth more than twenty-four hours later. Perhaps he should avoid romantic entanglements altogether. All of them would be curious about his time away, and he had no desire to revisit any of it. He didn’t owe them any answers. The only person to whom any of that knowledge was owed was himself.
“Well…” Felicity mused as she mulled the thought over, and she picked up that mug of cocoa that had nearly met an early fate. When she said, “I get it, I suppose,” Oliver turned to look at her, mildly surprised that she of all people could understand the breach in privacy.

Felicity became slightly abashed under his scrutiny, but she continued with her thought anyway, taking a sip of cocoa and pulling closer together the edges of the blanket she’d swaddled herself in.

“That was a big part of your life, and it changed you drastically into this person that you are now.” She motioned to his general person to accentuate the point. “She doesn’t get all of the horrible things that happened, the things you don’t even let yourself dwell on. And she can’t, can she?” It was a rhetorical question that the archer didn’t answer. “I mean, what’re the odds that people like us will find someone with shared life experience?”

Oliver wondered if Felicity had noticed how she’d just contradicted herself, but he didn’t ask. Instead, he waited as she grew pensive, her eyes locked on her hand that was sticking out between the folds of the blanket to hold her mug, or more specifically on a faded scar he could barely make out on her knuckle. He wondered what had given it to her. He didn’t ask.

“I think…” Felicity eventually continued, “all she wants is to try and understand and maybe to help you carry the weight of it all a little bit.” She finally looked back up as she said this, and the notion was a foreign one to Oliver, that someone would ask personal questions in an effort to somehow help him.

Felicity tilted her head a little to the side, again putting herself more directly into his line of sight that he only then realised had drifted.

When he met her eyes again, she gently asked, “Just go easy on her, okay?”

Oliver could only nod, and when Felicity smiled, he felt a little better. There was that strange attachment again. He wondered if he would ever figure out what it was.

He supposed it didn’t much matter for now.
June 22nd, 2012:

The first time she finds Cindy, it’s an accident. It isn’t that she hasn’t tried to find the girl since she got back, but the teen no longer has an official place of residence. After her father’s… disappearance, she’d been put into foster care, but, a month in, she’d abandoned the orphanage for the streets of the Glades. She’d fallen very well off the grid after that.

Felicity is walking home after a long day at work one day about a month after her return to the States--she doesn’t yet have the money for a car and she likes walking in the rain, remembers rainy days were the calmest on Lian Yu--when she comes across a young girl huddled in an alley. The hood of her jacket is drawn low in an attempt to shield her from the elements, but the fabric is soaked through and probably not doing its job anymore.

Even though the girl is four years older, Felicity recognizes her the instant she looks up.

Cynthia Porter.

She has to force back the memory that tries to resurface of fire and an explosion. She can’t think about that because then she’ll be as useful to this girl as the puddles on the sidewalk.

“Hey,” Felicity says instead as she kneels down, and the girl follows the motion with cautious eyes. “I’m Felicity.”

She doesn’t get a response.

“How have you ever been to Big Belly?”

It takes a moment longer but she finally gets some movement: a nod.

“Want a burger?”

Before the blonde can even go on a ramble about stranger danger and how the teen probably shouldn’t just wander off with people, Cindy asks, “Who do you need dirt on?”

And a pause follows during which time Felicity just sort of stares blankly at the girl in failed understanding as though her IQ is half of what it is.

“What?”

It takes Felicity a moment longer to realize Cindy thinks she’s trying to pay her for information--the girl must be good at gathering it if it’s what she instantly assumes Felicity is after.
“Hey, look, it’s just a burger,” the blonde says easily. “It’s not like I’m giving you an arm or a kidney or anything. It’s on me. You just look a little hungry.” Felicity glances over the girl’s soaked hoodie again. “And cold.” She shrugs. “Ergo, Big Belly. Solves both problems.”

It takes a few more minutes to convince the girl that she has no ulterior motives, but then she’s leading the way to the nearest Big Belly Burger. She also has to encourage the cautious teen to walk beside her instead of trailing behind her, and it’s almost like pulling teeth. Then she starts talking to try and alleviate some of the tension, and she ends up making a fool of herself in that special way she always manages to do. She supposes this serves her initial purpose, however, because Cindy actually cracks a grin.

That night, Felicity has no intention of reaching out to the girl again, but on a whim a week later she finds herself going back down to find Cindy in that same alley, two Doubles with extra pickles already in hand.

March 8th, 2013:

It isn’t unusual for Cindy to be out of the apartment early in the morning. She’s used to operating on her own timetable, and Felicity understands this. She also knows that, when Cindy’s out of the apartment, she usually goes to the Glades. For years, the streets of Starling’s most dangerous district had been her home, and she has some friends there. It makes Felicity nervous, mostly because she and her team often operate in the Glades; it’s where they’re needed, which means it’s where most of the crime happens.

But, she knows Cindy can look after herself. She did it for years without supervision, and Felicity also knows that trying to get the teen to stop would most assuredly backfire. So, she makes sure Cindy has her number in her speed dial, and she installed a program on her phone that acts as a one-hit 911, sending an alarm to Felicity’s phone should she ever find herself in trouble. The headstrong teen is under the impression that the program will also send Felicity her location, which she can relay to the police, but the truth is that Felicity has bugged Cindy’s phone with a tracking device—just as she’s done with her mother, Oliver and Diggle, all of whom have no idea they’re being tracked.

All this being said, the alarm on Cindy’s phone has yet to be used, and Felicity has never noticed anything out of the ordinary to suggest the girl is hiding anything troubling from her.

Until that morning, that is, when the brunette walked in with the hood of her jacket thrown up and her head hung low as if to conceal her face in its shadows.

“Cindy?” Felicity asks, instantly on alert, instantly on alert for this oddity, but the girl doesn’t stop. She’s making a beeline for her room, and the blonde gets this protective instinct that has her setting her laptop aside, piles of homework be damned. She jumps up and slips between the wall and the arm of the couch just as the girl passes, and she catches Cindy’s hood to halt her, pulling it down in the process. The girl ducks, and Felicity’s pretty sure she hears her swear under her breath. She frowns.

“Cindy, what’s wrong?”

The brunette’s fingers twitch as she slowly turns, and then Felicity can see just why she’s being so secretive.

Her lip is split quite severely, her nose has clearly been bleeding, and there’s a large bruise forming
on the left side of her face where she appears to have been slugged.

Felicity almost loses her cool upon seeing these injuries, demanding answers in her loud voice, but she manages at the last moment to stop herself. Blowing her lid preemptively is a good way to get Cindy to shut down. All the same, the effort of forced outward calm leaves her quietly fuming.

“What happened?”

Felicity can tell that her quiet anger has unsettled Cindy more than any yelling because she shuffles and glances down at her feet.

“I was going to meet up with some friends when I came across these guys who were harassing some guy who was alone,” Cindy began, wincing for just the effort to speak as her lip no doubt threatens to reopen. It looked like they were planning to mug him or something, so “I told them to back off, and one thing lead to another… I took two of ‘em down without getting hit, but… well, you can see what happened after that.”

The girl motions unnecessarily to the damage done to her face.

And see it Felicity can. How badly had the girl been beaten? She doubts the extent of the damage is visible, not with the way Cindy was favoring her left side. She also knows that, whatever the girl’s injuries, it could’ve ended so much worse, and it’s this that has Felicity so shaken, so terrified.

Since when does the girl get into fights? Especially against several guys?

“How bad is it?” Felicity asks with a surprisingly believable air of calm. She’s surprised by the control she has over her own tone because inside she’s anything but. Inside, she’s raging against the men who had done this.

“Better than it looks,” Cindy supplies, and her tone suggests this to be honest. “Some guy in a red hoodie stepped in before they could do much damage, so it’s mostly just… messy.”

Felicity sighed and rubbed her brow. This day had taken a quick turn for the frustrating. And it wasn’t even seven yet.

“Come on,” she says as she beckons Cindy towards the bathroom.

Felicity can tell the girl’s last comment is a half truth. The damage may be less severe than it would’ve been had this ‘guy in a red hoodie’ not stepped in, but she can tell from the slump of Cindy’s shoulders that the girl is struggling just to remain standing. The girl doesn’t struggle when Felicity sits her down on the toilet, and then the blonde pulls the first aide kit out from the under sink counter.

Under different circumstances, she might find it amusing how Cindy tries so hard not to wince as Felicity draws the alcohol swab across the cuts on her lip and cheek, which had apparently broken her fall to the ground at some point during the fight. While the blonde is trying to figure out how they’re going to break the news to her mother, a thought occurs to her for not the first time in the past few minutes, and she decides now was a good time to voice it while she has the girl trapped in the bathroom.

“You stumbled on them, or you were looking for trouble,” is her question.

The girl’s silence is telling, and Felicity’s very applaudable control over her calm slips as she momentarily ceases her fussing over the girl’s facial cuts.
“Damn it, Cindy, what were you thinking?”

At first, Cindy is surprised to hear her swear--to be fair, Felicity doesn’t do it often--but then she gets this defensive, obstinate look in her eyes, and Felicity knows the fight is certainly not out of her.

“I was thinking there are people in the Glades who need help, and I’m willing to step up,” she snaps. “How is this any different than what you did for me?”

This is a good question. That man’s intentions had been dark, and what Felicity had done that night seven months ago was certainly along very similar lines as to what Cindy is currently describing to her. There is one main difference however in the form of a deceptively strong Chinese woman and a snarky and terminally cynical Australian secret agent.

“The difference is I knew what I was doing,” was what she ended up saying aloud, “and I was only up against *one* guy.”

The wayward teen doesn’t miss a beat, as though she’d already thought of this response on the blonde’s part.

“That’s a technicality, and you know it,” Cindy says with an obstinate glare that’s returned equalfold on Felicity’s part. “Are you saying you would’ve backed off if it was more than just one guy that night?”

Now it’s Felicity’s silence that’s telling because they both know she wouldn’t have. She can’t just give the excuse that she has a registered firearm because Cindy might misinterpret this to be her saying, ‘get a gun’, which is something she would *never* tell the girl. Her other option is telling her just what kind of training she’s had, which is also something she wants to avoid. It opens up a can of worms about how *not* alone she’d been on Lian Yu.

“See! You would’ve done the same thing if you were me.”

“Cindy,” Felicity says in warning, and, with an almost growl as she turns her eyes away, the girl silently agrees to drop the matter for now.

The blonde sighs grievously.

“Where else is it bad?”

Cindy hesitates again, and her fingers twitch once in indecision before she reaches up to unzip her jacket. Removing even that with really only the use of her right hand is tricky, and Felicity knows even before the girl lifts her shirt beneath that she won’t like what follows.

But, *damn* … She still hadn’t expected it to be *this* bad.

Cindy’s entire left side is already turning deep shade of red, and Felicity is surprised the girl is able to stand straight at all for the extent of the damage. She sees several major impact points and knows they’re most likely the result of a horrible many kicks.

She very nearly asks who had done this, nearly growls it out in a very Oliver-esque fashion. But, she doubts the girl knows any names or addresses to give her.

“That bad?” Cindy asks, and Felicity glances up to see the girl looking at her over her shoulder, her brows furrowed in concern. Felicity’s expression must’ve given more away than she thought. She keeps herself from saying, ‘worse’ because she doesn’t want to freak the girl out. But, the fact remains that there is a *lot* of bruising, and she fears internal damage. She stands up, egging Cindy
onto her feet alongside her.

“What?” The brunette asks, although she complies to Felicity’s prodding and confusedly starts for the door.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“The hospital.”

“What? Why? It doesn’t really hurt that bad. I swear!”

Cindy grew up in the Glades. The only medical attention they would seek there, on the rare occasions where they actually did seek it instead of trying to treat themselves, they would go to the less well-equipped—but more importantly—free clinics. It wasn’t Cindy’s first instinct to see a doctor, even after taking this severe of a beating.

“Just humor me, okay?” Felicity asks.

Her expression must reveal a portion of the true extent of her worry because Felicity watches Cindy’s second rebuttal die on her tongue before the girl nods once and glances down at her shoes.

“Okay…”

Five hours and a marginally expensive ultrasound later, the doctor at the urgent care clinic informs them that there doesn’t appear to be any internal bleeding, and learning this makes it the first time all day that Felicity’s been able to breathe a little easier. The doctor prescribes a potent painkiller, ice, and plenty of rest for a couple broken ribs. As they’re waiting to be discharged, Cindy asks Felicity not to tell her mother about the fight.

“Work’s been really bad, and I just… I don’t want her to worry.” Cindy says. “She’s got enough going on,” she argues.

Felicity can’t deny the truth in this statement. Her mother has been miserable at her job recently. She’d ousted one of the other waitresses for taking money from the register, but she’d warned the girl first that she would do so unless the money was returned. By the time she went to the manager, he’d been told that it was Donna who had taken the funds. He’d been more inclined to believe the other waitress, and Felicity was quite sure this was because of personal matters between the two. Donna had been forced to return the money, which she had not taken, and was put on probation. Every night since then it’s taken all of Felicity’s self control not to hack into the manager’s life and reveal to him whatever she digs up. However pleasing it would be to see the man squirm, she knows blackmail will only make the environment more hostile for her mother. Donna is currently trying to find another job, but it isn’t going well given the state of the market in Starling.

The fact remains that Cindy has a point. Her mother has enough stress to cope with without throwing teen rebellion into the mix. She’s already dealt with that mess once upon a time.

“I’ll think on it,” Felicity concedes, and Cindy’s shoulders dip in relief. “Just don’t make a habit of this,” she warns, and the girl gives a--reluctant--nod.

Felicity has a whole new respect for her mother and hopes she was never this much trouble. Of course, even ignoring the whole teen goth, Brother Eye phase of her life, there’s still the whole ‘stranded and presumed dead for five years’ thing.
Her mother really has had a lot to worry about in her life.

June 27th, 2012:

“Look, I’m not your charity case, okay?” Cindy says in the face of the proffered burgers.

If her tone isn’t enough of an indication, the girl’s folded arms would’ve let Felicity know Cindy is defensive, but the blonde has a feeling this has more to do with the fact that it’s been so long since someone has even marginally taken care of her. She’s gotten so used to taking care of herself that she’s terrified to rely on anyone else.

Felicity can relate to that.

“I’m grateful. I am,” Cindy continues, sounding earnestly so. “But, you don’t have to keep coming down here. I was just a little down on my luck last week. I’m fine now. I can take care of myself. I don’t need you to be my mom or my big sister, or whatever it is you’re trying to be.”

Felicity is reminded again—although it’s never very far from her mind—that the girl has no mother or sister and that her father, previously her only living relative, is dead. She remembers that she’d been unable to help him, unable to get him back to his little girl whose photograph he’d carried with him.

She fails to swallow all of her guilt, and pushing everything back into its emotional compartment is more difficult than it had been the last time she’d visited the girl.

“You can go back to your life.”

Cindy turns then and starts to walk away with every intention of never seeing Felicity again, she’s sure.

Felicity should let her. She has no right to do otherwise, has no right to ask any more of Cindy when she’s already failed her, but… She can’t help it. It isn’t that she’s trying to replace anybody in a misplaced drive to atone for her mistakes. It isn’t even that she’s taking pity on Cindy. The girl can clearly take care of herself given how long she’s survived on her own.

But, in all honesty, it’s Felicity who can’t. It feels like she’s drowning, and she needs something to latch onto, something to help her keep her head above water. Felicity loves her mother. She really does, despite their rather apparent differences. But, her mom always hopes to see the girl who’d stepped onto that plane five years ago. Cindy would have no expectations from her, and Felicity needs that. She needs someone who won’t superimpose the image of her college self over the damaged girl who returned from Lian Yu, and it seems her mind just chose to latch onto the single known entity from her time away.

And, worrying about Cindy keeps her from worrying about herself.

“How about a friend?” Felicity asks.

Cindy pauses in her step and slowly turns back, her expression one of stunned silence. Felicity can still walk away. She can leave the girl to her life, let her be and walk away. But…

“World knows I could use one too…”
March 8th, 2013:

When John had told him who the target was, Oliver had frozen for a moment, both in step and in mind. Tommy had always been like a brother to him, and Malcolm Merlyn had always been like his second father, more easygoing and approachable than his own when he was a child. Even after the man had returned from his sudden two-year sojourn, cold and distant, Oliver’s views on him had changed very little. As opposed to his friend, who rather hated his father for his sudden departure after the murder of his wife, Tommy’s mother, Oliver had felt sorry for Malcolm, always thought he was more sad than he was cold. Where Tommy strived to become anything but his father, rejecting everything Malcolm tried to put on him, Oliver had rather enjoyed the few fencing lessons Malcolm had agreed to give him.

So, the matter of Malcolm’s impending assassination struck home in a way that nothing else had since Laurel had been targeted at Iron Heights. Chen Na Wei’s henchmen felt his wrath as he carved his way through Merlyn Global to where Malcolm had apparently taken Tommy to his office.

Seeing his hooded friend, whom he hadn’t seen since their rendezvous with the Count a month and a half ago, was enough of a surprise that it snapped him out of his Hunter mindset. He’d had his concerns about the girl, had debated reaching out via that laptop to see if she was alright, but he never did. A part of him didn’t want to, feared what he might learn.

Seeing her again… it helped him ignore those facts he’d been compiling recently.

The girl came in as Oliver was getting swarmed by a few Chinese assailants disguised as waitstaff, and she took down one of them before they even knew she was there. The other two were brought down by a few brutal blows from Oliver, and if one particularly powerful hit came directly after one of them raised his gun to shoot his friend, the vigilante just chalked it up to a happenstance.

“Hey,” Synth said by way of a truly lame greeting given how long she’d been absent from his dealings of late. “Figured you could use a hand.”

She paused, and it tickled something familiar in the back of Oliver’s mind when the girl started to explain her own comment. He ignored that too.

“I mean, I know you already have two of them,” she said with a flourish of her hand in his general direction. “Two perfectly good ones, as a matter of fact. I just mean-”

“You are a talkative one, aren’t you?”

The voice that cut Synth off before Oliver could was certainly of more of a feminine persuasion than those the archer had encountered previously, and he looked over Synth’s shoulder to see an Oriental woman in an elegant gown. Taking off her black wig to reveal snowy white hair. Chen na Wei—colloquially known as China White for rather apparent reasons. This meant only one thing.

The Chinese Mafia had been hired to assassinate Malcolm Merlyn.

Oliver was surprised when, after a brief pause, Synth lurched forward as if to launch herself at the woman, and it was only the years of honing his reflexes that let him react fast enough to grab her around the waist, halting her charge just after it had begun. He was so focused on the dangerous woman in front of them that he didn’t see Synth dip her head, but he heard her sigh through her nose and wondered briefly what was going through her mind—did this action by him offend her, or was she simply calming herself? She pulled his hand off her waist, however, and Oliver was relieved.
when she didn’t seem about to charge again.

“Go find Malcolm and Tommy,” he said lowly, and Synth turned to look at him over her shoulder, although her face coverings and the shaded glasses shrouded any emotions he might glean as a reaction to anything.

He told himself he wanted her to leave because he was worried about his best friend and his friend’s father, that he wanted someone to reach them quickly. He ignored the voice in the back of his mind that said he wanted to protect this girl too.

Synth ducked her head again and stepped aside, removing herself from between Oliver and Chen na Wei, and he breathed a little easier. She took off down the hall a moment later, searching out another stairwell since their current path was blocked.

“You are protective of the small one,” China White said, and her tone and expression seemed more amused than anything else. “That isn’t a trait the rumors of Starling claim you possess.”

“Maybe I’m growing,” Oliver quipped easily.

But, at the same time, he felt himself itching to kill this woman for agreeing to assassinate Tommy’s father.

“But probably not.”

Chen na Wei.

Felicity can’t believe the woman is in the States. It seems this particular thorn is one hell-bent on causing her grief. She feels foolish about her reaction earlier. If Oliver hadn’t stopped her, she probably wouldn’t have ever been able to leave that hallway of her own accord. As in, she would’ve needed to be carried out. In a body bag. Ded, dead. Whatever her personal grievances are with the woman—who surely isn’t even aware of them—she wouldn’t have stood a chance in a fight with her.

So, she’s letting Oliver handle that fight while she goes to look for their reason for being in this building in the first place.

When Felicity finds them, Tommy and his father are in the man’s office, and they seem unaware of the two mobsters now planning to ambush them from just outside. The two bozos are so focused on trying to sneak up on their targets that they don’t notice her approach. They rush into the room, automatic rifles held at the ready to spray the room with lead—not the most precise, these guys, but she supposes they get the job done well enough—but a tranq dart to each of them from her trusty tranq gun draws their attentions to her. They drop before they can even manage to turn their weapons on her.

Felicity steps over them and into the room then to find a stunned pair of Merlyns watching her, the elder seemingly at the ready to try his hand at dispatching the two enemies who no longer require dispatching. Tommy’s expression is a rather comical one, the blonde has to admit, all slack jawed with wide eyes as if he’d been about to call out a warning about their would-be assailants but was interrupted by yours truly.

“What the hell?” he asks instead in a tone that matches his expression, and Felicity almost laughs because there’s something satisfying about rendering silent someone who always seems to have something to say—she may never have met him personally, but she’s seen enough news feeds to
know he’s a man who likes to get the last word in.

But, the moment is shattered in the same instant two bullets tear through the window across the room, and Malcolm Merlyn goes down with two holes in his chest. Felicity ducks on instinct just as Tommy does, but as he turns a mortified expression towards his father, she charges forward and barrels into the younger Merlyn, bringing him to the ground as another bullet pierces the window. Although, given where it hits the wall, it may have been meant for her instead of Tommy. They don’t land behind any cover, yet, for whatever reason, no more shots come. She’s beyond curious about this because they’re sitting ducks right now.

Tommy is dazed for a moment after the admittedly harsh landing, but then he pushes himself up and scurries over to his grounded father.

“Dad! Da- oh God!”

He must’ve noticed the blood seeping through Malcolm’s shirt.

Felicity can’t be sure because she her first move is to scour the building across the street, trying to glean if she can find any sign at all of the source of the shooter. Of course, these efforts prove fruitless because the building is huge, and it’s not like the shooter is holding up a giant neon sign to give away his location. On the contrary, the shots have stopped, so he may already be making his way out. So, she gives up and turns to assess the damage done to Malcolm Merlyn as the man’s son continues to fumble between expletives and trying to blanch the bleeding.

She recognizes the signs of Curare poisoning almost immediately.

That means Floyd Lawton is alive after all--they never did find a body.

Before Felicity can even think of a way to save Malcolm without any of those useful herbs from Lian Yu on hand, Oliver bursts into the room, and she’s instantly relieved because this means he’d survived--if not won--his fight against China White. But, then she’s back on anxious because she failed to keep Malcolm from getting shot.

Oliver is now watching his best friend’s father die.

The man moves to rush forward, but he’s halted when Tommy, rightly paranoid after the night he’s had, levels his gun on the green-hooded vigilante.

“Stay back!” He shouts, but his friend doesn’t even flinch. “I won’t let you hurt him!”

Oliver holds his hands up to show the younger Merlyn that he’s unarmed.

“I don’t want to hurt him. I want to help him,” he says in that synthetically deep voice.

“Why should I trust you?”

And Felicity can tell that Oliver is too close to this. He’s about to do something drastic. She can see him reaching for his hood, so she does something drastic of her own before he can. She hurries forward and kneels down next to the Merlyns, and Tommy turns the weapon on her now. She glimpses out of the corner of her eye when Oliver moves as if to interfere, but she holds her hand out to stop him. If her sudden movement over there didn’t make Tommy shoot her on instinct, she doubts he’ll do so consciously unless she moves again.

“Let’s just… take things down a couple notches, okay?” Felicity asks, remaining very still with her hands up to show that she too is unarmed, but Tommy doesn’t look ready to lower his guard anytime
soon. “Tommy- You don’t mind if I call you Tommy, right?”

She gets no response.

“Okay…” Tommy it is. “Well, your father’s been poisoned, Tommy. That sniper who shot him, we faced him a few months ago.” The blonde indicates Oliver, who thankfully has remained where he is. “He laces his bullets with poison, and it’ll kill your father before anyone can make it up here to help, so we’re your only shot.”

Tommy glances down at his father, who has since passed out and is looking paler by the minute, and then back up at her. She can see him running through his options, quickly coming to the same conclusion as her, and he seems torn because why should he trust someone whose face he can’t even see? All the same, Felicity sees his guard drop even if he forgets to lower the weapon he has trained on her, and if she didn’t know better, she’d say he trusts her.

“What do we do?” he asks and he looks so lost, like a small child in uncertain times.

He probably thinks she’d saved his life a couple moments ago from that third shot, even though it seems he wasn’t the target—Lawton must have recognized her from their last incursion, but that he hadn’t hit her tells her he hadn’t meant to. It’s probably the only reason Tommy is listening to her at all, but she’ll take it.

At the same time, she’s not sure herself what they should do.

“He needs a blood transfusion.”

Apparently Oliver isn’t suffering from the same problem. Tommy turns to him, finally lowering the gun.

“It’ll slow the poison long enough to get him some professional help,” Oliver supplies, still keeping his distance until he’s given the go-ahead. “Are you the same blood type?”

And so, with Tommy’s affirmative, they’re starting the process of setting everything up using the generously stocked first aid kit Malcolm keeps on hand. Felicity’s job will be to fish the poisoned bullets out while Oliver sets up the transfusion between father and son.

She glimpses it after Oliver tears the man’s shirt open, when he cuts free the bulletproof vest that does little against sniper rounds, to let her assess the two gunshot wounds: one to his ribs and one to his upper chest.

A bullet scar on his shoulder.

Felicity knows Tommy’s mother had died in a mugging, so she forces herself to realize that it had probably happened then. So, why does her mind keep flashing back to a man clad in black robes. A man who had nearly killed Oliver. A man who had nearly killed her.

A man she’d shot in this very shoulder.

But, Malcolm Merlyn is a businessman and an acclaimed humanitarian. For these reasons, she dismisses her initial instinct as the folly of a mind looking for someone to blame for that incident in December. Where would a man such as Malcolm have learned to kill as the Dark Archer did? And how would a man such as that be able to fool everyone enough to be revered as being ‘for the people’?

It doesn’t make sense.
She’s simply imagining things, forcing pieces of a very large puzzle to match her version of things when in reality plenty of people have probably been shot in the shoulder.

March 10th, 2013:

He told himself he was imagining things.

It was the stress. It forced him to search for familiar faces where there weren’t any.

That could’ve been anyone’s jaw.

But, then Tommy was sitting in Verdant a couple days later after learning that his father should survive getting shot, getting poisoned, and his surgeries, and the youngest Merlyn couldn’t help but wonder.

What did Oliver keep down there? He still had no idea. His friend had once told him there was some flooding damage, that it was unusable.

But then why lock it up?

So, Tommy contacted the company that had made the keypad and got them to unlock it for him remotely—he was co-owner of Verdant, after all.

That was how he found him standing in the middle of a room that looked like it had been taken right out of a sci-fi film or something. All chrome and lit up. A setup of computer screens that seemed rather impressive despite the fact that he knew very little about computers. Several racks of sharpened, green-headed arrows.

And a very familiar uniform.

Good God…

Oliver was the Hood.
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood… Our hero may want to watch his tone if he doesn’t want to find himself in the proverbial doghouse. Meanwhile, one Felicity Smoak finds herself face-to-face with one of his particularly troubled ex-girlfriends.

Chapter Notes

Torture does play a part in this chapter. If you feel you need to skip it, it’s the second flashback scene, so just skip that. It’s sort of in the middle of the chapter.

May 31st, 2008:

“Where are the other survivors?” the man with very greasy hair asked again.

Felicity said nothing, and that guy who had walked right out of a horror movie, the one wearing the bicolored face mask, advanced again.

And she was ashamed because she probably would’ve told them by now if she did know where the fuselage was. They’d only asked questions for the first two days, hoping that withholding food and water would make her inclined to talk. Day three marked for Felicity an understanding of how very low her threshold for pain tolerance was. She probably would’ve told them if she could. But, she was a computer nerd stranded on a deserted island, and she could barely say which way was north, let alone describe the winding path they’d followed to get to Scylla’s launch site. There had been trees involved and several notable increases and decreases in elevation. That was as far as her knowledge extended.

Two-Face slid the sharp edge of his very large knife up her arm—what was that saying about men who use large knives?—and Felicity couldn’t suppress a whimper as she tried to retreat, only to be halted by her restraints, as the steel crossed over the already opened lesions on her arms. They weren’t bleeding much, but the pain of each one was excruciating. Shouldn’t she be bleeding more, though? Why wasn’t she bleeding more?

“I was patient at first, but now my patience grows thin,” Greasy Hair said.

He’d introduced himself politely as Edward Fyers as if he was trying to paint himself as anything but the villain of this story. Felicity didn’t care what he called himself.

What were the chances that was his real name, anyway?

March 29th, 2013:
Felicity considers herself a generally helpful person. In a single night, she’d cracked a code that should have taken a week--kudos to her for that victory! In doing so, she’d exposed Oliver’s best friend’s father to be the target of an assassination plot. She’d gone down to help in her gear. Oliver had acted… strangely to her presence, and she wonders even now if he suspects anything. If he did, though, why wouldn’t he mention anything? This is her biggest question.

If he’s still ignorant to her masked identity, however, his only true knowledge of her involvement recently has been limited. She has Finals coming up and hasn’t been to the Foundry as much as a result with her projects taking up much of her time. To be honest, she hasn’t chipped in as much as she should with the team.

That being said, Oliver didn’t have to kick her out. Add that to her pervailent teen problems--the girl still refuses to talk to her after their disagreement--and this is shaping up to be just the most terrific failure of a day. Felicity knows it has something to do with the woman who’d been with Oliver and Diggle when she’d walked into the Foundry. The woman wanted their help hacking into the FBI database for something, and Felicity, helpful person that she is, had offered to do so. Without any preamble whatsoever, however, Oliver had barked at her to leave. More aptly, he’d told her to ‘get out’, which is just so offensive.

But, she’s a helpful person, so Felicity has kept an eye on things from afar.

Helena Bertinelli. She’s one mean cookie. Sure Felicity understands how she can be so upset with her father, what with the whole, ‘having her fiance murdered’ thing, but the body count… Helena is carving a very bloody path on her way to finding her father. And, for whatever reason, Oliver had tried to help her track the man down the previous night. Felicity had been relieved to hear the woman--whom Diggle had so aptly referred to in a text as Oliver’s psycho ex-girlfriend--had been arrested, but then Oliver had broken her out of jail. To be fair, Helena knows his secret identity, so he probably didn’t want to risk her telling the police in some sort of plea bargain--this also might be why he’d agreed to help in the first place, Felicity would later think.

But, nonetheless, it all leads to Felicity’s current consternation.

“Just thought you’d want to know,” she says into the man’s voice mail--what, he’s not even taking her calls anymore? “A sporting goods store was just robbed of one high-powered crossbow, so, you know, call me back.” And, then she hangs up a little more forcefully than she should.

That’s when she feels that tingle on the back of her neck, and she somehow just knows.

“Get lost on your way out of town?” she asks with an impressive aire of calm as she swivels her chair around in her little cubicle, but she then finds herself face to face with not only Helena Bertinelli but also that high-powered crossbow the woman had just stolen.

Frak.

“Oh, I’m not leaving just yet,” Helena says with a little smirk as she tilts her head, sizing Felicity up again. “You’re going to hack into the FBI database and tell me where my father is being held. When he’s dead, then I’ll leave town.”

It’s frustrating, but Felicity doesn’t have much choice other than to comply. Helena has the upper hand. She’s too far for Felicity to reasonably engage because she’ll get her shot off before the blonde can even make a move to draw her gun let alone engage her close up. Grumbling internally about crazy exes, the tech guru pulls her laptop from her bag beside her desk and resists the urge to say just what it is she’s thinking when the woman says, “Nice and slow, Blondie.”
Hacking into the FBI really shouldn’t be so easy, but she’s inside in a matter of minutes. A quick search brings up Frank Bertinelli’s file, and listed right at the bottom is the location of his most recent safehouse.

“Here,” Felicity says as she leans back in her chair, and Helena approaches, clearly not thinking a tech nerd can be any sort of threat—although this assumption is most likely correct on average.

With the crossbow still trained on her back, Felicity can’t make her move yet, but she’s ready. Helena reads the address from over her shoulder and then hums appreciatively.

“No wonder Ollie keeps you around,” she muses, and Felicity is deeply offended by how surprised the woman sounds.

And she greatly prefers ‘Oliver’ to ‘Ollie’, which really just makes him sound like a little boy, which he certainly is not.

“Alright, Barbie,” Felicity rolls her eyes because that’s the woman’s go-to example for a blonde, “Thanks for the help, but now I gotta’ dash.”

Helena reaches for her wrist, and that’s finally her chance. Felicity moves quickly enough that she takes the crazy woman by complete surprise. She snatches Helena’s wrist even as the woman is reaching for her own and spins her chair. Throwing the brunette’s arm up, she lashes out with her foot and lands a solid kick to the woman’s thusly exposed stomach. Helena stumbles back into the outside wall of the opposite cubicle, and Felicity, in one fluid motion, stands and rotates to reach under her desk and grabs the handle of the glock she has stashed there.

She raises the weapon just as Helena gets her own back up, and then they’re at a stand-still. Felicity can’t appear any kind of weak, or this won’t end well for her. She has to keep the gun leveled at Helena’s head, a threat to match the mad woman’s own. Even if she won’t be able to pull the trigger if the time comes.

Helena takes her bluff, fortunately, and starts to back away. Felicity has to let her because she can’t bring herself to pull the trigger to stop her. Every time she tries, that scar on her stomach throbs and reminds her just how much it hurts to get shot, and it makes her stomach turn to imagine inflicting such a wound. Even to the likes of Helena Bertinelli. So, the crazy woman makes it to the stairwell and is gone the instant next. Swearing under her breath, Felicity slips off her flats so as to move silently and hurry over to that same stairwell. The door a flight down is already closing when she looks over the railing, however, so she knows Helena has gotten away.

This time, Felicity calls Diggle. The man actually answers—imagine that—and after only two rings.

“Felicity?”

“John, do you know where Oliver is? He’s not answering his phone,” she says as she makes it back to her desk and stows her glock away again.

“I think he said he was going to see Mikenna. Why?”

It’s very difficult for Felicity to swallow her jealousy, and that just frustrates her even more. She wishes this ridiculous crush would just run its course already.

“Helena just stopped by,” she says, a little more snippy than she should be because it isn’t John’s fault that she’s jealous.

He doesn’t let her continue, though.
“I’m on my way, I’ll grab Oliver,” he says so quick she can’t get a word in. “Where are you?”

“No- John, that’s not why I called.” She hears him pause over the line and sighs, rubbing her forehead where she can feel a migraine forming. “Thank you, but I’m fine.” His readiness to jump to her aid in a moment’s notice is deeply touching. “The problem is she knows where her father is.”

She’s certainly faced down scarier things than a dressed-up rich girl with a crossbow.

“Alright. We’ll handle it. What’s the address?”

And Felicity has to believe they will. With all the armed policemen undoubtedly swarming the place, she knows she won’t stand a chance, so she’ll have to leave this one up to Oliver and John. That’s what she tells herself, at least. She doesn’t want to get in the way. The darker, hidden truth is that she’s afraid. She hasn’t been suitting up much in recent months, and it hasn’t usually gone well when she has. She’s told herself she can be more help by working behind the scenes.

To this end, she also leaves Oliver another voicemail and sends a message to his Arrow phone via her Synth phone. She has no way of knowing whether John will be able to find him, and she wants to cover all of her bases. He should find out one way or another that Helena is now a loose cannon with a destination.

In the end, Felicity finds out that Helena had failed to kill her father and gotten away, but not before she shot Mikenna, who had apparently rushed to the scene to help. And then she thinks that maybe she should’ve gone to help anyway, should’ve shoved all of her doubts aside and hooded up. Could she have helped? Would Mikenna still be going in for surgery now if she had? She has no idea.

But, the guilt is almost suffocating.

May 30th, 2008:

Felicity screamed through mostly clenched teeth. She couldn’t help it, but she didn’t exactly have the inclination to hold it in either.

At Greasy Fyers’ order, Two-Face had moved on to a torture that was… ‘more suited to women’, as he’d so eloquently put it. She struggled against his hand under her chin, which he was using to keep her head tilted harshly back from behind her chair, but he was much stronger than her--she was probably going to have some fairly nasty bruises just from his grip on her jaw. He’d cut her shirt halfway down and cut her bra apart at the middle. Now he was taking some sick pleasure from her pain as he drew a very slow, excruciating incision down her chest and around her right breast, and Felicity didn’t have to ask what his end game was. It would be a lengthy and horribly excruciating process.

Unless she gave them what they wanted, he was going to take it off...

It was just as she’d finally allowed herself to realize this that the man stopped in the middle of the first incision of his terrible task, and Felicity sobbed in relief, more tears slipping down into her messy, damp hair.

“Help us, and I’ll end this. I’ll make sure you get home safely,” she heard Fyers say with false compassion, and Two-Face let go of her chin, allowing her to look at the man.

As if he would ever send her home after everything she’d seen.
“Help us,” he said, “or my compatriot here will finish his good work. Then he’ll move on to your other breast.” Felicity couldn’t suppress her whimper at the thought, “and if you still remain silent, then he’ll move on to your fingernails.”

Fyers sighed then as if deeply troubled, and he stooped to bring himself closer to her eye level.

“Miss Smoak.” He’d already told her that he knew who she was from the flight manifest, and she wondered if he also had the names of everyone he’d murdered. “I take no pleasure in this, I assure you. If you would only cooperate, this would end.”

Felicity hadn’t realized just how angry she was about Cooper and the horrible lot life had thrown her until that moment. She should have been many things. Terrified. Desperate. Ready to lose her lunch. But, no, the emotion that filled her was none of these. It was rage that boiled up inside of her, burning hot and powerful. It was true, she’d been angry for a long time, but this was different. With a fire she hadn’t previously known she’d possessed, she turned her eyes onto the leader of her captors.

“Screw you!” she spat, her words discernible despite the quivering of her lips, a result of the pain previously inflicted upon her. “You want to hurt people. You have hurt people! So many on that plane… You murdered them! I won’t help you finish the job! Just kill me and get it done with already if that’s what you’re gonna’ do!”

There was a brief pause, during which time Fyers simply stared at her, assessing something.

“Interesting,” he ultimately mused as he stood, and then he got this smug little grin on his face. “But, I do believe you’ve overplayed your hand. You will tell me where they are.” Fyers paused for dramatic effect and leaned in a little closer. His guise of compassion slipped away, revealing to her the monster within, and Felicity couldn’t help but shudder in the face of it. “Or I will shoot down another plane. And that one, Miss Smoak, will be on you.”

March 29th, 2013:

‘You know, Oliver, you really had me fooled with that one, what with the whole overprotective act you pulled the instant she walked in on our little meeting earlier. I really did think Computer Barbie was going to be helpless. But, I guess I should start assuming everyone has a glock stashed under their desk. Probably not a bad lesson to learn, actually, so thanks.’

These words repeated in his head for what felt like the dozenth time as Oliver rode the elevator up to the tenth floor, bringing to the forefront of his mind certain things he was finding more difficult to ignore. It was getting harder to push them aside, to rationalize them away.

When John had told him that Helena had gone after Felicity, his initial instinct had been to rush over, much as it had apparently been for John. But, Felicity had insisted she was fine, and John had said she’d sounded alright. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her own self-assessment or Diggle’s ability to read her tone. Oliver just wanted to make sure.

His mind also kept returning to the gun Helena had mentioned.

With a heavy mind, he stepped out of the elevator as soon as the doors allowed and followed the only path he’d ever walked on the IT floor to the corner designated to their Cyber Security division. His hunch was proven correct. Felicity was there working early that morning--it was only a little before five now. He hoped she’d at least gone home for a little while to get some sleep, but the rumpled nature of her clothing and the apparent weight of her limbs as she sat practically sagged in
her seat suggested against it.

Despite her obvious weariness, she noticed his approach as she always did and turned, quickly relieved to see it was him there.

“Hey,” she greeted with a grin, and he offered a small smile in turn. “Careful. If someone catches the infamous late-night bachelor of Starling up at this hour and at his family’s office, they might start to talk.”

“Somehow, I doubt anyone else is even awake at this hour,” he returned, and she quirked her eyebrow in amusement before becoming serious.

He knew what she was going to ask before she spoke, but that didn’t make the answer any easier to give.

“How’s the Detective?”

Oliver sighed, worn ragged by the night’s events and in serious need of some down time, so much so that he failed to read the brief but guilty nature of Felicity’s tone, expression, and posture.

“Moving,” he said simply. “She’s going to do her physical therapy back home with her sister.”

“Oh… I’m sorry to hear that,” Felicity’s compassion was earnest, and Oliver appreciated it even though it wasn’t necessary.

He just shook his head. McKenna was better off leaving. She would be safer. He just wished she’d left before his life had broken her…

“It’s better this way,” he said aloud. “She was always going to be in danger as long as she was here with me.”

Oliver couldn’t be sure, but he thought this statement from him might have saddened Felicity as he focussed back in on her, subdued lines forming around her eyes and borne of sympathy that wasn’t hampered by pity and a lack of understanding. He wasn’t eager to discuss the matter further, however, so he pushed on to the reason he’d gone to see her.

“But, anyway, I actually came by to see how you’re doing,” he said as he inclined his head in her direction, and she seemed taken aback. “Are you okay?”

He could see the easy lie she was about to tell, that nothing was wrong, and he wasn’t about to let her tell it. Not when John’s words echoed in the back of his mind about how they had to be careful not to let her break. Then he remembered Helena’s derisive words to him earlier that night, and he just had to know, had to get an actual answer from her.

“And I don’t just mean about tonight, Felicity.”

For a moment, this comment seemed to confuse the blonde, whose brow furrowed ever so slightly. But, as Oliver held her gaze, the creases of her brow eased up a little. The part of him that believed Helena had lied to him was proven to be naive.

It bothered him more than it should’ve.

“… Helena told you,” Felicity said in something akin to resignation.

It wasn’t a question.
He wanted to say something, but Oliver didn’t know what. He’d been charming in his youth, particularly his college days, but even back then, before all of the pain and the time spent away from ‘regular’ people, he’d never been very good with words when any actually serious matter came along. He’d rather avoided confronting any and all things that required sober and earnest contemplation. Now he was a social trainwreck. He could throw on the mask of ‘Ollie Queen’ for a few hours, but doing so was more exhausting than any of his nighttime activities.

Despite his shortcomings in this area, however, all Oliver knew in this moment, sitting across from Felicity, was that Helena had mentioned a gun. As if reading this thought, Felicity dropped her gaze from his and reached under her desk, and then she retrieved and set that very weapon on the tabletop between them.

It looked somehow… wrong. Inherently. Fundamentally and in the worst possible way. Felicity’s soft edges and easy humor were never more stark when in direct contrast with the hard, unforgiving nature of a firearm. And yet… he couldn’t stop the image from surfacing, an image of a hooded girl holding a gun on him in warning as he prepared to end Thomas Werner.

‘No killing!’

Oliver blinked the memory away, suddenly feeling very off kilter, to find Felicity looking at him still.

“When I got back… I didn’t really feel safe,” Felicity explained, apparently unaware of the storm brewing in his chest, “so I got a gun, and I started to learn self-defense.” She looked abashed then, and her cheeks colored in embarrassment as she started to fidget with her fingers. Oliver found himself cataloguing the few faint scars he could see, observant as he usually was when studying a problem that required solving--what had caused those scars? “I mean, I’m no you, clearly. I suppose I could handle myself against your average thug if I were so inclined, or even a dressed-up rich girl with a crossbow” this throw at the previous night’s events with Helena didn’t go unnoticed by him, “but anyone with any kind of special training could outclass me pretty easily.”

Could it really be that simple?

Oliver remained silent, trying to gather his thoughts on this newest revelation that shifted his perception of Felicity a little bit sideways. He pulled a chair over from the opposite cubicle and sat on the other side of her L-shaped desk. The gun sat between them, a weighty thing that was touched by neither but stared at by both.

On the one hand, if these suspicions of his turned out to be just that, then Felicity had survived a tragic accident that had surely left its scars on her, most of them probably unseen as opposed to those scars on her hands he had catalogued. If he wasn’t being paranoid, however… then his learned experience of psychology and motives told the archer she had surely been through much more than the simple phrase ‘stranded at sea’ would suggest. Whichever he wished to be true, his personal view on the matter held no credence on what had actually happened over those four-and-a-half years, nor did it tell him which was.

“Felicity,” Oliver said, rubbing the pads of his thumbs as he shifted in his seat, and she finally looked up at him again. “I don’t know what you’ve been through.” Possibly more so than he’d originally believed. “I know it’s more than you deserve.”

Felicity’s look of barely hidden terror as she sat there with a bomb around her throat.

‘We need to be careful if we don’t want that girl to break.’

The Dark Archer’s hand around Synth’s throat.
‘I can’t say I know what you’re going through or what you’ve been through, and I don’t know how much you know about me, but I do know what it’s like. … Hard times, I mean.’

Oliver blinked, pushing those memories back, and then he hesitated, having to get himself back on track with his previous thoughts.

“You didn’t even know me back then, Oliver,” Felicity said with a small laugh and a smile that almost reached her eyes as she tried to make light of a very serious moment. “For all you know, I was a terrible person.”

‘What do you need?’

‘You seem like someone who could use a friend?’

Oliver blinked.

“I’ve met terrible people, Felicity,” he said simply, and her false smile faded away. “I am a terrible person.”

‘But most importantly, you have to leave this room!’

“You’re not,” he declared with certainty, and when Felicity moved to protest, he knew it was about his last and rather generous self-assessment.

“Oliver.”

“You didn’t know be back then, Felicity.” With her own words used against her, Felicity couldn’t seem to find anything to say after that to refute him.

And, suddenly his suspicions didn’t matter because, whatever her reasons for having that gun, however she may or may not use it… could he really fault her for it when people like him existed in the world? He was under no illusions. Everything he’d done, even since his return, warranted a personal visit from something far worse than even the Hood--the irony of that wasn’t lost on him. And, as Oliver stared at that weapon on the table, he felt everything build up in his chest again, that storm that was always waiting to roll over into the world. His sister’s words rang in his ears, and he knew she was right. He kept himself carefully guarded, kept his thoughts and his past buried under so many pounds of brick and mortar that no one would be able to pry them up—not that some hadn’t tried. Whatever he’d done, however, his work was important to the city, and… he didn’t want to live under that weight anymore. Perhaps it was time to toss at least a couple bricks aside.

He wanted to trust again.

Maybe Felicity did too.

“You should be proud about how well you’ve managed to readjust,” he said at last, his voice gravelly as these words snuck past the nearly impassible filter between his brain and his mouth.

Felicity actually gave a little laugh, earnest, like she thought he was telling a joke. He cleared his throat.

“I’m serious,” he said, and her grin faltered. “You may not think so, but I can see it. You’ve still got a… lightness to you, and that’s something I haven’t had in a long time. Honestly, it’s… it’s part of the reason I wanted you to join the team.”

Felicity, and even Oliver himself, was surprised by this admission from him. He hadn’t meant to say
it, and it wasn’t even something he’d articulated to himself until that very moment. He paused again in a rare moment of hesitation.

What was it he was so afraid of? Even he wasn’t entirely sure.

“You’re talented, I know, and you’ve probably forgotten more about computers and electronics than I’ll ever know in my entire lifetime. Your help in that area is invaluable. But, you…”

This was one thought he couldn’t quite bring himself to confess, he realized, to admit that she with her personal progress after her own ordeal gave him hope for his future--once his crusade was finished, of course. A future which had seemed leaps and bounds below ‘bleak’ for so many years.

“You’ve been through more than most people, and if this,” he said instead as he held his hand out to touch the glock she’d left on the tabletop between them, “makes you feel safe, then it’s nothing to feel ashamed of.”

And he meant it. He had no idea what it had been like on that island or what had lead her to become who she was--or even who else she may be. If this weapon let her sleep at night with darkness such as himself--and worse, he admitted--lurking in the world, she would hear no objections from him on the matter.

Oliver held Felicity’s gaze, stressing the earnest nature of what he was saying and then asked with a forward tilt of his head, “Okay?”

A moment passed in which Felicity seemed only able to stare at him with heavy eyes, but then she offered a small nod in response, apparently accepting his opinion as potentially valid. Having said far more than he’d intended to on his way over to QC, Oliver stood to take his leave.

“Will I see you later?”

This question startled Felicity from her thoughts that had been quick to take hold of her once their conversation had ended, and she looked up to meet his eyes again. Recognition of what he was asking dawned behind her intelligent blue irises a moment later.

“Yeah- Um, Yes,” she stammered, correcting her glasses which hadn’t needed straightening, and Oliver grinned another one of those small grins that snuck up on him.

He wondered briefly if he’d ever found out how she did that.

“I’ll see you then.”
Truths Which Must Be Spoken

Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood: Our hero finds himself in the unusual possession of a guilty conscience after his building frustrations resulted in an undeserved verbal thrashing. Perhaps it's time for a little honesty.

Chapter Notes

A.N.: I li-iiiiiive! I have absolutely no idea how midterms snuck up on me… Anyway, here is the new chapter. If it helps, it's a rather long one. By my estimation, there are only eight more chapters in this season, so we’re about two-thirds done! As a happy coincidence, there happen to be as many chapters in this season as there are episodes in each TV season.

All John had to do was nod in her general direction for Oliver to understand. He watched as Felicity set about closing everything on what had quickly become her computer in the foundry and her clicks with the mouse were rather more forceful than necessary. The sharp line of her frown was a stark contrast from her usual easy smiles.

It was his fault. Oliver knew that. He had snapped at her earlier that day after Gavin Carnahan had been shot on live television. In all honesty, his frustration had less to do with the unfortunate turn of events than outward reactions might indicate. It had just been something to snap about. He’d claimed she was distracted, that Felicity’s head wasn’t in it all the way. In reality, he knew something had been troubling her since the Savior had claimed his first victim live for them all to witness, but nothing in Felicity’s handling of the situation made him think it had affected her skills at the keyboard.

No, it was just Oliver’s frustrations bubbling up to the surface.

“Hey,” he said after John had left to take Thea and Roy home--to their separate locations, of course. Even the archer had to admit, it was a rather lame approach to the issue at hand. All the same, he surged forward with it, stalling only momentarily when Felicity’s only reaction was to purse her lips and give a rather noncommittal noise of acknowledgement in return. “Heading out?’

Oliver didn’t do apologies well.

“Yeah, well, I’m a little upset with you right now…” The flat-toned way in which Felicity said this somehow added even more sting to the words than he envisioned any shouted and openly angry words ever could. “I would’ve waited upstairs, but then everyone would wonder what you’re doing with a blonde stashed away in your basement, probably not a good line of questioning no matter how you slice it. But, Roy is back, and they’re dispersing, so this is probably my chance. I don’t particularly feel like hanging around, so…”
It was as she said this that Felicity had finished shutting everything down, and she grabbed her bag from where she kept it slung over the back of her chair. Her intention was clear when she moved to walk past him, but Oliver knew he couldn’t let her go, couldn’t leave it like this. He reached out before he could tell himself not to. He could see she was wound tight, could see the toll the day had taken on her. When his fingers made contact with her arm, just the lightest feather of a touch, she recoiled. It was purely instinctual, he knew, and it may have had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her troubled state of mind.

But, the look she gave him had everything to do with him. Hurt and anger, things he’d never seen from her before. He’d seen her frustrated plenty of times, sometimes even at him, but this was entirely different.

Because this time he’d actually done something wrong and he damned well knew it.

“I’m sorry, Felicity,” he said. “Please, know that.”

She looked at him for a moment, studied him, and the fire in her eyes died a little in the face of whatever she’d been able to decipher in his expression.

“Yeah, well, I’ll get over it.”

She turned away again then, and he resigned himself to watching her go. But, she drew up short, paused in her step, and he heard her exhale an exasperated puff of air a few times before she spun back to face him.

“I’ve seen a lot of people die, Oliver,” she said oh so simply.

The nonchalance of this statement was belied by the tumultuous emotion he saw in her eyes when she turned to face him. This was something he’d only seen from her once before, on a night when his world had shifted and she’d confessed a little of her crucible to him in an attempt to curb some of his turmoil.

“A lot of innocent people. When that plane went down-” Her voice cracked, and Felicity stopped and turned away, blinking rapidly as she tried to regain her composure. “So, yeah, when I saw those men get shot, heard them scream and beg for their lives, it all sort of came back to me. And I hesitated. I know I did.”

She looked back at him with so much anger in her eyes, and Oliver felt again like such an ass because he knew it was good that things such as what had happened that day could still give her pause. That the suffering of people could strike her so potently. It rarely did for him anymore, and he wondered, not for the first time, if he was too far gone to be anything other than the weapon he’d returned to Starling to become.

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t give it my all today,” Felicity said, and Oliver had to stop her there because he could no longer let her believe that he thought any differently.

“I didn’t mean it, Felicity,” he said in an attempt to placate her.

This, as it turned out, was sort of like throwing fuel onto that fire in her eyes.

“Then why did you say it?” she asked with her fists clenched tightly at her sides. It was a fair question. “Because it hurt, Oliver, when you accused me of giving those men anything less than my full attention.”

Oliver’s stomach turned over unpleasantly to hear just how much his words earlier had upset her,
caused her pain. He wasn’t accustomed to feeling remorse. Even before his time away, he’d thought little of consequences to his actions both before and after carrying them out. But, he was sorry, no matter the foolishness of his youth and the unforgiving nature of his time away.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t angry with you, Felicity,” he admitted after a beat to allow his stomach to settle, and Felicity disarmed a little again--this time he was aware of the earnestness in his expression, shown through conscious effort. “I was yelling at myself. I’m the one who’s been distracted lately.”

That fire in her eyes receded further, and Felicity swallowed and glanced away briefly before asking, “Is it about Detective Hall?”

And then that sick feeling was back. Oliver was ashamed to admit that McKenna had entered his mind only a handful of times in the weeks since her departure. This, he knew, was to avoid the guilt he felt in regards to her current situation. But, it hit him hard in that moment.

“No.”

The silent and surprised ‘oh’, was obvious in Felicity’s expression before she became confused.

“Then what about?”

Here it was, another chance for Oliver to ask her about all of those thoughts he’d been having since he learned of the gun under her desk.

“It doesn’t matter.”

But, he didn’t ask.

“What does matter is that I yelled at you for it, and for that, I am sorry.”

Oliver leaned back against a nearby table and ran his hands over his face, putting a weary guise up as an excuse to think of anything else to say. In the end, he could only grasp at another truth, one that was much easier to confront openly.

“I’m not used to working with people,” he admitted. “Not people I like, at least.”

It was then Felicity’s turn to pause in thought as she studied him. Sometimes Oliver wondered what she thought when she looked at him. Did she see the weapon? The shell of a man who’d only recently come home to a family that didn’t recognize him? A killer? A man she probably shouldn’t know? He wasn’t sure why it mattered, but it did.

Whatever it was she saw, Felicity, rather than finish her departure, walked over to join him and leaned back against the table beside him with a half pace between them, not close but not far either. They remained silent, both looking forward as a pensive silence settled over them. Another few beats passed before the woman sighed, long and with noticeable effort as though forcing herself to let go of something in the air that she breathed out.

“Apology accepted,” she said at length. A little bit of the tightness in Oliver’s chest eased. “I suppose I get it. I mean, I don’t know what you’ve been through, obviously, but… I get it.”

He didn’t doubt she did. He did wonder just how much she understood.

“Just… don’t make a habit of it alright?”

Oliver smiled, a brief yet earnest pulling of his lips that seemed to appease her.
“I promise.”

He found himself under her scrutiny again after that, her eyes tracing over his face.

He was efficient at schooling his expression, but when she asked, “Are you alright?” he realised he must be slipping in this particular skill and would have to work on it. “I mean, I know you’re tired and all, and probably the thing you want most right now is a bed.” Felicity grimaced. “To sleep in, not… anything else.”

The woman sighed, dipped her head back, and muttered a few things under her breath before looking back at him.

“Are you okay?”

This question was just as sincere as the first time she’d asked it. He considered for a moment keeping it to himself. But, he knew they needed to know and, more than that… he needed to tell someone.

“Tommy knows.”

Felicity shifted to look at him more clearly, the picture of surprise.

“Tommy- As in knows knows? Since when?”

“I don’t know. But, when Falk took Roy, and Thea came in like she did, he just… He looked at me, and I knew.”

He could still see his friend’s face. Although silently telling him to help, Tommy’s eyes had… not been kind.

“Oh, yowza,” Felicity groused, and she slipped off her glasses to rub at her tired eyes. “And here I thought this day was almost over…”

“It’s probably why he’s barely down here anymore, so it’s possible he’s known for weeks, but…”

Felicity scooted a little closer, leaning forward to look at him in concern.

“Oliver…?”

He took a breath, trying and failing to sequester these new thoughts away into their own boxes in a dark corner of his mind. When that failed, he looked at Felicity. Whatever his face said, she reacted with a degree of empathy he’d never been capable of. He swallowed thickly past the sudden constriction of his throat.

“He won’t even look at me, Felicity,” he said, his words coarse, and he had to clear his throat. “Growing up, we were inseparable, and now…”

Oliver rubbed harshly at his eyes, trying to forget that look in Tommy’s eyes. This was why he had never wanted his family to find out what he’d returned for. He couldn’t stand the thought of what they would think of him.

“All he sees is a man who’s killed.”

A weight on his arm drew him from his unpleasant thoughts. He wasn’t surprised to find it was Felicity’s hand--she was the only other person there--but the contact was still unexpected.

“Oliver, you have to know that if he knew what you’re trying to do-”
“But, he doesn’t, does he?” Oliver didn’t really want to hear about all of the ‘ifs’. Felicity went quiet and her expression turned grim. He didn’t like that look, so he turned away again and felt the need to fold his arms across his chest as thunderclouds raged in his rib cage. “Because I never told him. And now he won’t even listen to me, so I can’t—”

With an internal growl, Oliver unfolded his arms and ran his hands over his hair digging his dull fingernails into his scalp as if he could actually remove all of these thoughts from his head, dig them out to give himself a moment of peace. He couldn’t, and so all he was left with was letting them ruminate and build and hammer into his brain to give him something else to dwell endlessly on. He was getting another migraine…

He heard Felicity’s intake of air and knew she was about to speak.

Her phone interrupted her before she got even one word out. The sound it made was alarming and continued, a combination of repeated vibration and beeping, and Felicity stilled beside him for a moment, her eyes wide. Pale, the blonde spun to her bag, which she’d set on her other side on the table, and she rummaged through it with fumbling fingers. The hairs on the back of Oliver’s neck stood on end because the sound the phone continued make, as well as Felicity’s reaction, was not a good one.

“Felicity?” he asked as he stood up straight. “What’s wrong?”

Felicity didn’t answer as she finally located her phone. Whatever notice was on the screen, she looked in that moment like she might lose her stomach.

“Oh God…” she exclaimed as she shoved her phone back inside her bag in great haste. “Ohgod-ohgod-ohgod…”

And then she turned to leave without even a glance his way, so Oliver grabbed her elbow to stop her. She flinched, but he held his grip as she whipped around again to face him.

“Felicity, talk to me!” he said, in what she referred to as his ‘loud voice’, and her eyes actually settled on him then, seeing him and not whatever threat her instincts might have perceived him as. He removed his hand from her elbow and lowered his tone. “What’s going on?”

Felicity blinked and shook her head.

“Uh… I-It’s Cindy,” the woman supplied briefly, fidgeting a great deal with her hands. “I programmed this sort of 911 button into her phone that she can push if she’s ever in trouble, but she’s never used it.”

“Until now,” Oliver inferred, and Felicity offered a quick nod of affirmation.

“Her ribs still haven’t healed after she took on this group of guys in the Glades a few weeks ago, so whatever trouble she’s in…” Felicity let the thought trail as more color drained from her face, although Oliver really didn’t need more clarification.

He thought of this information coupled with Synth’s absence of late and wondered if all of those things he’d been thinking really were just coincidences. Could it just be that she’d been injured? That Felicity only had a gun for her own peace of mind? Whatever the case, Oliver could see the woman’s worries spiraling quickly, so he zeroed his concerns in on calming her.

“Take a breath, Felicity,” he reminded her because the last thing either they or Cindy needed at that moment was for her to descend into one of her panic attacks.
She did so, taking in a shuddering breath and covering her eyes with her hand that wasn’t holding her bag.

Oliver waited until she seemed a little bit calmer before asking, “Where are we going?”

There was a brief pause before she lowered her hand, scrunched her eyebrows in confusion, and looked back up at him with a look of incomprehension.

“We? What-” Realization of what he meant dawned on her, and she shook her head firmly once. “Oliver, no. How do I explain to her that I’m acquainted with the Vigilante. Late night message board buddies?”

Sin might already know, Oliver thought, but he now went back and forth on how sure he was of this. The answer to Felicity’s question, on the other hand, was a simple one.

“So, I go as me, instead.”

It’s the first time she’s ever ridden on a motorcycle, and during the entire ride, Felicity has her arms clamped so tightly around Oliver’s chest that she’s surprised he can still breathe. It doesn’t help that he’s driving twenty miles over the speed limit--bless him for hurrying, but that’s quite a leadfoot, mister--and he slows very little for corners. What’s worse is that she understands all of the physics. If she weighs 65 kilograms, and Oliver weighs 80--that’s about 200 pounds--and if the motorcycle weighs about 350 kilos, then at their current speed that’s over 400,000 joules of kinetic energy.

That’s a lot of squish factor should they collide with anything larger than them, which is just about everything they might possibly collide with.

But, they have to get to Cindy, so she squashes that terrified voice down and tells herself the threat of death and mutilation in a fiery motorcycle collision is worth it if they arrive at their destination swiftly. To distract herself, Felicity calls the police with the location Cindy’s phone had sent her, not entirely surprised when the reaction by law enforcement is a little lackluster. So, she tells them to inform a certain Detective, to give him her name and tell him what she told them. She has no idea if they actually plan to or not, but then again, her most reliable assistance is currently booking it through a red light, narrowly avoiding being clipped by a white sedan--given the number of close calls they’ve had, she suspects this has more to do with skill than luck. But, Oliver can only deal with the immediate threat. He can’t keep someone from possibly going after Cindy again should there be some sort of vendetta involved.

When they finally get close--much quicker than she initially expected upon hopping onto the motorcycle behind Oliver--Felicity pulls out her phone to track Cindy, and the man slows a little to await direction. The girl has moved, and Felicity’s stomach turns over unpleasantly because this means she’s probably being tailed, which is never a good sign. She taps Oliver shoulders to tell him which direction to go, and in just a few short moments, they spot Cindy at the end of the street they’ve turned onto. Only, the girl is surrounded by five guys. The baseball bat one of them has speaks to their intentions.

Oliver is off the bike the instant after he pulls the kickstand, and as Felicity removes the helmet he’d given her and staggers off, a little green around the gills after the ride, he takes the helmet back from her and strides forward. She’s always marveled at how he can seem a force of nature from the intensity with which he moves. The five guys take his approach as a challenge, which it is, because they abandon their injured prey for this new threat. They try their hands at fanning out to flank him,
not that Oliver is exactly shaking in his boots at their averagely executed tactics. The vigilante doesn’t even break stride. He just pulls his arm back and throws his helmet forward. It hits the nearest one, a gaunt-faced man with nasty teeth, in the face so hard that there’s an audible crunch that makes Felicity flinch—because, ow!—and the guy drops with a shout of pain. His nose is surely broken given the amount of blood now pouring down his lip and chin.

The other four guys, foolish that they are, don’t back off, and then Hurricane Oliver officially makes landfall. One man with a shaved head throws a sloppy punch that Oliver easily ducks under. Felicity notices it as he throws a heavy fist into the man’s stomach and then punches him across the face. Gone is the calm efficiency with which he usually operates. This is really more of a brawl, and she can only assume this shift in technique is entirely intentional—must not want to implicate himself (or her since they arrived together)—with a vigilante. Oliver then snatches Shaved Head’s jacket at the back as he’s about to go down and throws him quite forcibly into one of his buddies, sending both of them to the ground.

Even as they’re going down, the man with the baseball bat swings in on Oliver from the left, and just as Felicity is about to shout out to Oliver in warning—as she reaches into her bag for her taser since her equilibrium is returning—the vigilante spins around on his attacker and raises his arm, apparently as aware of the man’s presence as she is. The bat makes contact, and for a moment its wielder looks rather pleased with himself. Until he notices how useless the blow has been when hitting the wall of solid muscle that is Oliver Queen. Oliver will probably have a large bruise on his upper arm after this but nothing more. He wraps his hand around the bat then, and Felicity knows his grip strength surely surpasses that of his opponent. So, when he throws his head, still helmeted, into the other man’s, it’s absolutely no surprise to her that the one left holding the bat in the end is Oliver as the other man collapses, groaning and rolling around on the ground in a feeble manner. Oliver discards the bat behind him, using his fists in lieu of the weapon, and steps forward to deliver three harsh punches to the man’s face. The man won’t rise for the remainder of the skirmish.

The other four men, most having felt the brunt of an Oliver blow, shy away but only for a moment, some of them still rising back to their feet. Felicity is a little surprised the men don’t flee after witnessing Oliver’s brutal display. She supposes, however, that everyone in the Glades has something to prove, which can’t happen by tucking tail and running at the first sign of serious opposition. So, the four men push in again, but it’s as they move to flank Oliver again that Cindy, God above, decides it’s a good idea to intervene. Felicity can’t condemn the girl’s bravery nor deny her own pride in the face of her trying to help, but the girl has clearly been further injured by these men, moves more stiffly and with an open cut on her face that hadn’t been there that morning when Felicity had last seen her.

Cindy jumps on the back of a man just after he retrieves the fallen baseball bat. The teen wraps her arm around his neck in an applaudable attempt at a choke hold. But, even as Felicity is more hurriedly making her way over—she sees Oliver get deterred in doing the same as two other guys draw his immediate attention away, taking a blow to the kidney that will do more than just bruise—a second man grabs Cindy by the shoulders and throws her off of his compatriot. The girl lands hard on the asphalt with a winded cry of pain, and Felicity has two immediate reactions that battle for supremacy.

The first is a paralyzing worry that Cindy’s fractured ribs have just been further broken with unknown consequences to her internal organs. The second is a protective fury, the likes of which she has experienced not even a handful of times in her life, that’s eager to launch her forward. In the end, this second impulse wins, leaving her uncharacteristically livid as the first man turns to join his buddy in rounding on Cindy, stepping up to the girl’s other side. The girl rolls over onto her stomach, unaware of the approaching danger, and her fists are clenched as she takes in deep breaths, seeming as though to resist the sudden need to throw up—which is not a good sign.
But, the thugs’ attentions should really be elsewhere.

They don’t even notice her approach. As the man with the bat, Bat-man, who is too far from Felicity for her to reach him, prepares to swing at Cindy’s ribs again, Felicity throws her bag forward and to the side, a distraction that grabs the men’s attention, and she grabs the closer man by the back of the collar of his tattered jacket. He barely has time to react before, with a snarl the likes of which Felicity can’t ever remember wearing before, she shoves the business end of her taser into the small of his back.

The man screams and goes rigid, an entirely involuntary reaction as 50,000 Volts at 2 milli-amps overrides his brain’s communication with his nervous system. Five seconds later, the current ends, and he slumps, Felicity only taking the time to lower his slumping form until his knees hit the ground--because tasers might not kill, but the fall certainly can. After that, she lets him go, and he’s on his own.

His friend with the bat forgets his previous target as he watches the man drop, and he turns his weapon on Felicity instead. His swings are wild and fast, and the blonde has to step back and strafe to avoid each one because, while Oliver might be made of solid muscle, she certainly is not, and she highly doubts she could get away with his ‘catch your bone snapping swing with my shoulder and not even flinch’ move. So, she continues to avoid the swings of the bat until Bat-man finally makes a mistake. He overbalances himself on one of his frenzied swings and has to release the bat with one of his hands to remain standing. This makes his next swing slower than those that had preceded it, and Felicity takes the opportunity to duck under the weapon. The man realizes his mistake a second before she shoves her taser into the soft tissue of his arm. He screams much as his friend had and goes completely rigid.

But, in maneuvering herself around so much, Felicity has apparently moved herself back within striking distance of the first man she’d tased, and she’s still unaccustomed to how long a shock from a taser will leave a person too out of it to act. Clearly, the man is coming out of his daze because he clips the side of her knee with his foot--she never did quite get the hang of mentally cataloging her surroundings. Felicity wobbles and lets up the taser as it’s instead she who struggles to maintain her balance.

This is all for not when Bat-man, now without his bat for dropping it the instant the electric current let up, drops to his knees as his muscles reclaim control. Then he launches himself forwards and upwards with a shout to throw his shoulder into her stomach and tackle her to the ground. Felicity’s vision goes white as her head makes painful contact with the asphalt. She thinks she cried out in response, but she’s not sure if that wasn’t just in her mind because the landing also managed to push all of the air out of her lungs and wreak havoc on her ears, a high pitched squeal the only thing she can hear. When she’s finally lucid enough for her vision to clear, Bat-man has snatched her wrist in a vice grip to keep her taser from being a further threat, and his other hand is around her throat, preventing any air from entering her now empty lungs.

There’s an initial spike of fear as the situation pulls a memory forward from the shallow recesses of her mind. But… as she compares the man above her with the image of a man shrouded in black, she can’t help but think… She’s seen much worse.

This man is angry, and he wants to hurt her. Felicity doesn’t, however, see in his eyes that same cold anticipation of her death. To be honest, she doubts if this man can go through with killing a person with his bare hands. There’s a vast difference between beating someone to prove a point, even shooting someone in whatever gang disputes these men may have found themselves in, and watching someone as they’re dying literally at your own hands. Batless-man realizes this. Felicity sees it in his eyes when he realizes he doesn’t want to go through with his own actions--not that this exactly
makes him a saint—and she feels a small amount of air slip past his hands as he subconsciously loosens his grip.

That’s when she finally regains the presence of mind to consciously notice that, while his other hand is still clamped around her wrist, she’s managed to hold on to her taser. With one deft move, she’s put it to the back of his hand that’s around her wrist, and one brief zap later—because she knows his grip will involuntarily clench around her throat—he recoils, releasing her as he clutches his electrocuted hand with his other.

Then his snarl is back in place as he spits out, “You bi-”

He never does get to finish because it’s as he begins to say this that a figure lumbers over them and grabs him from behind, one hand clutching the scruff of his hoodie and the other the hood itself. Batless-man goes wide eyed as he’s forcibly lifted from her. Oliver lets out a roar as he throws the man as if he’s nothing more than a twenty pound sack of potatoes rather than the 180 pounds he probably is in reality.

Oliver is standing over her then, and Felicity knows the only reason he doesn’t follow after Batless-man to continue his attack is because of the second man now in the process of standing on the other side of them—he won’t leave her alone in her compromised state. Felicity glances in the direction Oliver had come from to assess what other dangers might be incoming, only to find the vigilante has apparently already incapacitated both men. It’s as she watches the last two debate over whether they reasonably want to continue their assault that Felicity hears Cindy call out—more weakly than she surely intends—for the fighting to stop. No one turns, so focused as they are on the confrontation.

Of course, when the girl adds with a little more force behind her words, “I’ll shoot!” all movement stops.

Felicity whips her head around to face the teen, who is lying on the ground a few paces away next to the blonde’s discarded bag.

And who is now holding aloft the gun from that same bag.

How does Cindy even know she carries a gun? Felicity’s never mentioned it or had occasion to take it out in front of either the teen or her mother—oh, if her mother knew…

But, however Cindy knows, her use of the weapon certainly works. The two still conscious men take off running in separate directions, bolting for an alley nearest them. Felicity sighs in relief, dipping her head back as she really begins to feel the brunt of that rough landing. She hears Oliver’s boots shift on the asphalt next to her just before she feels a warm hand on the back of her neck. Her eyes snap open at the contact as she lifts her head. Oliver has set his helmet on the ground next to her, and he’s trying to look at the back of her head—he saw her get tackled in between beating up two guys?

“I don’t see any blood,” he says after a moment as she tries not to flinch with him shifting the hair around the sore spot on her scalp to get a look.

Felicity knows she has to get him to stand down because his proximity to her is making it rather difficult to focus on the things she needs to focus on.

“I’m fine,” she dismisses, ignoring the mild dizziness and the quieter but continued ringing in her ears.

She turns her focus squarely on Cindy, who is panting from her spot on the ground several paces away. Oliver steadies her as Felicity stands, and she forces herself not to think about his hands on her
waist. She misses them when they’re gone, something else she refuses to think about.

“Cindy, are you okay?” she asks as she drops heavily onto her knees beside the girl.

The girl flips on the safety of the gun before handing it to her, and Felicity quickly sets it aside, far from the girl.

“Hey, Felicity?” Cindy asks as she rolls onto her side, drops her head onto the asphalt, and closes her eyes as she wraps her arms around her middle.

And oh, how Felicity fears for her ribs.

“Yeah?” She doesn’t really hear herself say it.

“Why do you have a gun in your bag?”

But, this she hears.

Felicity’s mind stills and goes blank in the face of this completely understandable question from the girl. As she realizes Cindy hadn’t been looking for her gun--maybe her phone--Felicity also realizes she can’t think of anything to say to the girl to reasonably explain away the presence of the weapon in her bag. ‘Just cuz’ seems a little flimsy.

Fortunately, she doesn’t have to in the end because Oliver kneels down on the girl’s other side and puts his hand on her shoulder to keep her steady on her side. This draws Cindy’s attention from Felicity and her gun of unknown origins, and the girl turns to give him a curious look. With his other hand, Oliver applies mild pressure on her back where each rib is located. Felicity’s stomach drops when Cindy grimaces with a flinch at one prod and then a second: two broken ribs.

But, when Oliver says, “The breaks don’t seem severe enough to have punctured anything,” it’s the first time since the girl took that fall that Felicity’s been able to breathe easy--er. “They don’t seem very out of place, so they shouldn’t need surgical remodeling.”

Thank God.

It’s at this point that Felicity hears a faint siren in the distance, and somehow she just knows it’s Detective Lance and that he’s gotten her message.

“Oliver, you have to go.” she says.

It’s rather alarming how quickly his attention snaps up to her, his eyes intense and stubborn, but she’s not going to back down on this.

“We’ll just say it was some brawler on a motorcycle, never took off his helmet. More vigilantes popping up or something. If the Press catches wind of this…”

She hopes Oliver catches what she’s not saying, what with Cindy right there and all. He’s already been publically suspected of being the Vigilante before. If it happens again… curbing those rumors will be so much more challenging. The man holds her gaze, steady and calculating, and he glances down at Cindy and then back up before closing his eyes and releasing a breath of a sigh out of his nose. Felicity relaxes because she knows he’s conceded to her point.

So, he stands, and he fetches his helmet from where he’d left it on the ground a few paces away. As she watches him go, those words from earlier build up in Felicity’s chest again, a confession of everything she is that he doesn’t know.
“O-Oliver,” she says as she stands, still a little uneasy on her feet but managing the task, and he pauses and turns as she approaches.

But, the instant his eyes meet hers, she loses her nerve again. She hates herself for it, for the fear that takes over her every time he looks at her, for the fear of what telling him might change. She knows she should just get it over with, but she just can’t quite bring herself to do it. This night will have more than just the disappointment over a growing headache, it seems. Felicity pauses as her guilt over this battles with the sudden instinct to kiss the man silly for his lack of hesitation in coming to help.

Eventually, she settles for a hug instead, stretches up to wrap her arms around Oliver’s neck and mutters a soft, “Thank you,” near his ear.

She may be a coward, but the man had come to help her without her even asking, and she was so grateful for that and his help. Oliver tenses, and she wonders if she’s overstepped. She can’t see his face to check. But, as she’s about to apologize for her rash actions, she feels his hands on her back with a light and hesitant pressure that makes her think maybe he’s just not used to receiving gratitude. Or hugs. But, he’s done so much for her, more than just what he’s done that night. He and John have both helped pull her back from that island, have given her a purpose that drags her from that darkness a little bit day by day.

When she pulls back, Oliver’s eyes are intense and unreadable, and she finds it rather difficult to breathe all of a sudden. Then he’s turning and pulling his helmet on as he gets back on his motorcycle, and Felicity returns to kneel down beside Cindy. The engine roars to life and draws her attention back up and she finds Oliver staring at them again. She laments how unreadable his eyes can be sometimes because the continued intensity of his look tells her she probably wants to know what his thoughts are in that moment.

The teenage girl deep inside her wants to believe her crush isn’t as one sided as she thinks.

The pragmatist in her tells her she needs to tell him about her other work with him before he finds out on his own.

As a lone police car rounds a far corner down the street, Oliver drops the visor of his helmet, revs the engine of his motorcycle, and drives off down a narrow side street. With his eyes no longer fixed on her, Felicity can finally breathe, and takes the opportunity to fetch her phone from her bag and call for an ambulance. Detective Lance and his partner pull up just as she’s getting off the phone.

It’s as the two get out that the three guys on the ground realize they’re about to be arrested. One of them takes off running. Lance’s partner takes off after him with shouts of “SCPD!” and “Freeze!” The second man is shoved into the asphalt by Lance. The third seems to think he can get off scot free as he rolls over onto his stomach, prepared to bolt.

The crackle of the taser in front of his nose stops him dead, and he looks up to find a very unforgiving Felicity glaring down at him. He makes his smartest decision of the night and lowers himself back down onto the asphalt, placing his hands on the back of his head in surrender. A few short minutes later, all three men are tucked snugly away in the backseat of the police cruiser, and Detective Lance hurries over to Cindy and Felicity, who has since returned to the girl’s side.

“Is she okay?” He asks kneels down with his hand on Cindy’s arm. Rather than wait for Felicity’s answer, however, he dips his head to ask Cindy directly. “You okay, kid?”

The girl doesn’t even open her eyes to mutter, “Peachy.”
This response is comforting to Felicity because, while the sentiment is entirely untrue, the customary snark behind the word tells her the girl is not as bad off as she looks.

“I called an ambulance,” Felicity supplies when Lance pulls his phone.

He looks up and, when her words register, he pockets his phone again and sighs. He sounds like his day has been just as long as hers. After the entire fiasco with the Savior, she bets it has.

“And here I was hoping you girls would never need to call me again.”

Chapter End Notes

Oops! I accidentally left a note to myself in near the end of this chapter. I’ve taken it out now. Sorry if it interrupted the flow of the story for anyone.
Asylum

Chapter Summary

(Announcer): This week on Under the Hood… An old enemy resurfaces and our hero finds himself in more than one tight spot. And when the young, possibly not as young as he thinks, spitfire known as Synth gets herself into even more trouble he’s forced to confront the undoctored truth.

April 22nd, 2013:

The week had started out pretty great. Cindy was well on the mend and she’d been spending a little less time in the Glades in the meanwhile, so she hadn’t gotten into any more trouble. After a fairly restful night’s sleep--a rare occurrence for her by any stretch of the imagination--Felicity had gone to the Foundry to run a new system patch on her computers, already finished with a school project which wasn’t due for another week.

Then she’d heard the news. Count Vertigo had escaped from the asylum where he’d been a VIP resident for the past couple months, and he was terrorizing the city with a demonized version of his already evil drug. Add in a new dealer in town who was already doling the stuff out in the Glades, and they had the makings of a rather spectacularly crappy week.

Oliver had stopped a junkie who’d been taking hostages at the aquarium. He had gone there with every intent for the junkie to survive, but the man had overdosed on Vertigo before he’d been able to help. Dig had ignored his phone and thus hadn’t show up to help, either, mention of which made Oliver go quiet in a dangerous sort of way that reminded Felicity of a late friend of hers whom she prefered not to dwell on.

Oliver and Tommy fought about Vertigo.
Oliver and Diggle fought about Deadshot.
Oliver and Diggle fought about Vertigo.
Oliver and Felicity fought about Oliver picking fights with everyone.

And now she’s rushing down to the asylum where Thomas Werner is supposedly holed up because Oliver has dropped out of contact. Like she said, crappy week. With any luck, he just stepped on his earpiece by accident. ...And his phone. At least the tracker is still working.

It probably wouldn’t be if he knew it was there.

May 16th, 2007:

He woke up with a ringing in his ears, an acrid smell in his nose, and a blinding pain at the back of his head. Oliver registered the pain also in his upper back, on the left side where he’d hit the passenger seat, and on the right side where he’d then collided with the console as his momentum had
carried him forward into the main cabin of the vehicle. He groaned, his entire body stiff and aching, and opened his eyes. It was another moment before he could see anything around the spots of light in his vision and then he came face-to-face with the cabin light, which was fortunately not on. It was then that he consciously realized he was laying on his back on the cubby between the two front seats of the SUV. Sara, whom he had been tightly entangled with when they’d crashed, was prone on his chest and it was a brief moment of relief when he noticed no blood visible on the top of her head, that he’d managed to take that blow himself and had cushioned her landing somewhat. It was only another moment before she began to stir, and there was also movement to his left as the bodyguard in the passenger seat started to come to as well.

“Sara?” Oliver’s voice cracked as he spoke, his throat dry from the fumes of the airbag detonation. With a groan, the girl put her hand on his chest to push herself up a little, just enough to look up at him, and the focussed nature of her gaze was further reassuring. The passenger bodyguard groaned and then took in his surroundings around his deflating airbag. He was quick to spot the two beside him.

“Are you alright?” he asked and, despite the ringing still in his ears and the pain everywhere--but particularly the back of his head--Oliver nodded in confirmation. As the man opened his door, Sara slowly drew herself back onto the backseat and then Oliver started the difficult task of dislodging himself from between the seats with two injured shoulders. Once free, he pretty much collapsed into the backseat beside Sara. Then he looked out the front window and saw what they’d hit and he remembered those terrifying few seconds that had lead to the crash. The explosion. The impact as their driver tried and failed to avoid the second SUV, the one that held his father passenger.

Oh, God… That SUV…

It was upside down with a giant hole ripped through the bottom.

As swiftly as his aching body would let him, Oliver threw his door open and stumbled from the car. He wavered on his feet when he landed, nearly lost his stomach as it rebelled violently, and then staggered his way forward to his father’s car. The bodyguard from before had the rear door open and was knelt beside the vehicle. He heard him ask if the person inside was alright, and elation hit Oliver because that meant his father was awake and, more importantly, alive. Oliver dropped to the pavement beside the man and peered inside.

His relief turned to revulsion once he saw the state his father was in, strapped in, hanging upside down with blood running down his face, and he turned and finally threw up the contents of his stomach. He lingered like that for a moment, hunched over the asphalt as he tried to find some sort of equilibrium. Over the ringing in his ears, he heard one car door open, then a second and a third, before his stomach was finally settled enough for him to move again. He straightened in time to see his father unbuckle his seatbelt and utter a wheezing groan as he landed on the roof of his tipped vehicle. Oliver and the bodyguard from his own vehicle began the arduous task of pulling the man out into the open.

He was halfway out when Oliver finally noticed the crimson stain spreading on his father’s shirt. At the epicenter of the bloodstain was a jagged piece of metal and Oliver thought of the explosion that had sent the SUV over and the giant hole in the bottom of the car. A shard from the underside… It had impaled his father through the stomach.

Oliver wavered as his vision went momentarily black and he would’ve fallen onto the pavement had someone not caught him, steadied him with firm hands on his back and then an arm around his chest.
As it was, his ass still hit the ground, but his upper body was held steady. If the airbag detonation hadn’t burned his nose hairs, making that the only smell available to him, he probably would’ve smelled Sara’s perfume before some of her golden hair fell forward over his shoulder, but he learned it was she supporting him either way. He heard her gasp in his ear and knew she’d seen what he had.

His father was losing a lot of blood…

Her hand was in his hair then as she tried to comfort him as best she could. Oliver found he couldn’t swallow, couldn’t breathe, and he couldn’t look away. His father was dying, bleeding out right in front of him, and there wasn’t a damned thing he could do to stop it. He couldn’t even remember anything from those ridiculous health classes he’d taken in High School that might tell him what he was supposed to do. Should they remove the metal? Leave it in? Did it matter either way? Was his father a dead man walking?

“We need to move,” came a voice from above, and Oliver only looked away from his father’s anguish face when he felt a firm hand grip his arm.

He and Sara were pulled to their feet by one of the three bodyguards still able to move as the other two, the one from the passenger seat of Oliver’s SUV included, lifted Robert from the ground, each with one of his arms around their necks. The first man removed his sidearm and turned for the nearest alley.

“There’s a hospital three blocks from-”

The two bullets that hit him in the chest kept him from finishing that statement, and Oliver ducked on instinct as Sara screamed beside him, clinging to his side. The bodyguard dropped to the pavement. He was still moving, so he must’ve had a vest on. It didn’t stop the next bullet, the one that went through his head.

Sara screamed again, and one of the men supporting Oliver’s father dropped his arm to pull his sidearm. Oliver barely managed to catch his father as the man stepped forward, and then it was he and the bodyguard he’d first seen upon waking up pulling the man towards the alley. The second bodyguard leveled his weapon in the direction the shots had come from. Oliver didn’t see anyone when he looked. A distant crack sounded, this one discernible through the ringing in Oliver’s ears, and the second bodyguard dropped. They were almost at the alley when another shot went off, and then Oliver was supporting the dead weight of his father alone.

It was in that moment that he realized he didn’t even remember any of their names.

His father’s weight swung, threatened to spin him around, and the frat boy nearly lost his grip. He would have, the strain great on his injured shoulders, but Sara came up on their other side and helped Oliver pull his father the rest of the way to the alley. They only made it a few paces, however, before the strain became too much. With a cry of pain as he resisted the inevitable, Oliver fell to his knee. Sara drew to an immediate halt, and they were forced to lean their charge against the alley wall. Oliver sagged against the brick beside his father, spots dancing before his vision, and he finally lifted his hand to the back of his head.

It came back red. He must’ve hit his head on the dash harder than he’d initially realized. Another hand in his hair and one on his arm told him Sara was beside him again, and he covered her hand on his arm with his own when he felt her trembling. God, she must’ve been terrified. He certainly was.

His father’s hand on his wrist, covered in his own blood, drew Oliver’s attention from all of these other thoughts.
“Run,” the man said with all of the strength and authority he was still able to, and Oliver went pale.
“You ha- *cough* have to leave me behind.”

“Dad-” Oliver rushed to straighten, regretting the motion when his vision swam.

“I’m going to die, and so are you if you don’t run!”

A figure stepped up to the alley entrance they’d just come through, and Oliver barely had the presence of mind to glance up before a shot rang out. The man dropped, dead weight with a hole in his head, and only when he hit the pavement did Oliver have the presence of mind to wonder where his dad had gotten the gun in his hand, let alone where he’d learned to shoot like that. Sara screamed again and stepped back, both of her hands shooting up to cover her mouth.

A rustling of fabric barely drew Oliver’s attention from not the first dead body he’d seen that night, and he turned to find his father holding something out to him. He shoved it in his hands, and Oliver realized it was a small book of some kind. All he could really focus on was the line of his father’s blood down the cover. Then his father grabbed his wrist again, and the boy found himself looking into a pair of eyes that were very unknown to him despite the fact that he’d grown up looking into them.

It was much later before he realized they were the eyes of a man who knew he was about to die.

“Run, Oliver! Fix my mistakes!”

Then he pushed the barrel of that gun in his hands to his temple and he pulled the trigger.

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April 22nd, 2013:

Oliver was strapped down, and whatever the doctor had just injected him with—probably his latest version of Vertigo—seemed to be burning him from the inside. Aside from the doc—Webb, John thought he remembered them saying earlier—there was just one admittedly large orderly. He could take one guy. John was about to make his move when something on a table near the trio exploded.

Then the power to the building unexpectedly cut, killing the floodlights in the room. A loud clatter sounded inside the room shortly after. It was when he heard Oliver cry out that John jumped from his cover and tackled the alarmed orderly, who had just hit a now grounded Oliver in the back with an IV stand. As they started to brawl, the backup generators kicked in and brought the flood lights back up.

Felicity walks in on a scene that’s very unlike what she had been expecting. On one side of the room is Oliver, on the floor not far from a tipped gurney, and on the other is Dig in full-out fisticuffs with an orderly who looks like he belongs in a comic book, giant and bald and with a vague thug-ness about him. All things considered, John seems to be faring fairly well. Oliver, on the other hand, seems barely conscious as he reaches up, straining to reach something on the tabletop above him: brief inspection of the space reveals his quiver. It seems urgent, so she hopes Dig can handle himself against the orderly thug.

Felicity snatches the quiver from the table just as Oliver sags back onto the tile flooring and she wonders what he could be after until she notes the peaky nature of his complexion and the dilation of
his pupils. She nearly swears because this means he’s surely been dosed with Vertigo, clearly not with a commercial serving. She pulls the bundle of arrows from the quiver, picks out the injection arrow the archer had surely been after, and drops the rest back inside. She’s not entirely sure what to do then, holding the arrow aloft and ready to inject. Does it go in his arm? His thigh? His shoulder? It probably doesn’t matter, but the thought of jabbing Oliver with that very large needle also admittedly gives her further pause.

“Where should—”

Not that it gives Oliver any. He just snatches her wrist and stabs himself right in the chest.

The honey colored liquid doesn’t inject quite as quickly as she thought it would, but it certainly works fast. Barely a second after it’s entered his system, Oliver is lurching upward and gagging while puffing his cheeks in a rather telling fashion. He promptly rolls over and vomits out what looks like green goo all over the tile.

“Oh, gross,” Felicity says with an involuntary cringe.

A loud clatter sounds off to the side then, drawing her attention to that aggressive looking brawl between Dig and the very large orderly.

“Uh,” She turns back to Oliver and, finding he seems to be doing better, she gives him a quick couple of pats on the back. “Good chat.”

They’ve made a right mess of the place during this scuffle, tables overturned and large tray racks toppled over. Of course, this actually turns out to be in Felicity’s advantage because one of those racks gives her a nice step stool to leap onto the giant orderly’s back as he’s trying to choke Dig from behind.

The man barely teeters for her added weight, but her arm around his neck--more just to hold herself up--does surprise him enough that he releases the soldier. John stumbles forward a couple feet, a hand to his throat, and he catches only a couple breaths before he turns and throws each of his fists across the orderly’s face. He would’ve added a third punch, even pulls his arm back to do so, but the orderly roars before he can and charges forward like a crazed berserker. He barrels right into John and throws the man back several feet where he collides heavily with a large stack of crates and then drops. Felicity gets a sinking feeling just before she feels the orderly’s hands grip the fabric of her jacket at the shoulders.

“Uh-oh…”

Then her world turns upside down as the man lifts her dead weight over his head and launches her forward. Although she manages to get her bearings in time to put her feet under her, she lands far less than gracefully and takes a few tumbles that will most definitely leave her bruised in several places. She groans as she pushes herself up, her head still spinning, and notes how Dig seems perfectly fine, already on his feet and facing down their very large enemy.

“Go after Oliver,” he says without taking his attention off of the orderly.

It’s then that Felicity notes the archer’s absence from the room, as well as the good Doctor’s, and she realizes Oliver must have gone after the man. As she and Dig continue to stare down the orderly, who’s watching them from a few feet away as an angry animal might, Felicity hesitates because that guy had just tossed her across the room like one might a sack of potatoes. Did she really want to leave John to deal with that alone?
“You sure?”

“I’ve got this. Go!”

Well, if he’s certain he can take the guy, who is she to argue? All the same, she snatches the volt baton from where it’s strapped to her back.

“Take this,” she says as she tosses it to him, and John’s quick reflexes let him turn and catch it on instinct.

When he sees what she’s just handed him, he smirks, and that’s enough to put Felicity’s mind at ease. The orderly doesn’t know what he’s in for, she thinks as she takes off in the other direction and heads down a hall that leads off of the main room. As she rounds the far corner, she hears the telltale zap she’s come to associate with that specific weapon and a shout of pain, and she tries not to be amused as she removes her tablet from a pouch on her thigh, bringing up her tracking information on Oliver—it seems he’s in the tunnels under the building.

John will definitely be fine and, if she’s reading these schematics correctly, there’s a shortcut she can take just outside in the alley that will hopefully let her get the drop on Webb from the other side.

Oliver caught up to the man in the tunnels much quicker than he expected to given his head start—he must’ve thought himself free and clear. He readied his bow, hesitating a moment as his vision swam, and loosed an arrow at his target. He saw Webb go down with a shout, but then the archer stumbled, nasia bringing his knee to a forceful meeting with the ground as he braced himself against the wall with his bow hand. This new stuff had a really nasty kick even after he’d already vomited up most of it. His vision swam as he looked back up and he deciphered through the swaying shapes that Webb had rolled over onto his back and that he had missed, that the arrow had only hit him in the leg. He was sitting up and still had that gun in his hand and looked more than ready to use it.

He didn’t see the dark-clad figure that came up behind him.

As Webb raised the gun, Cindy-Felicity snatched it from behind and they began to wrestle for it. Oliver straightened and pulled another arrow. He wavered again as he lined up a shot, but he couldn’t bring himself to loose it. If his aim was just a millimeter off on his end, he could hit the girl. Two bullets went into the ceiling as they struggled before Synth managed to pull Webb’s gun back towards herself, hoping to wrench it from his grip as he lost his balance.

But, the gun went off again.

Synth lurched with a synthesized gasp and released the firearm, allowing Webb to tumble backwards with the weapon still in hand. Cindy/Felicity faltered back in her step, her head lowered, attention fixed on where she grasped at her left side below her ribs.

Where the bullet must have hit her.

In a rush, adrenaline flooded Oliver’s system, and it stabilized him. His vision that was once blurry became laser focussed. His hands were now steady. In a flash, he had an arrow nocked and aimed, locked onto Webb as the man turned with his gun. He actually had the gall to be stunned by what had just happened as though it hadn’t been his intention all along to shoot both of them so as to facilitate his escape. Oliver felt no remorse when he released the arrow, and it hit Webb center mass. It punctured his lung and threw him back to land on the cold concrete floor of the passageway. It would be a painful death as he both bled out and struggled and failed to breathe, and the archer
reveled in this knowledge for a moment before turning his eyes to where Synth was teetering on her feet beside the fallen man.

Oliver found himself frozen in place then, felt his perception of reality slow as he stared at her, and that was when it all caught up with him, all of those pieces to a puzzle he’d been trying not to put together.

Felicity looked at him, and Oliver thought for a moment that she was reassessing something about him.

Blood was seeping through her dark hoodie around her gloved hands.

‘I’m Oliver Queen,’ he introduced himself, and Felicity gave a small and nervous smile, one that was partly sincere this time.

‘I know who you are,’ she said with a light breath of a laugh. ‘You’re Mr. Queen.’

Synth looked up, and Oliver could feel her eyes on him despite the shades that concealed them.

‘But, then Felicity Smoak goes back to her boring internship Co-op with QC. Deal?’

‘There’s more than one way to save a city. You don’t have to kill to do it.’

She was in shock. He could read it in her body language. She couldn’t believe what had just happened.

‘I mean, what’re the odds that people like us will find someone with shared life experience?’

That she’d just been shot.

‘I know who you are.’

And then she said his name.

“… O-li-ver…”

And then it didn’t matter that he couldn’t see her face, that her tone was digitally distorted. She was looking at him, and Oliver had no more doubts. He felt as though he’d just been plunged into ice water as the panic and the fear of what he’d known deep down settled further into his gut, into his very bones. His heart stopped--or at least it felt like it did. His blood ran cold. His lungs ceased to function properly, going still in their own right as though he in his entirety was paralyzed. He nearly lost his stomach again.

Oh, God…

…

Felicity had just been shot.

And then she started to fall. Oliver pushed to his feet and surged forward and past a dying Webb. He caught her as she teetered one final time and lowered her to the ground. He threw his hood off and bit off a glove so he could slip his hand underneath both of hers to apply better pressure to the wound below her ribs. He felt kevlar beneath his hand. Bullet-size, point blank range, impact position on the vest, whatever the extenuating circumstances in the hit were, the simple fact remained that the vest had not stopped the bullet. Felicity groaned in agony as he pressed down on the wound, gripping his arm with both of her bloodstained gloves, and he apologized. In but a few short beats, she was
hyperventilating as the panic over her situation set in.

“O-Oli-” she tried and failed to say his name. “I c… C-can’t-”

She couldn’t breathe. Oliver didn’t need to be told twice. He removed her shaded goggles, lowering her hood in the process, and pried off the balaclava, bringing into view irrefutable proof of what the archer had struggled to accept. Felicity tried to suck in a deeper lungfull of air now that her mask wasn’t in the way, but she failed in this effort as well.

“Felicity, you need to breathe slower, okay?” His voice sounded raw. Emotional. Compromised. “Focus on me. I’ve got you. You’re going to be fine.”

He tried not to think of all the blood she’d already lost.

Felicity’s fear-stricken eyes met his, and a vice clamped around Oliver’s chest.

“Oliver… I’m s-sorry. I w-wanted… to tell you…”

He’d already known.

“None of that matters right now.”

“I-I d-”

She gasped again and, with her head angled to look at him, a tear slipped down her inclined cheek, rolled over the skin and off her ear to wet the dirt on the ground beneath her. That vice around his chest tightened until he couldn’t breathe and, when she spoke again, Felicity’s words wavered equal to all of the fear she was owed in that moment.

“I don’t want to die…”

And it was like these words steadied him, a line finally cast from someone who was drowning, something he could catch and hold onto to keep them afloat. Oliver put his free hand on her cheek to wipe away the streak of that tear that looked so wrong on a face that smiled so easily, and he held her terrified gaze with a steadiness that came from years of making the hard choices.

“You won’t.”

She wouldn’t die in that dark underground passageway next to the corpse of a man who had actually deserved his fate. He wouldn’t let it happen. This time he could do something to stop it.

He had to slow her heart rate down. He had to minimize the amount of blood she lost. Oliver removed one of the tranquilizer darts from where they were fastened to his wrist and stuck the needle into Felicity’s arm without any further preamble. He’d already wasted enough time on emotion. He wouldn’t risk her life on any more. The sedative worked quickly. The woman was out in seconds, lulled into a forced slumber as her formerly rigid body went limp. Her hands loosened on his arm and then her head slowly rolled to the side as she fought and failed to remain awake. She would be out for at least half-an-hour; although it would likely be considerably longer given her state of injury and the blood she was still losing--at a slower rate now.

A voice inside him said she may not even make it for that half hour. Oliver promptly crushed it. Violently and with all of the wrath he’d grown to be capable of.

She would not die.
With a flachette and his one free hand, Oliver tore a swatch of cloth from Webb’s lab coat and then he removed the man’s belt, pulling it free from the man’s dead weight with only mild difficulty for how he wavered when a brief bout of nausea hit him. He slipped the cloth under her kevlar vest and fastened the fabric more securely to Felicity’s side by slinging the belt around her middle and tightening it as much as he could to staunch the bleeding of her side. It was as he moved to try his hand at lifting her--difficult for the resurfacing shakiness in his limbs caused by his near overdose before--that he heard rushed footsteps enter the tunnel behind them. Oliver spun with a flachette at the ready to mercilessly bring down whichever assailant aimed to slow his treatment of Felicity.

But, it was John. Relief washed through him, and Oliver lowered his guard as John did the same upon recognizing him.

“Diggle, help me!” he shouted, frantic as he dropped the now useless flachette, waverering a little for a sudden bout of vertigo that hit him.

“What do you need?” Diggle asked as he holstered his gun and hurried forward.

“No, Felicity!”

Oliver watched John’s eyes go wide before the soldier dropped them to the prone form lying beside the archer.

“We need to get her to the Foundry!” Oliver said as he spun back around to try his hand at lifting the woman again.

Diggle didn’t hesitate as long as he had, Oliver noted—or perhaps his adrenaline-enhanced perception of time had only made it seem as though he’d paused for a terribly long span of time.

“Let me. You can barely stand on your own.”

Oliver didn’t argue. He wasn’t entirely sure he could carry Felicity to their transport without faltering in his step and losing his grip on her. So, as John carried her, the archer grabbed his bow and Felicity’s discarded headgear and hurried after them.

In the early months that John had known Oliver, he had resigned himself to the fact that he had joined this crusade mostly in an effort to curb the body count as much as he could, trying to instill pieces of the man’s lost humanity back to him, hoping it would make him something the city actually needed. It had been very slow progress, but he had made some headway. In the month since Felicity had joined them, however, John had started to notice more drastic changes to the cold hunter Oliver had initially been.

It had become a small source of amusement for John, the way this small, unassuming and self-admittedly unorthodox young woman could throw harsh and growling Oliver so off kilter with just a simple joke—usually one that only she understood—and a laugh. It was almost as though he’d forgotten what laughter was before she’d joined them because every time she did it, Oliver’s attention zeroed in on her as if he was confused about why she would do it. Every once in awhile, though, the archer would actually smile, subtly and usually when Felicity’s back was turned, but he would smile nonetheless. It was why John thought they would be fine without him on this one. Felicity would be able to keep Oliver grounded while John dealt with some unfinished business.

He regretted that decision now, even moreso than when Webb had snatched Oliver.
He was still having trouble believing it, honestly, but there she was. In the backseat of John’s car, Oliver sat behind Felicity—in her full Synth get-up—supporting her upper body in an effort to keep any bumps from jostling her too much. All the same, he saw the man wince in his rear view mirror every time the car jumped and felt his own stress levels spike each and every time. For the duration of the ride, Oliver sat with one hand pressing down on Felicity’s injured side—which by the end had mostly bled through the cloth he’d strapped to her—and the other settled over her pulse at the neck, probably to ensure to himself that they didn’t lose her en route. By the time John pulled up to Verdant, both men’s nerves were completely shot. They couldn’t get more blood in her soon enough.

With the adrenaline pumping through his system, it was easy enough for John to carry Felicity down the stairs and settle her on the table they reserved for just these kinds of situations. Oliver, who had rushed in ahead of him as Diggle lifted the woman out of the car, came over with two packs of O-neg, a bundle of clean towels, and their transfusion equipment. They’d barely gotten the transfusion started before Oliver turned to make his way over to the stairs, his intention to leave very clear.

“Do whatever you can to stop that bleeding! Do not stop until I get back!” the man ordered.

“Oliver, where are you going?”

Oliver didn’t turn or slow as he bounded up the stairs to the exit and yelled, “To get help!”

While the thought was definitely an appealing one, John couldn’t imagine who he would go to. As he turned his attention back onto Felicity, he could only hope the man would return soon.

She didn’t know he was aware that she was back in the States. If she had her way, he knew she never would have seen him again.

But, Oliver was desperate.

He’d broken over a dozen traffic laws getting there as quickly as he had, especially in his current cognitively compromised condition. Even then, the townhouse was an infuriating fifteen minutes from Verdant, but that was how much they needed her help. A gunshot to the shoulder was one thing, but treating a gunshot to the abdomen would require medical skills well outside his or even Diggle’s purview. He rang the doorbell several times in his great haste and then turned around, knowing the woman wouldn’t even answer if she saw him through the peephole. It was a frustrating couple of minutes before she finally opened the door, surely woken up given the hour.

Nora Reid recognized her visitor the instant he turned around to face her.

“Nora, I.”

He barely even got that much out before she tried to slam the door in his face. Adrenaline let Oliver catch it.

“Wait!”

He didn’t know if it was his manic, pleading tone or Felicity’s blood on his hand that gave the woman pause, but neither did he care. With her eyes wide in shock, the Doctor looked up at him.

“I need your help.
Scars

Chapter Summary

(Announcer): This week on, Under the Hood… There’s a lot to be said after everything the storm settles and trusts are shaken. Will Team Arrow ever be the same after all of the new information that’s come to light?

Chapter Notes

Finally! Almost 7,000 words, this one. Longest chapter yet. Best get to it then, so without further ado…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a whirlwind of activity from the moment the woman set foot through the door with Oliver hot on her heels. With a satchel in hand and her long coat billowing around her as she strode quickly across the floor, Nora Reid had taken immediate control of the situation. It was of note to John how seeing the Foundry and its owner didn’t give the woman the slightest pause, but understanding how Oliver knew this woman would have to wait, no matter how troubling the insinuation was.

“Someone get that vest off of her,” Dr. Reid had ordered as she set her bag down on another table and then sterilized a rolling tray table with some chemical from that bag before setting out a series of surgical instruments.

And so began the trauma surgery to save Felicity’s life. Oliver removed her bulletproof vest as John held pressure on the wound. Dr. Reid used a portable ultrasound to assess the internal damage and the horrifying news was given that the bullet had ruptured Felicity’s spleen and that the vest she wore had slowed the bullet enough that it was currently lodged in her abdomen—at least it was only one external wound, limiting the blood loss. Dr. Reid made a small incision where the bullet had entered and Oliver and John had to keep Felicity’s prone form at an angle to keep the incision level. With Oliver in his compromised condition after his near overdose, it had also been up to Diggle to continue to run the ultrasound for the good doctor as she worked.

This was probably for the best. To keep her completely steady, Oliver had to sit on the table and use his body to prop her up and John noticed how his focus would slip regularly to where his attention was on either Felicity’s face or on one of the multitude of scars that John was determined not to pay any mind to. He couldn’t, however, not note how there seemed to be an awful lot of them, particularly for one who’d been stranded alone on an island. Those looked like burn scars on her arm and side, clearly visible to him given that the bullet had hit her from the left. That small circular scar on her stomach looked like the remnants of a long since healed gunshot wound.

All in all, John thought the surgery went about as well as one could hope. The incision Dr. Reid made was only large enough to retrieve the bullet and then she’d used a narrow surgical stapler to close the tear in Felicity’s spleen. Suction had been used to undo much of the internal bleeding damage to the organ had caused, and then the good Doctor stitched her up. But, even after they’d
closed her up. Felicity’s vitals weren’t entirely promising and color had yet to really return to her skin despite the transfusions she’d been and was still being given. The fact remained that she they didn’t have the equipment on hand to properly treat this kind of injury. Which was exactly why John and the good Doctor were currently trying to convince Oliver to enlist proper care.

“She needs a hospital, Mr. Queen,” Dr. Reid advised him quite sternly.

Even only knowing her for the brief time he had, John could tell that Nora Reid, a clear pragmatist, did not like Oliver much, yet she’d still agreed to help him with something this sensitive while clearly knowing Felicity hadn’t taken a bullet acting as any legal law enforcement.

“We can treat her here-” Oliver tried to protest, but Dr. Reid was two steps ahead of him.

“The damage to her spleen isn’t going to heal on it’s own. She needs either a splenectomy or a splenic artery embolization, and I don’t have the equipment or the staff for either of those procedures. After that, she’s going to need fluids, antibiotics, around the clock care.”

Oliver wasn’t phased and simply countered with, “I can buy all of those things, hire a team for you, get the equipment. This doesn’t have to go on any official records.”

“Does she have any family?”

Utter silence met this question, and in that silence, John knew that Oliver hadn’t even considered this, that Felicity had family who would worry in her absence. This fact was only more confirmed when the archer rather harshly ran a hand over his cropped hair and ducked his head, a low growl of frustration escaping his throat.

“Because I’m sure they would notice her missing for a few days.”

“The Doctor is right, Oliver,” John put in. “The best thing we can do for Felicity is get her to a hospital.”

“They have to report gunshot wounds, Diggle!” Oliver shouted as his irritation boiled over the top of his formerly collected visage. “If we take her in, they’ll need to know when and how and by whom, and those aren’t questions we can very well answer.”

But, that didn’t change facts. It was one thing to refuse to get proper care after a gunshot to the shoulder, but it was an entirely different monster when dealing with injuries to the abdomen.

“The official story is whatever we dictate, Mr. Queen. She could have taken a bad fall, ruptured her spleen, and that’s it. All evidence of a gunshot has been erased by the damage from this very hasty surgery but that new damage needs to be rectified. I’ll say again that I don’t have the tools or the staff for it here, and time is not on her side. Those internal stitches weren’t intended as an indefinite solution, just until proper care could be given.”

Oliver was still hesitant, and he cast a glance back towards the main room as if he would glean some answers just by looking in Felicity’s direction. They’d brought the conversation into the small hallway off to the side in the hopes that they would avoid disturbing her. But, they hadn’t anticipated just how stubborn Oliver was, how long it could take to convince him onto a course of action other than the one he’d already dictated. The soldier really should have seen this coming, but he’d thought this a simple decision. Hell, it was a simple decision, but Oliver just refused to see it that way.

But, then John heard it, the even tone of a flatlining EKG, and in that moment his heart stopped. He clearly wasn’t the only one to notice because by the time he turned- Oliver was already rushing out into the main room.
That sound had filled him with a dread that had surprised him after he’d already lost so many people in his life. The lack of any such feeling in recent years may have had more to do with how he often refused to let people get close. How Felicity had managed to sneak past all of that, he still had no idea, but that didn’t change the fact that when he’d heard the EKG flatline, he had frozen in place, hit by a nondescript heaviness over what all of this would be like without her on the team.

He was now a man who relied on a team. It was a striking realization.

When he finally ripped himself from his stupor, Oliver ran for the main room, half of him filled with a blinding rage towards a man who was already hours dead and the other half terrified of what he would find. As soon as he rounded the corner, his eyes landed on the table where the admittedly expeditious surgery had been finished not a half-hour past.

Oliver wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or not when he found that table to be void of its now former occupant. On the one hand, Felicity wasn’t actually flatlining, but she was by no means in any condition to be on her feet. The archer turned to John, who was fast on his heels with a surprised Nora behind him, to give the order to search for her—not that he wasn’t sure the man was already planning to do that very thing alongside him. But, then he heard the shaky sounds of someone breathing. He stepped forward and found a figure slumped against the pillar near the stairs and Oliver was around the table and beside Felicity fast enough that his vision spun. He had to brace himself with a hand on the pillar above her, but with a firm shake to dissipate the dizzy spell, his attention was squarely on her hunched frame.

“Felicity,” he breathed her name as he knelt down and he reached out to rest his hand on her shoulder, over the blanket they’d draped over her to try and bring up her temperature, a blanket which she’d since wrapped around her shoulders. “You scared the hell out of us.” How was she even awake yet? “What were—”

The woman drew and exhaled another shaking breath then, and Oliver finally realized those were the telltale, emotionally wrought intakes of breath which could at times be mistaken for hushed laughter. But, she wasn’t laughing. They weren’t expressions of joy or mirth or anything else this woman always seemed ready to give.

Felicity was crying.

Oliver slipped his hand from her shoulder to her back as he ducked lower to try and look at her. With her head bowed and tucked towards the column, he succeeded very little, but after what little of her expression he did glimpse he wasn’t sure he could handle any more. She gave another small and defeated sob that hurt him to hear and he knew why she was on the floor next to that pillar.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this…” Even sitting right next to her, Oliver could barely hear her as Felicity forced the words out between quiet sobs. “You weren’t supposed to know…”

She’d been trying to run away.

She took a breath that steadied her only a little, and she didn’t look up or uncurl from the ball she’d tried to make of herself.

“I was going to tell you what matters,” she said with more fervor to her voice that told him she wasn’t just saying this because her secret had already been discovered. “I’ve been trying to tell you who I am. I really have, but… Every time I try to get the words out, I choke. I was going to tell you
what matters. I want to trust you.”

'I want to trust you.’

These words echoed in his mind from a conversation he’d yet to realize they’d had until that moment, a conversation between a harsh man no better in his cruelty than the criminals he sought and a girl--woman--who hoped he could find another way.

“But, I didn’t want you to know everything…” As she said this, consciously or no, Felicity pulled the blanket tighter around herself, just far enough, Oliver noticed, to conceal the large, clean scar on her chest that curved with the swell of her breast. “I didn’t want you to know this …”

“Felicity-”

Oliver himself wasn’t sure what he’d been about to say. All he knew was that Felicity was hurting and he had no idea how to help her. The situation was straining the emotional parts of him he tried so hard in recent years to suppress. He could handle a rabid criminal even on his worst days, but he just didn’t have any experience to draw on to handle the raw emotions of others.

He had no idea what to do when a woman was crying.

“Because people don’t get these kinds of scars on their own.” As she said this, Felicity managed to pull herself into a tighter ball against the support column, closing further in on herself. “I didn’t want you to look at me differently…”

Oliver couldn’t tell her that he wouldn’t… Because he did. No matter what he’d tried to convince himself of when the inkling had first struck him of who Felicity might be, this knowledge did change things. He couldn’t define what it was, couldn’t give it its due thought in that moment, but his perception of her had changed nonetheless.

“I don’t know the details, but I know how much you’ve been through, Oliver. I can see it in how you carry yourself. And John’s been to war. That one word is enough to know he’s been through so much too.”

“...That island was my hell, Oliver, and I let it break me. You come back with this grand quest to save your home. John is… well, he’s John. And I can’t even fall asleep at night without a gun under my pillow. Even then I barely sleep at all. And when I’m not busy trying to avoid everything while also trying to ignore how tired I am all the time , I get these infuriating panic attacks that come out of nowhere and render me the blubbering psychotic mess that I spend all of my energy trying to hide from the world…”

A drop fell from Felicity’s chin to the dirty concrete floor of the Foundry, and Oliver clamped his jaw to square himself as he brought his hand back up to grip her shoulder. He had to end this.

“I didn’t want you to meet this girl, this pathetic girl who let her troubles win. I-I-”

She was running out of breath. Oliver said her name again to try and stop her rambling because she was injured. She’d a lot of blood. All of this could wait until she hadn’t just suffered the damage of a gunshot and a surgery.

“I didn’t want you to see her and think, ‘why did we want her to join us? W-what… can she bring to the table?’”

“Stop, Felicity.” He pleaded in all but words.
He went ignored or unheard one last time.

“Because I l-like what we do… I don’t want it to end… and I-”

And then Felicity sagged, going boneless as her weight slumped in its entirety against the support column, and a terrified Oliver knew she had passed out.

“This is just the sort of thing I was talking about, Mr. Queen. It’s a complication from the surgery.”

Damn it, he knew that already!

“Call for an-”

“I already did.”

Gratitude mixes with his frustration in equal measure and Oliver moves to pick Felicity up to head out and meet the paramedics. Diggle is there, however, and takes her limp form from his arms. The archer is about to protest, that he can carry her himself: that he can at least do this much for her.

But, without even looking at him John said, “Go change your clothes. I’ll drive us to the hospital,” before he made his way up the stairs.

Oliver hadn’t even remembered he was still in his uniform.

The official story was that Felicity, while checking on some of the wiring in Verdant, had taken a fall from a step ladder and sustained damage to her side from the corner of a table. Oliver had called a private doctor and Felicity’s dire condition had required immediate action. An ambulance had been called as soon as she was deemed stable enough for transport.

And so, Felicity was somewhere in that hospital, enduring a second surgery for the same injury, while John and Oliver sat in the waiting room. Oliver, probably had a migraine as he sat with one hand blocking the overhead lights from his eyes. Digg could hardly fault the man, at least for that.

But there were plenty of things which he could find fault with and one stemmed from the fact that, while Oliver had been worried during this entire horrible scenario, he hadn’t once seemed surprised, not in the same shellshocked way John had been. It was telling. Digg couldn’t bring it up in that waiting room, however, not where so many could overhear. So he resigned himself to wait.

Ten minutes in that busy waiting room became twenty, and then a blonde woman in pyjamas and a coat rushed through the doors a short ways off, followed quickly by a dark-haired teen in even darker clothing. John thought nothing of their arrival, just more concerned patrons of the hospital, until he noticed Oliver tense beside him. The man was still, his wary attention on the pair until they passed by, and then he was on his feet, making a beeline for the exit they’d just come through. The blonde kept on towards the desk, but the man’s swift motion drew the attention of the girl. She paused and backtracked. And she recognized him.

“Hey.”

They must’ve been Felicity’s family, although John had no idea how they were acquainted. When Oliver turned, it was with a surprising degree of caution, like he feared this small girl would somehow hurt him. It was not something John was accustomed to seeing from the archer who could make hardened criminals soil themselves.
“Thank you.”

These words surprised the man, who stood there in wide-eyed—for Oliver—silence. They were also undeserved by John’s mind. If he had listened, if he had let them—them serving as another problem no matter how much help the good doctor had been—get her to the hospital as soon as she was stable, Felicity might not be in such dire straights, fighting for her life again in that building. But, he’d argued. And he’d dug his heels in. And he’d refused to see reason until Felicity’s injuries had walloped her again. John hadn’t been about to let the man attempt to carry her up the stairs either, not in his condition. He could’ve dropped her and that would have been the end of the entire matter: but not an ending any of them wanted. Oliver had been reckless that night, all for a grudge against a man who was literally out of his mind.

Words from the teen girl drew John’s mind back to the present.

“They said you brought her in,” she said.

Oliver nodded to accept these undeserved thanks, and the girl nodded back. Then the archer turned and resumed his exit from the ER. John was on his feet and following before he could convince himself not to. He was tired and he was stressed out of his skull for their friend. He wasn’t in the best frame of mind to confront any of these things. But he was also too tired to convince himself to wait, to mull everything over. He followed Oliver out onto the street to avoid curious onlookers and met him in the alley the man moved to.

“You knew,” he said in a gruff tone and Oliver paused, his shoulders tense. “When we had Felicity in that basement, you weren’t surprised, not like I was.” He didn’t try to deny it. Digg was convinced, and he expressed that conviction in his tone. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It wasn’t for me to tell, John,” Oliver said as he turned to face him, his expression carefully guarded. It was just an excuse and both men knew it. John had a right to know that Oliver had these kind of suspicions about Felicity, that she was putting herself in danger like this with a distinct lack of a drive for self preservation—the foes she chose to confront, well above her skill level most of the time, spoke of that much. John had asked Oliver if he knew who the girl was, wanted to impress on her just the kind of people she was dealing with and perhaps even to train her if she refused to stop suiting up. But, Oliver had known and he hadn’t said anything, and it wasn’t his only omission.

“You mean like the fact that someone else in this city knows damn well who you are under that hood of yours?”

Oliver’s blank expression tightened into something of a scowl.

“Nora is none of your business.”

“Like hell she isn’t, Oliver!” John pushed back. “I’m in this too, you know, and now she knows I’m working with you. That woman hates you. It’s obvious and if she decides one day to oust you, you won’t be the only one to go down. And it won’t be just me, but Felicity too. We both deserved to know that your identity was compromised.”

“She won’t turn us in, John.”

“And just how do you know that?”

“Because I do.” He said it like it was irrefutable, as though the facts about why he thought so didn’t matter.
“Am I just supposed to take your word for it, Oliver? Trust you when you clearly don’t trust me?”
That seemed to hit a nerve. “How long, exactly, have you known that Felicity is the kid throwing her life on the line for you every other week?”

“Does it matter?”

“Just answer the damn question!”

“A week!”

John was skeptical and his instincts held true when the man added almost reluctantly, “but, I’ve had my suspicions for a couple months. There have… been signs.”

A couple months. He’d kept all of this to himself for months. John couldn’t say he was surprised, but he still felt the keen sting of disappointment.

“But, you didn’t feel like sharing them. Just like you didn’t and don’t feel like sharing your ties to Nora Reid. I can’t help but wonder what else you’ve been keeping to yourself. I’ve never needed to know your entire life’s story, Oliver, but I do need the important details, the ones that could hold standing with this operation of yours.”

A glare was shared between them, betrayed meeting unmoving, and Digg snorted. They both knew Oliver would take as many secrets as he could to his grave and this near tragedy didn’t change that.

“How am I supposed to trust you when you don’t trust me?”

With that final reiterated point, John walked back into that hospital where one of their friends already had one foot in an early grave and he didn’t look back.

Late that night, Oliver received a simple text, interrupting his gnarled mass of thoughts as he’d sat alone down in the Foundry, staring at the table that still had Felicity’s blood on it.

*She’s out. Surgery went fine.*

Oliver was a little surprised he even got that much information from Digg, but he reasoned this had more to do with Felicity and moral obligation than it did with appeasing any of Oliver’s worries. The archer had tried to relax his nerves after that and spent a good our scrubbing that table down, removing any visible signs of what had nearly happened. Of what had almost been lost. Then he tried to make himself go home. He had to sleep. He’d been awake for nearly 48 stressful hours.

He ended up at the hospital, waiting in his car until visiting hours started the next morning.

Seeing Felicity, unconscious but alive, had calmed the storm in him a little but not much. Oliver kept his distance, leaning against the wall of the short entrance hall made by the addition of the bathroom to the hospital room. He didn’t want to wake her two guests. They had surely had a very long eleven hours waiting for news on the surgery, and he had no idea how much they’d slept during the night. Sin was asleep in a chair in the corner—farthest from the exit, he noted with some interest. Donna Smoak had pulled a chair up to Felicity’s bed and was currently asleep with her head resting on the mattress one hand gripping her daughter’s, even in sleep.

They didn’t know just how close they’d been to never seeing her alive again, but perhaps that was a
A nurse came in sometime later to check her vitals and to give her more morphine. Oliver stepped out, taking the opportunity to grab some instant coffee from down the hall. He was too tired to even taste it and it didn’t seem to do much by way of increasing his energy stores. But it gave him something to do, and when he returned the nurse had moved on to another patient.

The room was almost as he left it. But, only two of the three people in the room were still asleep. Felicity didn’t notice him enter and he didn’t call attention to his presence. Her eyes were on her mother for a time before she turned to observe Sin in the corner. She had expected never to see them again, Oliver thought as he observed her expression, afraid to look away—both her and him, it seemed.

The vigilante had run the blood from Lawton’s knife twice, mostly for something to occupy himself with. Both had come back positive, but he hadn’t expected any differently. Knowing her identity hadn’t quite prepared him for the reality of it, though. He’d wondered a few times why she often wore long sleeves, even in formalwear, which was uncommon to say the least. He’d thought on one occasion that perhaps she had simply grown accustomed to wearing warm clothing during her time away, clothes that would help shield her from the elements and from the cold after the sun went down on that island she’d been stranded on. Oliver found himself wishing this had been true.

Because the number of scars that littered her body were in direct contradiction with the woman he’d come to know. Someone so earnest, so good and ‘soft’, should never have had the kind of wounds those marks spoke of. No one should have to go through so much, to live through such hell, but Felicity in particular, a woman so pure in her motives, shouldn’t bear such ugly reminders of a horrible past. They proved just how unfair life could be.

The large pale scars he’d seen on her left tricep looked like shrapnel wounds, jagged and wide like the skin had been sliced open by flying shards of metal and hadn’t been stitched back together as they’d healed. There were also burns on that arm, that suggested she’d shielded her face at some point for quickly expanding flames—although what deserted island had explosions? That scar on her stomach, though small as it was, had looked like the remnants of a gunshot wound. Then there was the scar that had poked out above her athletics bra, the one she’d tried to hide that implied she’d been tortured with the threat of amputation—the thought of her in such a situation made his blood curdle, made his stomach turn violently, and made his fists and jaw clench in a quiet yet very potent righteous fury. Of the alarming number of other scars that littered her flesh, most of them had appeared to have been slash marks.

Even now, however, Oliver’s eyes kept dropping to her arms that was draped over her stomach, to the bullet scar he could see on her wrist and to that knife cut on her bicep, both of which she’d received from Floyd Lawton. As it turned out, that had been the day he’d first met Felicity.

Oliver was unable to decipher just what it was he felt as he watched the woman breathe, a soft rising of her chest as she observed her mother and Sin in turn. Anger, he was no stranger to, so that was fairly simple to identify, but it was muddled by so many other things. Disbelief. Concern. Confusion. Curiosity. A tightness in his chest that seemed to be caused by something more than just his worry—what that something was, he himself couldn’t decipher. All Oliver knew was that he couldn’t stop thinking of the scars and what they meant.

She disarmed him. That was the obvious answer, both to why he’d been unwilling to accept this truth and why it troubled him so. Oliver was the kind of man who thought of everything. His paranoia was all-encompassing. Or, at least it should have been. But, he’d been unwilling to let himself accept the truth sitting right in front of him this entire time, and that came down to the simple
fact that something about Felicity put him at ease. It terrified him a little to realize, made him feel
complacent, dull, things a weapon should never be.

He had truly noticed this fact back in January, when she had asked to meet him regarding the copy of
the List his mother had. The day’s events, dealing with the Count and letting him live, had left him
sour, but that angry tension in his chest had eased a little when he’d seen her walk past the window
with a nervous little wave and a smile to match. Talking to her was somehow easier than talking to
most--maybe because she was usually nervous enough for three, which made it nearly impossible to
offend her by inadvertently saying the wrong thing--and it wasn’t so much work. He didn’t have to
worry that his mere presence would remind her of something that would set her off and make it
impossible to reach her for days. Why he was comparing her to Laurel, he wasn’t sure, but the
thought still applied. With just a word or a glance, she could calm the rage in his heart, appease the
storm long enough for him to take a much needed breath. To know that Felicity had suffered in the
ways the reminders on her body spoke of… The knowledge burrowed to his core and made Oliver
yearn for his bow and something to shoot, something tangible and at fault that he could demand
answers from, demand why.

Perhaps it was her earnestness that appealed to Oliver. In his world of hidden agendas and lies spun like
cobwebs, it was somewhat appealing and disarming to speak with someone who, however
unintentional it was, wore her emotions on her sleeves--this was also why he found Diggle’s
company so agreeable, he thought, because the man never hesitated to share his views, never hid
them from him to further an agenda. Yes, Felicity clearly had her own secrets, but she had never
actually outright lied to him about any of it--moreso because Oliver had never thought—or, later, been
able—to ask. Obviously, she had kept things from him, but the archer couldn’t exactly be cross with
her about that, not when he was doing the same to her, John, and his family. He wasn’t angry with
her, more just angry with himself for his naivete and with whatever vague and unexplained
circumstances had lead her to become this scarred person she was.

What was worse was that Felicity seemed to be ashamed. Her words from earlier rang in his ears
again, about her trying to hide this from them to keep their opinions of her unaltered. Did this change
anything? Yes, Oliver had already admitted to himself that it did. He now knew that Felicity wasn’t
quite what he had initially pegged her as, that she wrestled with demons far greater than he’d thought
upon their first meeting at QC. But, did it change what really mattered?

Oliver ultimately decided it didn’t. In actuality, it only served to highlight those facets of her
personality that had drawn him to her, that had him seek her out as part of the team. He hadn’t
misread the earnestness of it whenever she laughed. He’d misunderstood the extent of the instincts that
had her notice him so frequently before others, but that didn’t erase the honesty of her smiles for him.
Why she was ever happy to find him approaching, he wasn’t sure he would ever understand, but all
of these things he’d learned didn’t alter Felicity as he’d come to know her, not really. She was
damaged, yes.

But, she was hardly the only one.

“I have nightmares.”

Oliver spoke softly. He told himself he was trying not to wake the others, but a deep part of him
knew that he wouldn’t have been able to say the words, to admit to his own weakness, any louder if
he’d tried to.

Felicity turned quickly, whipping around so fast he was worried for her new stitches. Her eyes were
wide in a fright that came from being startled. When she saw it was him standing there, she didn’t
look as comforted as she once had upon recognizing his presence. She looked… guarded, as guarded
as he always felt. Her eyes were steely, her expression carefully blank, and it looked so very wrong
from her. For the first time, Oliver actually started to believe it, the tumultuous past which her body
spoke of.

He wanted her to smile, he realized, even surprised himself with how much he wanted it. But more
than that, he just wanted her to stop looking at him like that, like she thought he would rip her heart
out, like she was so sure he would that she had to guard it behind a proverbial wall of steel. Like she
had prepared for this moment, prepared herself for him to say all of the worst possible things to her.

“‘I usually can’t sleep for more than a couple hours at a time.’”

Oliver might just admit to everything, all of his sins and insecurities, if she would stop looking at him
like that.

He pulled a chair over from the wall and set it quietly next to her bed, set it sideways so he could rest
his arm up on the bed, remove the weight from his sore shoulder after that landing from the gurney in
Webb’s lab. He was speaking quietly, and he didn’t know if he’d be able to say any of this twice, so
he needed the proximity. When he looked back at her, uncertainty had taken hold of Felicity’s gaze.
Her free hand, the one closest to him, was clenched tightly around the hospital sheets, and Oliver
could see her body was wound just as tightly. If she wasn’t injured and strapped to an IV, he’d think
she was ready to bolt at the slightest provocation. He settled against the back of his chair to put some
distance between them. She didn’t relax.

“I can’t have my back to a door or a window,” he continued. “If I do, I get so tense that I’ll snap
someone’s wrist if they so much as touch my shoulder from outside my peripherals.”

The iron around Felicity’s eyes let up just a little, and she almost looked confused. Why would he be
saying these things, confessing these insecurities to her? Honestly, this was the first time in a very
long time that Oliver hadn’t planned everything out beforehand. He hadn’t intended to say any of
this going in--he hadn’t even known she would be awake. But, these were things she needed to hear
and, possibly moreso, they were things he needed to say.

Oliver’s next thought was one he’d kept from voicing even to himself for months because… well,
because acknowledging it would make it tangible. A phantom feeling could be ignored, but as soon
as he acknowledged that it was there… But, he could feel the words building, could feel their need to
be said. He had to look away from Felicity, knew he wouldn’t be able to say it aloud and look
someone in the eye. He clenched his fists and almost bit his tongue as he struggled to give voice to
one of his most painful realizations.

“I can’t talk to my sister…”

He’d kept these words bottled up so tightly and for so long that voicing them now was sort of like
trying to speak through a mouthful of gravel. His voice strained and cracked for the effort.

It was one of his biggest regrets.

“She remembers me as someone I wasn’t,” he continued quickly, blinking away the stinging in his
eyes. “Caring and a role model. Someone she thought she could look up to when I was actually the
farthest thing from it. And now I’m someone she should never know, so I just… don’t say much for
the fear that she’ll see what I’ve become.”

A long pause followed, and Oliver tried to collect himself, tried to shove all of these thoughts and
emotions back inside their little boxes in his head. It was more difficult now that he’d confronted
them, and that frustrated him, filled him with a regret for confessing that only served to add to that
frustration. He felt the burning need to flee, to abandon that room for the streets where he could beat on some thug until he’d managed to bottle everything back up, to run away and pretend he’d never said anything.

But, then he felt a feather of a touch on the pinky of his hand that was on the bed, and he turned to see Felicity’s hand settle slowly, meaningfully, on top of his, her weak fingers applying the meagerest amount of pressure, a show of support or compassion or any number of other things he shouldn’t receive but that she always seemed ready to give. And it grounded him, reminded him why he’d decided to say these things in the first place; because she needed to hear them as much as he needed to say them. The tension that had taken hold of his frame slowly eased, and he could breathe again.

When he looked up at her, that steel that had once been in her eyes was gone, replaced with a look of compassion that was almost painful to see. But she was willing to listen.

“I miss my father,” He admitted a moment later, surprised himself to finally hear the words aloud as well as to hear the subtle tremor in those, his own, words. He tried to subtly clear his throat before he continued, and with Felicity in her current state, he may have gotten away with it being unnotice. “He was harsh, and he was no saint, but I loved him, in my own, rebellious way.”

There wasn’t much to add after that. They were the things that had weighed on him the most, and Felicity had accepted them without comment or judgement. It was all he could ask for.

But, he did add, “You’re not the only one trying to piece yourself back together,” because she needed to know that she wasn’t the only one who had been broken, that she needn’t feel shame over that fact. Oliver turned his hand over and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “I’m sorry you got hurt.” A phrase that encompassed far more than her injuries sustained the previous night.

Felicity squeezed his hand back weakly, as strongly as she was able, and grinned. Oliver felt himself return it without thought, just happy to see that upward tilt of her lips once more.

“And... Thank you.” The words felt almost foreign on his tongue. “Not just for tonight.”

The first time she tried to speak, it came out as more wheezing sound than anything else, but then she swallows a couple times and managed to rasp out a rather painful sounding, “For what?”

But, the effort of just that had apparently irritated her throat to the point that she seemed on the verge of a horrible fit of coughing, which would surely be no good for her new stitches, he was sure. Oliver was on his feet in an instant as the heart monitor registered the increase in her heart rate, and he swiped a cup of water from her bedside table. With a hand supporting her neck, he helped her take a small sip via a vibrantly colored straw. The first sip was longer than the two that followed it, and when she placed her hand on his wrist that held the cup of water, he knew she’d had enough. So, he helped her settle her head back down and returned the water to the side table before shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and he waited for her to catch her breath.

When she finally looked at him again, Oliver could see she was no less confused than she’d been before, so he added, “For last Christmas.”

With all of the drugs in her system, Felicity’s mind was surely a little foggy, so he wasn’t surprised when it took her a minute to figure out what he meant. Of course, when she did, her eyes went wide. He could see her dismissal rise in them, but he couldn’t let her voice it—and not just because she was having so much trouble speaking. He took her hand again and watched as those words slowly died in her throat.
“It wasn’t nothing,” he said once he was sure she was ready to hear him. “Thank you.”

After a pause, Felicity gave him a nervous smile and, rather than try to speak again, she offered a small nod to nonverbally accept his gratitude. He smiled too, although without the nervous undercurrent, and gave her hand another small squeeze.

“Go to sleep, Felicity.”

She was out soon after he left the room.

Chapter End Notes

The argument with Digg was a new addition. Inspiration struck a couple days ago and I feel like this sets up the next couple of chapters quite nicely. If you’ve got time and the inclination to do so, shoot me a comment to let me know what you thought of the chapter. If not, I hope you enjoyed it and that you’ll tune back in next time.
According to Plan

Chapter Summary

Floyd Lawton is back in town and John Diggle gets his back up for the sting operation aimed to take him down.

Chapter Notes

Hello, all. I realize it's been a considerable amount of time since I posted, and I apologize for that. This chapter was supposed to be twice as long as it is. However, rather than wait even longer to post what would have been the longest chapter yet, I have decided to split it in two. The next part is very near completion, as is the chapter following, and I will post them as soon as they are finished. Until then, I hope you enjoy this installment.

June 1st, 2008:

She was dragged from the tent by the walking nightmare. They hadn’t bothered to afford her the decency of zipping up her jacket or a fresh and uncut shirt, although, with her hands bound in front of her, she could at least cover herself a little. In pain, terrified, practically half-naked, and utterly humiliated as a group of his soldiers passed, casting glances her way, Felicity was deposited onto her knees in front of Edward Fyers. The man smiled and clapped his hands together as though she’d just arrived in time for tea.

“Now then, Miss Smoak, if you would please direct your attention to the sky, we can begin.”

With a wary eye towards Wintergreen, who had only been introduced to her as such very recently, Felicity knew he would force her to comply if she didn’t do so on her own, so she reluctantly did as she was told. Even as high up as it was, the plane was easy to spot given the cloud cover was meager that day, a long streak splitting the expanse of blue in two with the airborne passenger vessel at the lead.

“That plane you see there will be in firing range within the next, oh… sixty seconds.” Straight to business, then. “If you don’t tell me where the rest of the survivors are, I will order it be shot from the sky.”

With her eyes locked on that plane, Felicity said nothing, kept her terribly chapped lips clamped tightly shut.

“You must be aware that, if there are any unfortunate enough to survive, they will be subject to the same hospitality you have been so fond of these past few days.”

Fyers stepped in front of her then, towering over her kneeling form and blocking her view of the sky, and Felicity was given no real option other than to return his gaze with a glare.
And you will watch all of it as my compatriot performs his good work.

It was the first time since all of this had begun that Felicity actually considered telling him what little she knew. Not the thought of experiencing any of it but watching someone else experience what she had was enough to give her serious doubts.

“I wonder how long you will keep your silence then, as you watch them bleed and scream for mercy.”

But, she said nothing. It could be a big mistake. For all she knew, his men had found the error in the launcher’s code and fixed it. The lives of everyone on that plane in the sky could be in very real danger—not that she could actually tell Fyers where the fuselage was. More than anything, she was hoping her subterfuge remained in tact. Yes, it would mean another plane full of innocent people wouldn’t be subjected to the hell which she and the others had been through.

But, she also really wanted to see the look on greasy Fyers’ face when his threat backfired quite literally, end her on the spot as he may for her subterfuge.

“Very well.”

Fyers took her silence as the refusal it was and then he turned towards the man standing at the ground-to-air missile launcher thirty yards away.

“Ready the launcher.”

With every button that man pushed, Felicity had to tell herself to say nothing, hoping, praying that they hadn’t found those few extra lines of code.

May 10, 2013:

Felicity likes to think of herself as a helpful person. She’s kept an eye on Thomas Merlyn’s phone records because, whoever he is to Oliver, she doesn’t have to trust him and can keep a happy surveying ear to his phone conversations. She can make sure he doesn’t spill the beans about how his best friend has grown a recent fondness for dressing in leather and shooting pointed objects into people; that helpful dominatrix Oliver reference will be sure to forever haunt her, but at least the only one around to be mortified by it is herself. And if Tommy never says anything about his best friend, the Vigilante Archer, then who needs to be any the wiser to her snooping? It’s not as if she’s spending her nights listening to all of his conversations or pouring through his texts and emails. That would just be creepy. But, Felicity sent him a malware which will alert her to the use of any keywords such as ‘Hood’ or ‘archer’ or anything else that might pertain to Oliver’s new nighttime hobby--again, that unintentional and unfortunate dominatrix reference is back to haunt her and she shudders.

Anyway, because she’s a helpful person, Felicity is currently taking it upon herself to be John’s backup, despite Oliver’s very vocal protests.

“No,” he had said outright over the phone--while he was on his way to not be John’s backup. “You are not going into the field, Felicity. Lawton is a trained killer and you are injured. The doctor said six to eight weeks after your surgery, and if we’re being generous it’s only been half of that.”

She gets it. She really does. Rasmus is one bad cookie, setting his lackey assassin on the little boy of two nice people he already had killed, a boy which Oliver’s former--and quite probably current--
flame, Laurel Lance, has taken upon herself to protect. At Oliver’s house. And Rasmus is on his way out of town, surely to a country without extradition where he can live out his life of plenty without ever facing up to his terrible crimes.

The choice is a horrible one to have to make, so Felicity is trying to help. Granted, she knows she’s injured. She’s scarce been able to forget it this past month—twenty-one days is not generous for half of her prescribed healing time, although she’ll grant him that it barely qualifies as being it. But, the bullet and surgical wounds have sealed. It may still hurt when she twists, but, if all goes to plan, her help won’t even be needed. ARGUS will nab Floyd Lawton and the entire situation will be over, no muss, no fuss. Still, she knows John will tell her to leave even faster than Oliver had.

So, she’s wearing an old hooded MIT jacket with her hair down, and she has two coffees in hand, one for herself and one for the person she’s not actually there to meet. The soldier didn’t look at her twice when she passed him. All the same, because she sits at a table nearby in the mall court, Felicity goes against her own instincts and sits in the chair that faces the wall, putting her back towards the man who could recognize her and, the source of her anxiety, the crowd milling about the space. She sets the other coffee opposite her at the table and takes out her phone to pretend she’s actually waiting for someone who doesn’t exist. Well, that’s not entirely true. She is waiting for someone but highly doubts Floyd Lawton will join her at that table for a coffee and a nice chat about the ‘good old days’.

Of course, that doesn’t stop random t-shirt Joe from doing that very thing not ten minutes later, taking up residence in that chair as if it was meant for him all along.

“Always nice to meet a fellow nerd,” he says with an easy grin that flatters his kind features. “Mens et manus.”

Okay, so he’s an MIT grad. This is certainly unexpected. All the same, it doesn’t change the fact that Felicity is in that food court to potentially help in catching a very dangerous international sniper for hire.

“Ah, um… Sorry, but I’m actually waiting for someone.”

She doesn’t want to be rude. It’s been a long while since she’s had a conversation with a fellow code junkie, but her focus wouldn’t be on any conversation they might share therein. His friendly smile doesn’t falter at her words, though.

“Well, I’m sorry it took me so long, but I just got slammed at work today. I rushed over as soon as I could.”

This actually manages to catch her distracted attention, but only because the line is so unbelievably atrocious. She looks at the man aghast, only realizing as she focusses on him that he’s actually quite attractive with his warm brown eyes and his high cheekbones and his well-kempt hair that’s somehow both professional and casual at the same time.

“My God, does that line actually work?”

He laughs, giving a nice honest smile, and Felicity wishes for a moment that she wasn’t there on dangerous vigilante business.

“Not usually, no,” he admits, but his expression implies he hadn’t expected it to. It had, however, broken the ice for him. “How about I just keep you company until your friend gets here. Here,” he moves the coffee over to an empty seat to make it clear it isn’t his. “No harm no foul. So, are you a new graduate? I’m class of 02.”
“Um…” She really shouldn’t. “No. I would’ve been class of 09, but I… had to take some unexpected time off. I’m actually finishing up now.” It’s just been so long since she’s had a good nerd-to-nerd conversation.

“Oh. That’s a long commute,” he says simply.

A laugh bubbles out of Felicity. There’s something endearing about his corny jokes, she’ll admit. It might even have been one she would make.

“Online,” she clarifies with a smile, although it’s unnecessary because they both know the average person can’t commute across the country on a regular basis.

“They don’t usually do that.”

He’s fishing for information. She can read it in his eyes as he watches for tells in her expression shieight give unintentionally.

“Special circumstances,” is her only cryptic answer.

This only makes him more curious, but then again that’s her aim.

“And what circumstances might those be?”

“So, what’s your deal?” Felicity turns the tables on him, unashamedly dodging the question, and the man grins in good humor. “What brings you to this hub of lacking social activity on a Wednesday night?” She leans forward to rest her arms on the table, taking a sip of her mostly forgotten, lukewarm coffee. “Did you actually have plans or were you just looking for lonely MIT grads in need of some company?”

“Well,” he draws the word out in an overly exaggerated fashion as he mirrors her posture with his arms on the table. “If you must know, I like to scout local venues for talent. A buddy of mine started a company recently and is always looking for new blood.”

“Really? Any luck?”

She takes another sip. He shrugs.

“It was a bust, unfortunately. Guy was a dud.”

“That’s a shame. My condolences to your evening.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” His tone is light. “Things are looking up.”

If Felicity didn’t know any better, she might think she’s being vetted. She grins, her eyes narrowing in mild curiosity. She’s not looking for a job, has a nice, low-key one lined up in fact with a contract of employment for at least two years following her graduation. But, all the same, it’s always nice to feel wanted.

“You just met me,” she argues.

“That I did,” Dimples isn’t swayed.

“You don’t even know me.”

“Sure I do.”
“From a two minute conversation?”

“It’s been a very enlightening two minute conversation.”

“Has it? We haven’t even talked about tech. What if I didn’t know a single thing about it?”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“And, why’s that?”

“The hoodie?” He tries, but she gets the feeling it’s more of a joke.

“Maybe I just like red.”

He laughs an open sort of laugh that makes it hard not to laugh with him. Whoever his friend is, he’s definitely no slouch if he has the sense to send this guy out to do his recruiting.

“Maybe,” he agrees. “But, I doubt someone who knows nothing about technology would be able to hack into a mall’s security cameras on their phone.”

It takes Felicity a moment to realize what he’s said, and then she feels all humor seep from her system, dragging her grin down with it. In her lap, not even visible to him, the screen blinks to another camera feed, this one a shot of the courtyard from the west corner--it let her keep an eye out for Lawton without actually having to look up and seem suspicious about her business.

“Because there’s no security raining down on us, I’m guessing this technologically savvy person is discreet enough to avoid detection. Why break down a firewall when you can just slip past it, right? Not that mall cyber security is terribly imposing. Probably had to just physically tap into the feeds of their closed-circuit system. All that being said, it’s still curious that someone would even choose to hack into it.”

Oh, so they were speaking in hypotheticals now. Well, Felicity could play along just fine.

“Maybe this person has a good reason.”

The blonde takes another lazy drink of cold coffee.

“Well, I mean, it would have to be, right? Otherwise, what’s the point? But, tell me this. What reason could there be for an MIT graduate student to hack into mall security feeds? I’m just going to assume there’s no heist. That would just be disappointing, all that talent gone to waste for something so obvious as money. Is it practice, a way to hone your skills?”

She’s just looking at him, tight-lipped.

“Look, I’m not gonna’ call the cops. Unless you are pulling a heist.” He pauses a moment, scanning her, but he seems pleased by whatever he’s read in her expression--which, she’ll be honest, she has a lousy poker face. “No? Good. I just make it a habit not to offer jobs to potential felons. My company is still growing, you see, so it’s best to avoid bad press until it’s past adolescence.”

“I thought it was your friend’s company.”

He shrugs again.

“Well, I am my best friend. Can’t get rid of me no matter how hard I try.”

This corny joke gets no reaction from her as he’d clearly expected it to, and, with a sigh, Dimples
gets back to the matter at hand.

“So, are you up to anything nefarious, Miss…”

They stare each other down, one calculating gaze scanning another.

“Smoak,” she ultimately says at length. “And no, I’m not. I’m just… looking after a friend.”

He smiles, pleased.

“You have a strange way of looking out for people.”

They stare one another down for a moment before he takes a card out of his pocket and slides it across the table. Cautiously, Felicity reaches out and picks it up. All it has is a logo with a large P and a phone number.

“I don’t get it. There’s no name. What’s the company?”

She looks up to see he’s already standing, his intent to leave apparent.

“I guess you’ll just have to call and find out.”

With a final smirk and a wink, the man turns to walk away.

“Hey, I never got your name,” Felicity calls, and he pauses and turns back, seeming surprised at himself.

“Oh, it’s R-”

And that’s when the first gunshot goes off. Felicity thinks in retrospect that she should have paid more attention to her surroundings.

June 1st, 2008:

It surprised Felicity just how powerful the shockwave of the launch was. If she had been standing, she surely wouldn’t have been afterwards. Even on her knees, she ended up on her back with the wind knocked out of her. Then again, perhaps that was a good thing.

Because when the missile arced downwards seconds into its flight it hit a solitary tent almost fifty yards off.

With barely enough time after seeing it change course, Felicity had thrown her arms over her head and curled into a ball on instinct. The resulting explosion still popped her right eardrum, and the blonde felt a searing wave of heat roll over her in a powerful gust that quite probably would have thrown her a couple feet back had she been standing. She stayed that way, with her arms over her head, for several moments until the heatwave had well passed her over. Through the buzzing of her left ear, she could faintly make out the roar of fire and what could be the distant shouting of the soldiers near the blast radius of the missile and what must have been a munitions tent given how large the explosion had been—not that she had much experience with missile explosions.

Weary, Felicity settled onto her back and let her arms fall from her face and was left staring up at the sky, to where the passenger plane was still making its slow progress across the wide expanse of blue. She felt herself grin, the first truly honest smile she’d given since Cooper died. That moment
stretched on as she watched the airborne vessel, and she couldn’t remember ever feeling quite so light before. Those people would make it home. They wouldn’t even know there had been a chance they wouldn’t. They would go about their lives, none the wiser to the hell she’d been made privy of. They would live.

When Felicity finally found it in herself to turn away from the plane, from all those happy endings she envisioned for those people, she found Fyers observing the chaos that had been wreaked on his camp, and his slack-jawed expression was worth everything she’d been through.

“I’m afraid Scylla is in need of some technical support,” she rasped out.

Even her own voice sounded weird with only one ear working.

Fyers’ attention snapped to her, and Felicity saw it the moment he realized this had been her doing. Gone was his mask of false empathy. Now she was looking at the violent and vengeful sociopath he kept hidden. His expression twisted with fury and he turned to Wintergreen, who was just getting to his feet.

“Take her inside!” he barked before getting up to run out into the smoke-shrouded chaos

Felicity didn’t care when Wintergreen hauled her to her feet. Her grin didn’t falter with the knowledge that she was going to die. Her plan had worked. That plane was safe, and Fyers’ operation was gravely damaged to boot. Not bad for a computer nerd in way out of her depth, she thought. But, just before she was shoved through the flap of the tent, the wind pushed aside some of the billowing black smoke fifty yards off, and she saw something that made her smile fall away. Out there in the chaos, ignored as everyone focused their efforts of putting out the fires and dragging the injured to safety, was a prone figure slumped on the ground.

It was the burning figure of a dead man.

Felicity stumbled and hit the ground inside the tent, her landing harsh, and she didn’t bother trying to get back up, all of her previous thoughts of victory flushed from her mind in an instant, replaced by the image of the distant, half burned face of a man she didn’t know. When she’d set those coordinates, she’d been expecting this. She hadn’t given the matter a second thought. She’d wanted revenge, revenge for everyone on that plane and for stranding her on this island. She hadn’t in that moment cared how many casualties her actions might wrought.

She wasn’t prepared for the reality of it.

She didn’t even know that man. Given how many soldiers there were, she’d probably never even crossed his path during her stay in this camp, and now, because of her, he was no longer alive. What was his name, she wondered? Would someone miss him? Did he have a family? Parents? Kids? Had she just taken someone’s father from them, left them waiting for the return of someone who never would? Had she just given some poor kid the same fatherless upbringing she’d endured? Whatever the answer to any of these questions were, the fact remained that she, who couldn’t squish the spider on her dorm room ceiling, who had enlisted a grinning Cooper to take it outside in a paper cup so that it wouldn’t have to die, had just outright killed a man.

The worst part was that some deep part of her had wanted this, had wanted to kill the bastards responsible for all of this. And it terrified her. In that moment, she was brought face to face with the darkest part of herself, formed of the anger that so many things had built up inside of her. Her father’s abandonment of her. Cooper’s suicide. A rocket hitting her plane, of all of them in the sky.

And now a man, probably more than one, was dead. Because of her.
It was the lowest she’d ever felt.

When she was finally hauled to her knees again, Felicity was brought face-to-face with a livid, soot-covered Fyers as he stepped into the tent. He took two large strides and threw the back of his hand across her face. Felicity hit the ground hard again, and the fresh pain in her cheek caused tears to spring to her eyes. She didn’t bother looking, but she heard the shifting of his boots as the man knelt down beside her. Her enemy was here to end her, and she couldn’t find it in her in that moment to resist. For the death borne of her own actions, she deserved to die.

Except it wasn’t Fyers.

The fingers which brushed the hair from her face were gentle, caring. And those sneakers definitely weren’t Fyers’ heavy combat boots. Felicity turned her head, drawing her chin across the dirt to look up at the person beside her, to look into a pair of eyes she hadn’t seen in months. But it couldn’t be real. The pain and hunger of the past few days must have driven her delirious.

All the same, it was really good to see him.
Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood: An old enemy is back in town, and our hero decides whether to help take him down or to prevent the escape of a wealthy businessman responsible for the murders of two innocent people. Either choice could have severe consequences in regards to the important people in his life.

Chapter Notes

The second part of the last chapter turned out to be a full length chapter on its own by the time I was done, so it’s probably good that I split it up. The next chapter is near completion, so I will try to get it out within the next couple weeks as well.

May 10, 2013:

The loud crack of the gunshot is amplified by the stone walls of the quad, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly where it is it came from. She hears someone scream in pain across the room and Felicity hates herself for letting herself get distracted. She’s moving without even turning to seek out the gunfire like all the other panicked civilians. With her targen and the layout of the quad, she can estimate the direction the shot had most likely come from, so the blonde stands from her seat, flips her table towards the likely source of the gunfire and pulls Mr. R. P. down with her behind this meager new cover.

He grunts hard with the landing and turns his immediate attention to covering his head with his arms—not that doing so will offer any feasible protection should any stray bullets tear through their admittedly lackluster defense. Felicity, on the other hand, finds herself watching as John Diggle and the ARGUS agents across the way retaliate. One of their men is already down and being dragged to safety. She hopes briefly that he makes it.

Then she looks at the security feeds displayed on her phone and her assumption is proven correct. Deadshot had apparently guessed this was a trap and is now firing his automatic wrist gun from a nice little perch up on the second floor overlook across the quad. Thirty paces between them, she’d say. Felicity turns to Mr. R. P.

“Stay here!”

He doesn’t look like he’ll be wanting to move anytime soon and she doesn’t give the man time to do any more than verbally protest, which she hears as she veers around their cover and out into open gunfire. Then she’s sprinting across the quad. It feels so good to be moving after weeks of little more than bedrest that Felicity hardly registers the painful pulling at her side. Lawton is so preoccupied with his shootout against the agents that he doesn’t seem to give her a glance, just another frenzied bystander to his mind. Felicity takes solace in the safety of it when she passes under the balcony Lawton is perched on. She’s at the adjacent corner, but this stairwell will be a nice way to get the drop on him nonetheless.
She passes several fleeing people in the stairwell on her way up and warns them off of running out into the open. She tells them to instead hide under the stairs and to wait for help. She knows Lawton won’t seek them out, but there’s no telling what could happen if they run out into the crosshairs. They listen to her advice so readily that Felicity wonders if something in the calm of her tone and demeanor makes her sound like an undercover police officer, someone used to running headlong into danger and ready to give direction to those who aren’t.

But, she’s not a leader. She’s just a computer nerd with some skills and hobbies picked up from an unexpected and prolonged vacation where she’d had little better to do.

As Felicity reaches the top of the stairs, she pulls her hood on and unzips her jacket to remove her Glock from its holster under her arm. This one is registered to her and is with her almost all of the time thanks to her permit to carry it concealed--Helena Bertinelli would probably recognize it, in fact. She pauses a moment at the door to listen, to gauge if Lawton has moved. When she’s confident he hasn’t, Felicity eases the door lever forward to disengage the locking mechanism as quietly as possible and open the door, and then she holds the door with her foot to just as silently release the lever.

Lawton doesn’t know she’s there when she steps out of the stairwell, nor does he take notice of her when she takes several steps closer, keeping to the wall for that very reason. The sniper, with some strange looking device over his eye--come to think of it, hadn’t Oliver stabbed him in that very eye?--draws up and out of his cover to fire down below and Felicity takes this as her best chance. She aims down the sights of her Glock and pulls the trigger, hoping to take his gun arm out of commission with the shot.

But the kickback hurts so much more than she expected it to, rips at her side violently. The shot veers up just a little as she flinches and, while it still hits him in the arm, as she’d intended, she’s sure it’s just a graze.

Lawton cries out in pain and alarm and turns his gun in her direction. Felicity barely manages to duck into a little shop, the strong fragrance of it telling her it’s either some sort of perfume or candle shop--she doesn’t bother to look to find out which--before the man turns his automatic weapon on her. She hits the ground as the glass of the windows around her shatter, raining down shards of glass that force her to cover her head and duck it towards the floor.

She’s not sure how long he shoots for, doesn’t know if it’s only the ringing in her ears that she’s hearing for so long. When she chances a look up, however, the gunfire has ceased. Thankful for her long sleeves, Felicity pushes herself up on the bed of glass shards she’s found herself on, and she’s pretty sure over that continued ringing that a different gun is going off, non-automatic fire and probably the reason Lawton ceased his attack on her. She winces as the glass shards cut into the palms of her hands as she pushes herself up, but she doesn’t have time to pay this or the blood she leaves behind any mind.

Felicity staggers her way out onto the balcony, where it seems Lawton has set off a smoke grenade to facilitate his escape. She coughs as she inhales the vapor and covers her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket, trying to glean anything through the haze. She starts at the sound of a door latch just a few paces to her left and whips around to find only the closed door to the stairs.

Lawton had crossed the balcony to exit through this stairwell despite the fact that there had been a closer exit on his end of the balcony. It could have been only to throw off any pursuers, but Felicity has a suspicion his motives aren’t quite so simple. She can’t just not follow him, however, so Felicity hurries over on legs that are a little more stable as her hearing and equilibrium continue to return, and she throws the door open just as a fire alarm begins to blare down below. She levels her weapon as
she peers over the banister, only to spot the door to the emergency fire exit close, the source of that wailing alarm. Fearing he’s getting away, Felicity hurries down the steps, taking them two at a time. She checks on the civilians under the stairs first. They’re fine, she discerns quickly, and she grabs the arm of the calmest one, a hispanic man in his mid-forties who’s managed to keep an applaudable level of outward cool.

“There’s a big black guy out in the quad with a gun,” she yells to him over that infuriating alarm, and she’s relieved when he’s not only paying attention to her but seems to hear what she’s saying. “Tell him the shooter went out this door and that I’ve followed!”

He nods, and she tells the others to follow him. She waits for them to all leave the stairwell before she follows Lawton through the emergency fire exit.

She should have listened to that instinct in her gut because Lawton’s elbow collides with her head just as she’s clearing the door.

Dazed by the blow, Felicity drops to the pavement, where her forceful landing painfully strains her admittedly still injured side. It’s a moment before her vision clears and she’s able to see Lawton jam something under the door to prevent it from opening. That he had plenty of time to do so before she’d gotten there reaffirms Felicity’s earlier thought that their meeting was his aim. He removes a knife from where it’s fastened to a strap on his chest and turns to face her with what appears to be an amused grin. He keeps his distance as he circles her, his intent clear in that he’s waiting for her to ready herself. All the same, Felicity keeps her eyes on him as she lifts herself off the ground.

What is it with men and using knives against her, anyway?

Felicity hates it as much as she did the last time, but she ultimately holsters her sidearm. It worked against the Dark Archer, let him underestimate her just enough. She can only hope the same will hold true here. Her odds, she feels, may even be a little better because she gets the feeling that this man’s intent isn’t necessarily to kill her in cold blood as the archer’s had been. It’s almost like he wants to play with her, a cat having cornered a rodent and seeking entertainment.

She also knows that her hood will do her little good without her identity-concealing facewear, so she drops it to her shoulders, ignoring how Lawton quirks a curious eyebrow in response to her appearance, and sheds the jacket. She’ll be able to move easier without it.

“I gotta’ say, you aren’t what I expected, sweetheart,” he muses aloud, and Felicity fights the urge to roll her eyes.

She pulls the collapsible police baton--it’s something she’s taken to using in place of that sword she brought back from Lian Yu--from under the pant leg of her calf as she stands.

“I get that a lot,” she groused.

June 1st, 2008:

“Hey there, gorgeous.”

“Cooper…” He smiled when she said his name and it was the most beautiful thing Felicity had seen in months. “What are you doing here?”

He brushed her cheek with his fingers, and she could have sworn for a moment that she actually felt
that phantom touch.

“Came to see my girl,” he said in his easy way.

Felicity’s smile was bittersweet because the calm of his presence was juxtaposed heavily by the shouting and the roar of flames that filtered in through the opening of the tent.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said.

Cooper seemed honestly confused by why she would think this.

“Why not?”

“You shouldn’t be here for me,” she reiterated. “You always wanted to help people, and I… I killed that man…”

He paused, but he didn’t back down.

“You always wanted to help people too, Felicity.”

She couldn’t accept that then, not with that man’s face still burned into the backs of her eyelids.

“I just killed that man!” she insisted more vehemently, sure that if she said it again it would drive him away, send his memory away from that wretched place.

All Cooper said was, “So make it right.”

And he said those words so simply as if the entire thing was just a matter of choosing to turn left instead of right.

Feeling the sting of tears, Felicity struggled for breath as she asked, “H-how? How can I possibly make that right?”

Cooper smiled again, and she felt a powerful pang of grief in her chest. He should be the one alive right now, not her…

“Well, I can’t say I have an answer for that,” he said.

And of course he wouldn’t know. He was conjured by her subconscious, so he could only know what she knew.

Cooper leaned in close and held her eyes with fixed determination, cutting off her thoughts of how much she wished he was really there when he said, “But, whatever it is, for starters, you need to get out of this alive.”

And then he asked something of Felicity that went against everything she was feeling in that moment, everything that told her she deserved whatever happened to her next.

“Promise me.”

He knew her. If she gave him her word, even though he wasn’t actually there, she would do everything she could to keep it. That was why she said nothing. This was something she just couldn’t agree to.

“Felicity.”
“Please…” she asked him, her voice small as she dropped her brow back to the dirt. “Don’t ask me this.”

His hand was in her hair then, a comforting touch her tired and tortured mind fooled her into believing.

“Promise me you’ll get out of this.” Still, she resisted, held strong to her desire to die until, softly, Cooper’s ghost asked, “please, Felicity?”

And then she closed her eyes and felt the tears fall. She had failed him before. Even if he wasn’t really there in that tent with her, she owed it to him to do anything that even her memory of him asked of her. She knew him too, after all. Even in that moment, when she felt so low, she knew he wouldn’t have wanted her to give up.

And so, she finally said those words. “... I promise.”

“Look at me!”

Felicity’s head was wrenched up and the real world came crashing back down on top of her. Cooper’s soothing image was replaced by that of a furious and snarling Edward Fyers as he lifted her head with a fist in her hair, and she cried out as his actions pulled painfully on her scalp.

“You will regret what you have done today, Miss Smoak,” he vowed. “You’ve just cost me a lot of good men and now you will learn just how cordial your stay here has been thus far.”

That was not a pleasant thought. Felicity cast a wary look at the lumbering nightmare a few paces behind the man.

“You see, my compatriot here, he’s… well, let’s just say I keep him on a tight leash for a reason. Unfortunately for you, you have just given me cause to let him off of that leash.”

Fyers released her, let her head drop back to the dirt, and Felicity grunted with the effort of catching herself to prevent her head from hitting too hard.

He stormed off then and as he left threw over his shoulder a final, “End this. In whatever way you please.”

And then Wintergreen turned back to look at her, the very image of a nightmare, and he took out a very large knife. Behind his very large frame, she caught a glimpse of Cooper’s phantom as he gave her a meaningful look. This was what he had asked, what she had told him she would do. But, as she looked up into the eyes of the behemoth who was to end her, she wasn’t sure Cooper had understood just what it was he was asking of her.

Sometimes, it was just too much.

May 10, 2013:

Lawton strikes first, slashing high with that knife, and Felicity ducks almost too slowly. She catches his knee with her forearm as he attempts to knee her in the head and then she swipes at his exposed midsection with her baton. He catches her wrist, however, and turns, twisting her arm with him as he goes. He kicks the back of her knee, bringing it to the ground, and Felicity sees it coming as he lifts the knife to her throat. She lets it happen, praying she’s correct in that his aim is not her death, and
feels the relief of it when he only presses the blade into her throat, not hard enough to even draw blood.

“You feelin’ alright, sweetheart? Your reflexes were quicker last time.”

It’s then that someone slams into the door behind them, clearly with the intention of throwing it open, but Lawton’s countermeasures have prevented it. Through the small gap the crowbar permits, Felicity hears John call out to Deadshot. It distracts the man, who turns, and the blonde takes this as her chance. With her free hand she snatches her taser from where it’s strapped to her waist and jabs the barbs into Lawton’s shin before flipping the switch.

Lawton shouts in alarm as his entire body goes rigid, and Felicity throws herself back into his chest to shove him off as she releases the switch on her taser. He has a knife to her throat, after all. It falls away from her neck as he stumbles back and he releases her arm. Felicity sighs in relief as the strain is removed from her shoulder before she drops forward to brace her hands on the ground and uses the leverage to throw her foot back. The hit lands heavy in his gut and pushes him farther back.

John yells something else, but, focussed as she is on Lawton, Felicity doesn’t hear what it is. When she turns, the man is already shaking off the electric shock and the kick to his stomach, having not lost his grip on his knife during any of it.

She fares well at first during the short brawl that ensues, but Lawton is right. She’s injured, and she’s definitely feeling it in that moment. Every twist pulls painfully on the, while sealed, still healing gunshot wound in her side, and every time she catches one of the man’s hits with her arms, it sends a shockwave through her that does even worse damage. It’s when she winces after a particularly brutal hit that Lawton makes his move. Having apparently guessed based on her movements where the injury is, he jabs her healing wound, a hit that just about cripples her. Her knees buckle, and he uses her loss of footing to lift her over himself.

Her landing with the ground as he slams her down is easily the most painful one she’s ever experienced, a fire shooting up her side as her vision flares up and then goes dark for a moment. When it’s back, she finds through the spots and the nauseating swimming of her vision that Lawton is stooping over her. He tilts his head to the side.

“You alright, sweetheart?” His tone is anything but sincere and does nothing to hide the somewhat amused smirk he’s wearing.

Felicity coughs the first time she tries to speak, pleased when he doesn’t notice her slip her hand into her pocket, and then she manages a wheezing, “Up yours too, buddy.”

Floyd Lawton laughs. Right before she holds up her flash grenade and clamps her eyes shut before flipping the switch. It’s the one thing from her vigilante gear she allowed herself to bring--couldn’t risk being seen with it all without her mask.

The flare is bright even through her eyelids, and Lawton cries out in alarm. It lasts for a fraction of a second, but that’s all that’s needed to disorient a foe. He’ll have already closed his eyes--eye--anyway, so anything more would be useless. Felicity opens her eyes again to find Lawton has stumbled a few steps back and is hunched over, his face scrunched up in pain and the heel of his hand jammed into the socket of his one remaining eye.

“Aah! That’s the only eye I’ve got left! I swear, if the damage is permanent-”

An arrow in his shoulder--of the arm she only then notes had been readying his knife--silences the threat he’d been about to voice, and Lawton cries out again. He’s ready for the next volley, and it
only grazes his cheek as he whips around. His mechanical eye is probably still functioning in whatever way it does because his aim seems less than the desperate and aimless spray of bullets she half expected. The sound of the weapon feels like it’s going to split her head open, so Felicity throws her hands over her ears as her eyes close on instinct. Everything is a haze after that until she feels a hand on her shoulder rolling her onto her back--she hadn’t even realized she’d turned over.

Felicity knows the logistics of the evening and so she also knows that Oliver had let Rasmus go to come help them. There was no way he’d be kneeling over her right now if he’d stuck to his plans. He says something, but she can’t quite hear it through the ringing in her ears. From the vague bits she can glean by reading his lips, she thinks he’s concerned about her well-being. She wants to tell him she’s fine, that he should go after Lawton, whom she can’t see in their vicinity anymore when she glances around.

She feels the urge just a moment before it’s too late and barely has enough time to turn over before she throws up. Felicity must linger in her nausea longer than she thinks because when she sags onto her side again and looks up, Oliver is no longer beside her. He’s over at the emergency door and he must’ve removed the crowbar Lawton had jammed it with because John is stepping out.

Oliver points off to the side. John looks, then looks at Felicity. He hesitates. Then Oliver turns and approaches her, says something over his shoulder, and John lingers a moment longer before he takes off, presumably after Lawton. Oliver stoops and scoops Felicity up far easier than he should be able to considering she’s a full grown--if a little bit short--person.

But shouldn’t he be helping John go after Lawton? Lawton is now injured, but he’s still a trained killer.

“Diggle can handle himself. I need to get you to Nora.”

It’s only because her ear is against his chest that Felicity hears this over that continued ringing in her ears--in the back of her mind, she’s already thinking ‘concussion’--and she realizes she was thinking out loud again. She really needs to get a handle on that.

Felicity would protest, but when she tries to speak, her stomach threatens to rebel again. She knows he won’t listen, and she’s so mortified already about throwing up in front of him the first time that she can’t bring herself to risk it again, even more so because him holding her would mean she would throw up on him this time. So, she keeps her silence as he brings her the couple blocks down to her car, wondering to herself how he’d even known where she’d parked.

Oliver must’ve texted Dr. Reid while he was driving because the good doctor is already waiting outside the Foundry’s side entrance with her supplies when they arrive--Felicity idly wonders if she’ll ever meet this woman while standing on her feet instead of lying on a table or being carried. Oliver tries to take the stairs as quickly as he can without jostling her. All the same, Felicity fails to stifle several winces and he murmurs a quiet apology each time. Then she’s back on that table, unable to uncurl herself from the ball she’s made of herself for the pain that’s been steadily intensifying in her side since her harsh fall.

Dr. Reid uses what she claims is a portable ultrasound machine to investigate the internal damage in Felicity’s side. Apparently the small tear in the lining of her large intestine, probably almost healed before this, has ripped back open. While small and not reaching all the way through the wall of her intestine, the bleed is persistent.

“Because of the head trauma, I’ll have to use a localized numbing agent. You’ll be conscious, Miss Smoak, but I would recommend you don’t watch.”
Felicity didn’t have to be told this twice, not that she could exactly twist herself in her condition to get any sort of significant look at anything in the afflicted area. She was allowed to remain on her side but was rolled a little bit forward, forcing her to brace her weight with her arm. The numbing of the afflicted area as the medication does its work is a profound relief, not just because of the pain but because of what that continued pain has been doing for her nausea.

“I should only need to make a small incision this time, enough to suction out the excess blood and staple the tear in the lining of your large intestine,” the woman supplies.

And so, the good doctor gets to work doing just that. In the end, it doesn’t take as long as Felicity expects, but, all the same, the knowledge that someone is poking around her organs, even to save her life, is… unsettling and altogether unpleasant. The instinct to look sneaks up on her several times. The first time it happens, she almost gives in to the impulse without realizing it. Then Oliver draws her attention as he kneels down in front of her, his hood lowered but the grease streak still stark against the is skin around his eyes.

“Hey,” he murmurs with a meager attempt at a smile, his voice barely discernible over the sound of the pump for the suction tube currently inserted into her side.

Felicity is about to respond in kind, but then she feels a slight pinch in the vague area of her numbed side, and she clamps her eyes shut to avoid looking, her fists clenching tight as she fights the urge to be sick. She’s resigning herself to staying that way for the remainder of the process when she feels Oliver take her hand, easing it from the fist she’s made of it. She looks to find him looking at her still. He speaks again as soon as he has her attention.

“How’s Cindy?”

The drastic change in topic surprises her, and Felicity has to pause a moment to fully process his inquiry.

“Um…” She gives a small jerk of a nod. “She’s good. She still sneaks off to the Glades, but I haven’t noticed any new bruises or limping, so she must be staying out of trouble.”

That instinct to look strikes her again, but the instant her eyes turn from him, Oliver gives her hand a small tug, drawing her back in. With a sudden understanding, she looks back at him, finding his gaze still fixed on her as if to keep her attention.

“Are classes going well?”

With a swell of appreciation and something deeper that she refuses to acknowledge, Felicity realizes he’s distracting her. She takes a steadying breath that should’ve been— but isn’t— because she’s currently undergoing surgery and gives another small nod.

“Yeah.”

“How long do you have left?”

“My last class will finish in May.”

He gives a small nod of understanding and lifts his other arm to the tabletop to rest his chin on his forearm, an action which she finds to be oddly adorable.

“That’s close.”

She can’t help but smile a little.
“Yeah.”

“You ready?”

“To have a degree I already use everyday?” She quirks her eyebrow in the face of his silly question, and his eyes smile in spite of himself. “Yes, I am.”

He then asks about how things are going at QC and she rants just a little about the silly problems that make their way to IT. She’s halfway through a short anecdote about a man who didn’t even check to see if his computer’s power cord had come loose before calling IT when Dr. Reid says she’s finished. She and Oliver help Felicity sit up, so they can wrap the newly stitched incision. The localized numbing agent is still well in effect by then, so the blonde’s side doesn’t even protest to the movement. In but a few short minutes, she’s then being eased back down onto the table, where she’s told to take it easy. She makes no protest and allows her eyelids to slip closed as her exhaustion catches up with her.

It feels like she only closes her eyes for a minute after that, but it must’ve been considerably longer because when Oliver says her name, she looks over through bleary eyes to find him standing beside the table in civilian clothing, and Nora Reid is nowhere to be seen. Felicity brings up a hand to shield her eyes from the harsh lighting overhead because the instant she’d opened them, her brain had vehemently protested with an angry throb. Finally getting a better look at him, she asks herself if that cut had been on Oliver’s cheekbone before she fell asleep.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver says. “You can’t sleep for too long.”

Felicity gives a small nod, wincing at the movement, because, however miserable she might feel in that moment, she understands.

“Concussion,” she agrees, and he nods.

“Can you sit up? Your bandages need to be changed too.”

Felicity mutters a verbal confirmation and moves to try her hand at lifting herself. Without prompting, Oliver assists with his hands on her shoulders, bearing most of her weight as she rights herself. The blonde doesn’t even notice him reach over to grab it, but then he’s holding a water out for her.

After she takes it and swallows a very appreciated gulp, she asks, “Where’s Dr. Reid?”

“She had to go see to another patient,” Oliver supplies, his arms folded across his chest. “She gave you an antibiotic injection before she left.”

Felicity nods and regrets the action when her head spins.

Wanting to focus on something other than her building nausea, she takes another drink and asks, “Did you have that cut when I fell asleep?”

Oliver tenses as his jaw shifts.

“I had to go home to check on things,” he says, and he adds quickly, “Nora was with you then. I wouldn’t have gone if she wasn’t.”

She blinks, the thought having not even occurred to her. It sounds like he’s trying to defend his own
actions, like he thinks she’d be upset and jump to that conclusion first.

“I wasn’t worried about…” Why would he assume that would be her first reaction? “I know you wouldn’t do that, Oliver. You don’t have to explain yourself.”

He closes his eyes briefly and breathes out a sigh through his nose as his shoulders drop a little. He seems relieved, she thinks, and Felicity wonders then if Laurel had been upset that Rasmus had gotten away, if that was why he was so defensive. She takes another drink of water.

“So, um… How did things go? At home?”

Oliver looks back up and nods when her question processes.

“Rasmus’s assassin won’t be giving that boy any more trouble.”

In spite of what these words probably mean for the fate of the assassin, Felicity smiles, relieved. Despite whatever Oliver might think her views on the matter are, she’s not completely irrational when it comes to fatal countermeasures. If it’s necessary, there’s nothing to be done for it. She’ll just be happy if she never has to add more blood to her hands.

“That’s good.”

Oliver seems lost in thought for a moment, his eyes focused on her but also not at the same time, before he offers a distracted, “Yeah.”

Then he shakes himself from his thoughts and steps forward. Felicity sets her water down and has to remind herself for his proximity that he’s only doing so to change her bandages.

It’s then, however, that the door at the top of the stairs opens. Down trudges John Diggle with heavy and sluggish footsteps, looking like he’s seen much better days. There’s a cut over his left brow and she can already see a number of bruises sprouting on his face. Felicity doesn’t have to ask because his expression tells her what she needs to know. Lawton had gotten away.

Oliver is tense as the man makes his way down, and the blonde realizes he’s been expecting this, that it was one of the reasons he’d been so defensive a moment ago. He’d wanted to help both Laurel and John tonight and had ended up letting them both down instead.

John passes them both and tells Oliver he wants to speak with him when he gets a chance, and then he begins to march out a path back and forth a short ways off, seemingly unable to sit still despite his obvious state of injury. The archer’s shoulders are stiff as he turns back to Felicity.

“I can do this,” she offers, knowing it won’t make things any better to keep John waiting. “You should go.”

He levels his focus on her, tentative.

“You sure?”

She gives a small nod and sighs in irritation because she can’t seem to stop herself from doing that.

“Yeah.”

Oliver pauses for a moment and then gives her a brief nod of his own. He undoes the knot of the bandages at her side first, and Felicity hadn’t even realized yet that she would’ve struggled with that task herself. Then he turns to walk over to where John is still pacing. She wonders if Oliver notices
he’s doing that nervous tick with his fingers as he goes, but she thinks he probably doesn’t--or at least doesn’t recognize it for what it is if he does.

They keep their voices down as they argue, and Felicity turns her attention squarely onto her task. With the hand of her good side, she unwraps the bandages under her ribs. It’s a tedious process, but it beats twinging her side with every movement, painkillers or no. The gauze is a little stuck when she gets to it, so she winces at the pull of it when she removes it. She can’t entirely see the new incision and she’s thankful because she’s always been rather repulsed by the look of stitches. She goes about applying a new gauze, an admittedly tricky task with one hand, but she manages, however sloppily, to do so, the tape at the corners either rumpled or at odd angles.

“Deadshot *is* a dangerous killer, Oliver!”

Felicity’s head whips around at this sudden shout from John, and she winces at the way her temple throbs in angry protest as the room spins for a moment.

“Two of Lyla’s agents are in the hospital,” the man continues, “and Felicity is on that table *again*! You don’t think he should’ve taken precedence tonight over some rich guy who only hired an assassin?”

Oliver glances her way briefly and his jaw shifts, and Felicity feels in that instant like she’s snooping, intruding rudely into something she shouldn’t be witness to. She can’t bring herself to look away, however, and then his attention is back on John. He doesn’t back down and raises his tone a little to better match the other man’s yell.

“But, even if I was choosing, I *owe* her, John.”

Their argument suddenly makes sense without her having to hear anything that preceded these comments. They’re arguing about Laurel and her sway over Oliver.

“Because of me, her sister is dead. I will *never* be able to make up for that.”

John stands there for a moment, his nostrils flaring, before he asks, “And how many more people will die because Deadshot is still out there?”

The silence that follows this question is loud. Felicity has a horrible feeling in her stomach as she watches these events unfold that has nothing to do with her nausea and everything to do with the fury that burns in John’s eyes.

“I’ve been on the fence these past few weeks, but you just made my decision for me, Oliver. I’m out.”

The words resound in the otherwise silent space, and then John Diggle turns and he leaves. Felicity can’t help but wonder if the door at the top of those stairs has always closed so loudly.
This week on Under the Hood… Our hero braves his way through something the likes of which he has never faced before. How will he fare during his first Donna Smoak experience?

After this, there’s a thick, awkward silence as Oliver just stands in the middle of the room, rubbing his fingers together in that anxious tick of his—not that he would ever admit to having an anxious tick. Felicity tries not to dwell on Dig’s resounding absence and to this end turns her attention to wrapping the gauze around herself, trying to hide her winces as the motion pulls a little on her new stitches. Pointedly focused as she is on her task, she doesn’t notice Oliver glance over at her and down to where her hands are working. She hears it, however, when he moves over to join her, and she looks up, pausing in her current pass around her middle.

“Here, let me,” he offers as he holds his hands out to take the gauze from her.

Felicity silently concedes, handing the roll to him and trying not to let him see how it affects her when his fingers graze hers as he takes the bandages. Oliver redoes what she’s already done—having to stretch a little to apply the gauze to herself, Felicity had been doing so a little too tightly—and another long silence follows as he works. She observes him for a moment, watches those muscles of his brow tense as he surely mulls over his argument with John. She has to turn her eyes down, however, because if she looks at him any longer, she knows that impulse she feels to reach out and smooth those muscles with her fingers might just slip past her reach. It’s also havoc on her nerves every time he reaches around her because he has to draw so close each time he does so that she can scarce control where her thoughts trail—she should probably avoid taking any sort of painkillers with this particular man around, she ultimately decides.

“Thank you,” Felicity says softly, feeling awkward about breaking the silence by speaking any louder but deciding she has to focus on something other than his closeness.

In a silent and brooding mood, Oliver continues to work and offers only a brief nod of acknowledgement, and she knows he thinks she means for his help with the bandages.

“For coming to help us, I mean,” she clarifies because while she’s grateful for the help in this current task, she wants him to understand what exactly she means.

The man pauses in his motions for a brief moment before looking up, and his gaze stills her the instant it meets hers because he’d been reaching around her just before. His face is closer to hers than she remembers it ever being before and, for a moment, she finds it difficult just to breathe. She has to drop her eyes to his chest for a moment to catch her breath, willing the butterflies in her stomach to settle. When she lifts her eyes back up, he’s still looking at her as if expectant for her to explain just why she would ever thank him for anything.

If only he knew how much he’s actually done for her. Maybe someday she’ll get up the courage to tell him.

“I know it wasn’t easy,” she says, and her words are soft again because she can’t quite conjure
enough air into her lungs to speak any louder, not that she needs to given how close he is, “letting Rasmus go.”

For what feels like a longer moment than it surely is, they just stare at one another, and Felicity wonders what he’s thinking when his gaze goes distant, unfocused, and drifts down just a little. But, then he blinks and drops his gaze further, back to his hands, and continues his work on bandaging her middle.

“I should’ve been there sooner,” is all Oliver says in a low and self-deprecating timbre.

His jaw is tight as he focuses rather too intently on his task, clearly not agreeing with her opinion that she should thank him. And Felicity’s heart aches for him as she watches him close further in on himself because she knows how conflicted he’d been over his two options earlier. It had been a choice between helping one of the people currently closest to him or helping the woman he’d once--and still--loved. And, in the end, both Deadshot and Rasmus had gotten away.

It’s as Felicity watches the muscles around his eyes tighten that she knows she has to stop whatever thoughts are going through Oliver’s mind. So, she puts her hand on his wrist as he moves to wrap the last of the gauze around her middle, and this time he’s the one to still—even surely for different reasons than she had previously. He sighs audibly through his nose, his eyes shuttering closed briefly, stubborn as he is, before he looks back up at her. This time she doesn’t look away. Felicity steels her nerves and holds his gaze, getting so bold as to move her hand down to take his—as much as she can with the gauze still held in his, that is—and after a moment the harsh lines around his eyes soften just a little. But, as the seconds drag on, she feels this pressure, this sort of nondescript intensity, begin to build, and she finally loses that battle she’s been fighting and looks down, slipping her hand from his. She sees him run his thumbs over the fabric of the gauze for a moment—that tick again—before he gets back to it, wrapping the rest of the material around her and tying it off at her side.

He steps back then as Felicity lowers her shirt back down and she clears her throat as she hops off the table.

“Thank you,” she says, this time for his medical assistance.

He only nods again before he offers a simple—and not really an offer, “I’ll take you home.”

It’s then that Felicity realizes she has no idea what time it is. She’s relieved she had the foresight to text her mother that she would be late before all of the evening’s excitement.

“You barely fit in here,” Felicity says with a small laugh. “I mean, look at you. Anyone who knows you would probably be thinking, ‘how’d you manage to squeeze him in there?’ right about now.”

The seat is pushed as far back as it’ll go and still Oliver’s thighs bump the underside of the steering wheel. Her car was apparently not designed for someone of his stature, and this is very apparent as he drives her home. It’s probably that dose of not-localized painkillers, but the sight is quite amusing to her in that moment.

Then she realizes how her previous words might sound, and she groans.

“Ugh…”

She turns, mortified and defeated, to find Oliver biting the inside of his lip as though trying not to
react.

“Not a word!” He might actually feel threatened if there was any ice in her words, but right now she’s too tired to argue with herself, and the painkillers have made her brain nice and fuzzy. “Sorry. I swear, these things always sound different in my head.”

Much to the relief of her dignity, they arrive in front of her building shortly thereafter. Sluggish in her movements, Felicity unbuckles her seatbelt and opens her door to find Oliver is already out of and rounding the car. He helps her up and she knows without having to ask that he won’t just let her walk to her door by herself in her condition, particularly after she fails to stifle a wince as she stands.

Her apartment is on the second floor. The stairs take the longest for her to traverse, one slow step at a time. Oliver offers his hand to help support her, and she leans on him more than she thought she would need to. This late in the evening, they pass no one in the hallways. That’s probably why, by the time they make it to her door--and it surely has more than a little to do with the painkillers--she works up the courage to do something she’s wanted to do for most of the time she’s known him.

“I’m going to hug you now.”

She declares it, partly to let him know beforehand and also so she can’t back down. Oliver lets her hug him, but she gets a sense from the stiffness of his frame as she reaches up to wrap her arms around him that this isn’t something he’s accustomed to. He’s hesitant to return the gesture, his hands tentative as he places them carefully on her back. It only makes her want to hug him more, his inability to readily accept such a simple gesture, if only to acclimate him to it. But, she can read the unease in him, so she lets go and steps back, ignoring it when her brain tells her the delay in continued pressure from his hands means he doesn’t want her to. Against the norm, he’s the first to smile as he slips his hands into the pockets of his designer jeans—surely worth more than most of her wardrobe combined.

“If anything seems amiss, just let me know. I have no problem breaking traffic laws.”

“I’m aware,” Felicity says, amused. “And thanks, but I think you might have to get in line behind my-”

It’s at that exact moment that the door to her apartment opens, and they both turn to find none other than Donna Smoak in the now open doorway.

“Mother…” Felicity finishes her thought with an inward cringe because of course she would catch her daughter standing outside their apartment chatting with Oliver Queen so very late at night.

“Oh, Felicity! I was getting worried. I know you said you were going to be late, but” She begins, but then her eyes land on Oliver and her thought trails off. “And… Oliver Queen. Why-” Her eyes go wide, and Felicity feels the blood drain from her face. “Oh my, were you two just-”

“No!” Loudly and vehemently because the last thing she needs is her mother thinking she’s dating Oliver Queen, Felicity interrupts whatever colorful fashion the woman had been planning on finishing that thought, “Mom, no. Just-”

Felicity covers her eyes and mutters a few fictional expletives under her breath. Then she feels a soft touch on her shoulder and looks to find Oliver--at least he doesn’t seem offended by her mother’s insinuation. Of course, then she looks back at the woman who it seems had given birth to her for the sole purpose of teasing and humiliating her, and she sees the older blonde wiggle an eyebrow at her. Her face heats quickly, and she’s thankful Oliver doesn’t let his hand linger on her shoulder.
“Please, come in! Come in!” Donna ushers them both inside, leaving little room for a polite declination on Oliver’s part.

Cindy makes her way over from the couch as this is all going on, shoving her hands into the pockets of her hooded jacket. She exchanges a quiet hello and—quite miraculously—a small smile with Oliver, which he returns, and Felicity thinks that fiasco to rescue her from that mob must have really helped the girl’s opinion of him. She might go so far as to say they’ve become kin of the monosyllable.

Then Oliver turns to Felicity’s too-pleased mother and says, “I’m afraid it actually is my fault she’s late, Ms. Smoak-”

And Donna gives an easy laugh and interrupts with, “Oh, please, it’s Donna. No need to be so formal,” waving off such formalities with a coy smile.

Oliver pauses a moment like he’s not quite sure how to process this request, but then he offers a grin and a small nod and continues.

“-Donna,” he concedes. “I went to ask for her help while she was in the archives room at QC, and there was… a little mishap.”

It’s a little startling how quickly her mother’s expression changes from coy to dead serious.

“What do you mean ‘a little mishap’?” Her eyes lock onto Felicity with an intensity the blonde has rarely seen. “Are you okay, honey? Is it your stomach?”

Almost quicker than Felicity can react, her mother is reaching for the hem of her shirt, doubtlessly ready to lift the article of clothing right then and there to check on the injury herself. The younger blonde is quick to clamp down on the fabric. She does not need her mother seeing the fresh bandages or, worse yet, the fresh sutures. She’d never be allowed to return to work the following day.

“Mom. Mom!” The woman finally looks up. “I’m fine. I just… twinged my side a little, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.” Her mother has stopped her fussing, thankfully enough, but she’s certainly not convinced. “And, I didn’t feel comfortable driving, so Oliv-, er- Mr. Queen offered to ride me home.”

…

Felicity almost doesn’t hear it.

Perhaps it would’ve been better if she hadn’t.

But, she sees the way Cindy raises a single eyebrow, her mother gets this look that says the holidays have come around early, and Oliver presses his lips together as if he’s a little uncomfortable but is debating whether he should point out her faux pas or let her try to save face by ignoring it.

But, oh boy, does she hear it now…

“I mean give me a ride home!” she blurts in correction, her face heating to a million degrees in less than sixty milliseconds. “Give me a ride, not- There was absolutely no riding going on because that would just be unprofessional, and we’re just friends. He sat on one side of the car, and I sat on the completely other side.” Does she usually use this many hand gestures? “No touching of any kind, and- Oh my God,” she exclaims as she holds a hand to her forehead, trying to make her brain shut up. “Painkillers and me do not mix well. Never again am I allowed to take painkillers with you around,” she says as she points a mildly accusatory finger at Oliver as though it’s all somehow his fault that this whole unfortunate foot-in-mouth thing keeps happening around him--but, really,
gorgeous of that level should be considered a deadly weapon of *some* kind.

Oh, she desperately hopes she didn’t just say that out loud…

“Miss Smoak,” Oliver breathes out in a way that makes her think he’s trying not to laugh as he brushes his fingertips across Felicity’s elbow. She hopes he—or especially her mother, for that matter—doesn’t notice the way his small touch sends little jolts of electricity up her arm. “Breathe.”

Gawd, her mother sees it, doesn’t she? Damnit, she thought this crush had almost run its course, but then he had to show up at her hospital bedside those few weeks ago and be so earnest and forgiving and sweet…

“Right.” Felicity nods and takes in a small, only slightly helpful breath. “Breathing.”

She removes her glasses to rub her eyes and takes in another breath that helps slightly more than the last.

“It seems you find my daughter in trouble rather often, Mr. Queen,” Felicity hears her mother say then, so she puts her glasses back on and tries her best not to focus back on any of what had just been said—mostly by her. “I should probably send you another bouquet. Did you get the first one?”

Oh, good lord…

“Oh, mom…” Felicity groans. “Please tell me you did not send *flowers* to my boss.”

Oliver chuckles, actually chuckles—it’s a musical sound she can’t remember hearing before—and says as he turns to the younger blonde, “It’s alright, Felicity.”

Her mother mouths ‘Ooh, ‘Felicity’” in reference to Oliver habitually using her first name—he’d caught the first one, but she supposes it was only a matter of time before he slipped—and the poor computer specialist colors again in embarrassment.

“I did get them, Ms.- uh Donna. Thank you for the gesture.”

Oh, good lord…

“See, Oliver appreciated it,” her mother defends herself, and Felicity groans, wishing Oliver hadn’t encouraged her. “And he’s not your *boss*, Felicity. His mother runs the company. And why shouldn’t I have thanked him? He brought my baby to the hospital after her *spleen ruptured*.” She emphasized this point as if it actually needed emphasizing, and then the woman leaned in with a suggestive glint in her eyes. She puts her hand next to her mouth so that only Felicity can hear her and mutters, “I’d have thanked him more properly, if you know what I mean, but I get the feeling a guy like him is already taken, you know?”

An unflattering guttural sound escapes Felicity as a mental image of just what it is her mother means pops unbidden and entirely unwelcome into her mind, and she squashes it violently down in an attempt to erase it. It doesn’t work and lingers for a while longer.

“Ugh, please stop,” she begs with a hand over her mouth in a miserable attempt to hold her nausea at bay.

Cindy muffles a laugh and pointedly ignores the glare Felicity sends her way. Oliver may be out of the loop as far as everything that is her delightful mother is concerned, but Cindy can probably follow this conversation without even hearing anything.

“What,” her mother asks as though she hadn’t just implied *that*. “I only meant-”
“Don’t, mom,” Felicity holds up a hand in urgency, and the woman thankfully quiets. “I swear, one more word, and I will puke all over you.” She shudders as the horrifying image of her mother jumping a poor unsuspecting Oliver fights to be seen again. “Guh, one mental image is enough to haunt me for a lifetime.”

“Why?” Her mother asks conspiratorially as she leans in again. “Is he taken by you?”

Oh, how she hopes that Oliver can’t hear anything her mother has said.

“Don’t you have a shift tonight, mom?” the blonde asks loudly so as to change this subject to anything else. Then she pauses as she recalls the time as she’d seen it in the car just a few minutes ago. “Now that I think about it, didn’t your shift start half-an-hour ago?”

Her mother’s sigh, void of all previous signs of humor and curiosity, sobers Felicity in an instant.

“I called in sick,” her mother says with another sigh in her words.

“I thought things were going better. Weren’t they training you to work behind the bar?”

“They still are,” her mother replies. “There’s still just a lot of underlying hostility between myself and the other waitresses. I don’t think anyone there likes me, and it’s hard to want to go sometimes.”

Felicity is about to speak, although she’s not sure herself what sort of nonspecific, unhelpful encouragement she was about to give, when a confused Oliver speaks up before she can.

“Hostility?”

Felicity’s mother turns to him and sighs again.

“I caught one of them stealing from the register. She’d been working there longer, but he ended up believing my word over hers,” with some helpful encouragement from Felicity, which her mother is unaware of. “He even agreed to start training me for this new job. But, ever since then, it’s just been really tense,” her mother says with a sigh.

Oliver takes this news in silently for a moment and Felicity sees an idea form in his mind a moment before he speaks.

“Well, one of my bartenders was caught serving to minors a few nights ago, so we’re still shorthanded. If you’d like, I can schedule you for an interview.”

Wait, what?

“What?” Felicity’s mother echoes her daughter’s thoughts, but then her face lights up an instant later. “A- Yes! Yes! That would be fantastic!” Her mother is positively giddy, and Felicity can’t help but smile in the face of it—it’s been too long since she’s seen her mother actually excited about something. “I’ve been trying to find another job, but so far no dice. Oh my gosh, Oliver Queen just offered me a job. Cindy, pinch me,” Donna says with a bracing hand on the girl’s shoulder.

The teen groans and does as bidden a little more harshly than is necessary. Donna yelps and turns, rubbing the now sore spot on her arm.

“What?”

“Sin!” the girl stresses, and Donna looks abashed.

“Right. Sorry, sorry.”
“Mom,” Felicity says because there’s one thing her mother seems to have jumped over in her excitement. The woman turns, her eyebrows raised in question. “Oliver offered you an interview, not a job, so you know what that means.” She points a finger because she needs to further stress what she’s about to say. “Best behavior.”

Her mother has the gall to laugh as though her fifth grade graduation never happened.

“Oh, Felicity, everyone loves me. There’s no need to worry.”

“Not everyone,” Cindy mouths in her direction and the blonde has to press her lips together to keep from laughing.

When she looks, although he’s just smiling, Oliver’s eyes are laughing, and she can’t help the toothy smile it conjures from her.

Then her mother leans in again--this never bodes well for Felicity--and mutters, “I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t ‘thank him properly’, or I’d be the girl who slept with the boss.”

Felicity gags outright and brings her hand up to her mouth.

“Oh Gawd! Mom!”

When her mother just laughs in return, Felicity thinks that perhaps she’s just saying all of this to mess with her, that there’s no actual intent behind any of what she’s saying. Then again, with her mother, who can say?

“And on that note, I should probably turn in,” Felicity says because there’s only so much of this she can take.

“Then I should take my leave,” Oliver adds, and she’s so grateful that he’s been such a champ through his first Donna Smoak experience. “It was nice to actually meet you both this time. I’ll contact you about that interview, Donna.”

Such a champ.

“It was wonderful to meet you, Oliver,” her mother says in farewell, and Cindy just offers a brief, “Later,” before turning to reclaim her seat on the couch, retrieving her handheld gaming device from her pocket and resuming her very busy evening.

Felicity catches a glimpse of Oliver’s grin as he turns back to the door, and she follows, both to see him out and to prolong the inevitable mother-daughter ‘boy talk’.

“Thank you,” she says in earnest as Oliver turns to bid her farewell. “For that,” a simple wave in her mother’s direction is all she thinks is necessary for that clarification, “and for offering to help my mother find a new job. She’s been really miserable this past month.”

“It’s nothing, Felicity. Like I said, we’re a staff member short, so it’s really no big deal.”

Why is it that he seems so unwilling to accept her appreciation, she wonders.

“It’s a big deal to me,” she insists, pointedly holding his gaze until he has no other option than to accept her words.

After a beat, he dips his head in a subtle nod and says with the subtlest smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, “You’re welcome.”
And then he’s turning to leave, but Felicity finds quite suddenly that doesn’t want him to go just yet, so she adds, “A-and, uh…” He turns back, and she almost forgets to speak. In the end she manages to add, “Thank you for the ri- er- lift home.”

She might avoid that word for a while. The amusement that lights the vigilante’s eyes makes it pretty clear that he’s caught onto why she’d switched over to an alternative word. She almost feels embarrassed again.

But, then his hand grazes her elbow as he says, “Goodnight, Felicity,” in that soft way he does.

The degree of the fluttering sensation that these words--or rather that loaded look he gives her while saying them--ignite in her stomach take Felicity unawares, and she forgets to breathe for a moment. She has to run her hand across her stomach to settle her nerves before she can answer.

Even then, it’s a soft and slightly breathless, “Goodnight, Oliver,” that she somehow manages to breathe out.

“I’ll call you every two hours,” she barely has the presence of mind to hear him say, but she does catch it when he warns, “If you don’t answer, I will come back down here.”

While the irrational and infatuated part of Felicity’s mind can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have Oliver Queen break into her room late at night to check on her concussion, the rational and already highly embarrassed side of her brain knows she could never let him go through with it.

So, Felicity nods under Oliver’s intense stare and then she watches him retreat down the hall and out of sight, leaning against the doorframe for a little support--the reason for which has less to do with her concussion and fatigue than it should. Felicity probably lingers a little too long, however, because when she turns around, she finds two things. One: on the couch, Cindy is focussing a little too intently on her game. The second thing is that her mother has this look on her face that says she just knows something, and that look has never been kind to Felicity.

Not to mention, it threatens to dump on her head a particular can of worms concerning her feelings which she doesn’t want to look at, much less confront.

“Mom, I swear, one more word about Oliver, and I might just have to hole myself up in my room for a week out of embarrassment.”

“What?” The woman has the nerve to sound genuinely confused. “I was only going to say…”

Here it is. Her mother is relentless, and Felicity is already planning out when she’ll need to take her meals to properly avoid her. It helps that their work schedules are almost opposite to one another.

But then Donna Smoak, illicit gossip queen, simply says, “He seems nice.”

... Wait, what?

It takes a moment for Felicity to process that this is all her mother has said, and then she’s left utterly speechless for a moment because her mother never lets go of a juicy piece of potential drama once she’s got it in her jaws. She clamps down and shakes until you tell her what she wants to know, often at the expense of your dignity.

…Strange.
“Yeah…” Felicity says, unsure and half expecting this to be some sort of trap. “He is.”

Donna smiles that same smile as before, but this time Felicity can see something else in it. It’s difficult to put a word to, but all she knows is it seems like her mother, although clearly understanding just what effect Oliver has on the younger blonde, has decided to respect her privacy. At least for now, and it’s not something Felicity can recall happening before her time on Lian Yu.

Then her side pulls a little as she shifts her feet, and Felicity fails to stifle a wince.

“Alright, now let me have a look at that side of yours,” Donna says, and her tone is just a notch away from being at the level where refuting her becomes impossible.

“No, it’s fine, mom, I swear,” she says with only mild insistence. Key number one in getting her mother to do anything: don’t push too hard. “All good. Oliver already checked it out—"

Frak.

“Had it checked— Ugh…”

So close…

“Oh, I bet he did.” Donna’s sultry smirk is back in place, and Felicity hangs her head. “And ‘good’ is surely putting it mildly.”

Ah, there it is. The inevitable and thinly veiled innuendo—Felicity had begun to wonder if it was actually coming, but maybe that was her first mistake. Her mother won’t confront her about the matter directly, at least not seriously and not for a while, which gives her a little breathing room to blatantly ignore the burgeoning existence of her feelings for the leather-clad vigilante in her life. But, until then, Donna will tease her about it relentlessly in as many indirect ways as she can.

Oliver keeps to his word and calls her every two hours to make sure she doesn’t sleep for too long. The following morning, Felicity changes her bandages again and she’s pleased because they’re cleaner than she expected. At least there’s that. To boot, she receives a call from Queens Consolidated telling her she’s been granted the remainder of the week off. She doesn’t have to ask to know who’d made it happen.
Lost at Home

Chapter Summary

This week on Under the Hood… Our hero finds he is pitted against an enemy much closer to home than he realized. As he struggles with this acknowledgement, he must decide if he’s finally ready to actually accept and fight to keep the people in his life.

Chapter Notes

I apologise for the delay. The chapter that was giving me trouble has been nixed and I just put the important bits of conversation in this one instead.

May 20th, 2013:

He was entirely opposed to this plan and he’d made that very clear up front. That being said, Felicity had been adamant and nothing he’d said had swayed her. It was possible he was losing his edge. Or it was just Felicity, which was entirely possible. Just the previous week, she’d insisted, against his equally vehement protests considering her history with planes and panic attacks, on flying with him to Shanghai to ‘transfer’ Edward Rasmus to Japan where he could be extradited for his crimes. She’d handled the trip better than he’d expected, quiet but calm as she sat with him in the cockpit--she’d claimed it would help to see out the front windows and he hadn’t denied her.

Then she’d wanted to purposefully get herself caught counting cards in Dominic Alonzo’s casino, so she could plant a device on his personal computer that would allow her to access his files and discover what he knew about Walter Steele’s disappearance. While the plan itself had been, against his better judgement, a feasible one, they’d run into the very problem he’d had with it. That was how he’d found himself kicking in Alonzo’s office door to find the man using Felicity as a human shield with the barrel of a gun pressed to her temple.

Oliver may have been a crack shot, but he wasn’t willing to risk the issue with Felicity between them.

“Drop the bow,” Dominic had growled, “or the blonde gets a bullet in the brain.”

The eyeroll Felicity gave was so exaggerated it must’ve hurt. She’d then proceeded to throw the man’s gun arm up and shoved her elbow into Dominic’s sternum and when they both righted themselves again, Dominic was staring down the barrel of his own gun. Felicity, pressing a hand into her twice-injured but healing stomach for the previous exertion, had glanced his way and offered Oliver’s slightly bemused look a simple shrug.

The smirk that had taken his lips was entirely unbidden.

To Alonzo’s look of almost oafish surprise, she’d offered an understated, “Five years of self-defense classes.”
Then Alonzo had told them about Walter’s fate and the archer forgot what it was like to smile.

“I saw them drag the body out. There was this guy in black, looked a lot like you.”

Oliver and Felicity had shared a grim look over this information. His stepfather, it seemed, had fallen prey to the Dark Archer. Felicity had been very quiet after that as they’d gotten away. Outside, she’d offered soft condolences to him, which he’d only been able to accept with a terse nod as he thought of how he’d have to tell his mother and Thea. The grip of Felicity’s arms around his middle had been tight as he’d driven them back to the Foundry on his motorcycle and her entire frame had been tense against his back for the duration of the trip. He dressed in his civilian clothing on autopilot, trying to figure out just how he would tell his family, to tell his mother that she was now a widow for a second time while Thea had lost a man who had been like a second father to her.

“It’s Malcolm Merlyn.”

Oliver was surprised to find Felicity had been waiting for him in the alley outside the foundry’s back entrance, and he turned to find her step away from the wall of the building she’d been leaning against while she waited for him. She was twisting her hands together, her shoulders tense in apprehension.

Then he heard her words and realized just what unfathomable thing she was implying. Oliver went still.

Felicity noticed this reaction from him and jumped to continue before he could say anything.

“I haven’t been sure how to tell you because he’s your best friend’s father,” she said, “ but I’ve known for about a week. I’ve had my suspicions for a while, and I finally figured it out when I found a news article dated shortly after Christmas.” She paused as if expecting him to say something, tell her to continue or deny her outright, but Oliver wasn’t entirely sure how to even respond to an outlandish claim like hers. When it became clear that he wasn’t going to say anything, she continued, apprehensive. “He was wearing a sling. He told the press it was from a personal training mishap, but I couldn’t let the coincidence go, so I started digging into it.” She wrung her hands together again. “Do you remember those devices I use? The flash grenades?”

Oliver offered a vacant nod and tried not to let his foul mood rule his reactions.

“I used one that night, and the flash was stronger than I’d anticipated.”

“What does that have to do with Malcolm Merlyn?” Against his intentions, Oliver’s tone was defensive with his impatience to have this ridiculous conversation over with.

Felicity stepped closer in challenge of his tone, all nervousness melting from her posture as she did so.

“It took me a while to trace the money because it went through several subsidiaries of Merlyn Global, but I eventually found out he’d flown overseas for an off the books laser eye surgery. It’s why he was out of the States for several weeks.”

Oliver turned, having heard more than enough of this.

“He was recovering ,” Felicity insisted, but he didn’t turn as he bit down an angry remark. “Oliver!”

He spun around, catching the woman off guard as she nearly barrelled into him and she took a step back in surprise.

“That man was like a second father to me, Felicity. You can’t expect me to just believe he could do
something like this out of the blue. Our families have been friends for years. After his wife was murdered, he changed, yes, but there’s no way he’s behind all of this. He’s not that kind of-”

“Not that kind of man?” Felicity’s words were loaded and they drew Oliver up short with their painful subtext. “You mean like your father wasn’t?”

It hurts, both to say and to be heard, but it has to be said. Oliver’s father hadn’t been the man his son had thought him to be and neither, it would seem, is Malcolm Merlyn. Oliver recoils like he’s just been sucker punched and Felicity feels a pang of sympathy for him as he turns away and his expression closes in on itself. She steps forward to place her hands on his arms to keep him facing her because this news is something he needs to face.

“I’m sorry. I am,” she stresses as she holds his gaze and then she watches his jaw clench and shift as though he’s trying to ground the information between his teeth. “But, it’s him. Malcolm killed Walter.”

And that’s the real sucker punch of all of this because, if she’s right, it means Malcolm Merlyn is also behind his father’s murder. Oliver meets and holds her eyes for a moment, his gaze heavy with so many things. Then he exhales and looks over her head and Felicity sees the first bout of doubt in his eyes.

Despite how insistent she’d been, Felicity had hoped she was wrong. In his car, which they’d moved to after he’d driven them to his house on his motorcycle, they had listened as not only Malcolm Merlyn but Oliver’s mother made it clear they had both been entirely aware of Walter’s situation. When Oliver had told Moira of Walter’s demise, the woman had called, on a phone he had bugged beforehand, to demand answers and proof of life from Malcolm, implicating herself as an unwilling accomplice of his to some unknown end.

While his survival is definitely good news, that Oliver gets out of the car to storm off towards the side patio speaks to how troubling the method of their learning it had been. Concerned, Felicity sets her laptop aside and follows across the moonlit yard. He’s a ball of frustration as he paces across the well-manicured, lamplit stone of the patio, his hands a busy and fidgeting mess of running through his hair, gripping his hips, and just fistig at his sides.

This continues for a few moments before he grips and flips the patio table over with a roar of frustration. Felicity watches silently and from a distance for another moment, but when his agitation only continues to grow, she decides she should probably step in. She strides forward to take Oliver’s wrist in one hand to hold him still and puts the other on his other arm as she turns him to face her. Her intent carries through as he’s drawn from his thoughts to return her gaze. She can see the conflict there because his mother, willingly or not, is helping Malcolm Merlyn—who is in fact not the man he’d thought—and had lied to him about it only moments before. She offers her silent presence because it’s all she has to give, but he eventually begins to calm regardless, pressing his fingers into his eyes and then running that same hand over his head as he dips it, his other hand settling on his hip.

She’s not going to say the situation doesn’t suck or that everything will be okay because it does and it won’t. But, she can be there, offer her silent support.
After he takes a few breaths, Oliver lifts his head again and drops his hand to her arm, a gesture which tells her he’s calmed.

“Can you track that call?” he asks.

Felicity gives a nod a returns from the car a moment later to find Oliver has already righted the table and is sitting with his brow dropped to the surface and his fingers interlaced behind his head. It’s probably the most outwardly troubled she’s ever seen him. He lifts his head as she sits and settles back in his chair with his fingers now laced together on the tabletop and none of the turmoil she knows he’s in is bleeding through his expression. The man’s always had quite the poker face.

“We could call John,” Felicity ventures as she opens her laptop. “He would help us.”

“No.” Oliver’s response is immediate and resolute.

Felicity looks up at him, but Oliver keeps his attention raptly on the table between them.

“Oliver, come on. If he could help with this, then-”

“We don’t need him. We can do this job on our own.”

Oliver is clearly trying to convince himself of this, and doing a good job of it, surely. She’ll even give it to him that perhaps he’s not wrong. But, having to do something and being forced to do something out of an obstinate refusal to share potentially pertinent information are two wildly different things.

“Maybe,” Felicity allows after her brief pause of contemplation as she pours through Malcolm Merlyn’s most recent calls for the one she wants. “But, we do need him. You need him.” Oliver, stubborn, is apparently intent on ignoring this. “He’s not just your bodyguard or your partner in crime fighting, Oliver. He’s your friend. Those are never overrated but have a poor history of being underappreciated.”

The pause that follows is thick with the weight of old memories as Oliver’s gaze glazes over, still fixed on a spot on the table between them. While he contemplates on her words, Felicity starts a trace for the source of the feed Merlyn had streamed to Moira minutes before. She’s surprised a moment later when Oliver speaks again, particularly given the topic he chooses.

“Shortly after my stay in China began, when I was just starting… all of this,” he begins and Felicity dips the laptop screen a little to give him her attention. “…I had partners. Friends. For a while, we had a good thing going. We were mostly just taking on street crime, but what we were doing was good for the city. But, one of them turned on us, got mixed up with the gangs and turned his back on everything we’d been trying to stand for. For money.” He glances up but turns away again when he finds Felicity watching. “I’m not saying John is anything like him or that he would try to do anything of the sort because I know he wouldn’t. But, ever since then, I’ve learned to need no one, to rely on myself before all others. That’s not to say that I don’t appreciate friends or what they do or have meant to me, but letting them go has become… easier. I won’t ask anyone to go any farther than they will. If I do, they’ll just leave under worse circumstances, so what’s the point?”

The silence that follows these revelations of character is heavy with unspoken implications as Oliver is still unable to look her in the eye. One inference in particular sticks out to her and Felicity leans forward, wary of the sensitive subject as she rests her elbows on the table in the space in front of her laptop.

“Are you expecting me to leave too?”
This gets Oliver’s attention, makes him lift his gaze to her. But, he doesn’t refute anything. This is the answer she was expecting, but it isn’t the one she’d hoped for.

“That’s a lonely way to live.”

“It’s easier,” Oliver defends quickly and then adds, “and necessary.”

“I don’t think I believe that,” Felicity dares.

The scan finishes and Felicity glances to find it’s given an address, but she doesn’t lift the screen to get a proper look at it yet. Walter’s life isn’t in immediate danger so long as Moira keeps up whatever her end of their deal is and this is clearly a conversation Oliver needs to have.

“Back… on the island,” Now it’s Felicity who averts her eyes, focusing instead on cataloguing the worn keys on the keyboard of her laptop. “I had this friend. She was a little like Cindy, actually. And you. Quiet. A little gruff. I don’t know if you saw it, but I have this tattoo on the back of my shoulder. A dragon.”

Oliver’s eyes drift down as his thoughts seem to drift back to that night in a dark asylum when Felicity had nearly died. After a moment, he swallows, his eyes focusing again on the table. He doesn’t lift them.

“I saw it,” he says at length and Felicity nods but doesn’t drop her gaze this time, willing him to look back up and to stop blaming himself for that night.

“It was hers,” she says. “She’s the reason I’m here today, taught me most of what I know, actually. But, in the end I… I let her down.” Through the swimming that stirs in her vision as moisture coats her eyes, the blonde sees Oliver look up. “In the worst possible way. Every day, I’m reminded of her, and I have this lingering regret that I’ll never be able to apologize. But, mostly, I’d just like to see her again, to ask for her advice when I’m stuck or maybe just to hang out and learn more Chinese…” Felicity’s mind drifts back to quiet nights of learning Chinese in a trashed fuselage, but she stops the memories before the first pang of regret can hit her. “I’m not saying you always have to agree with him, but John is still your friend. And one day he might not be here for real. And then it won’t just be a choice that keeps you away.”

Silence falls as Oliver silently contemplates this thought and Felicity lets him think for a moment before she adds, “You say it’s easy for you to let your friends go. I don’t think I believe that. I think that’s just something you tell yourself to make it easier when you think you have to let them leave you. It makes it easier for you to push them away.”

Felicity leaves Oliver to his thoughts then and turns her attention back to her laptop. The signal triangulation gave her a building in the northern section of the Glades. There’s not much of a surprise there. After borrowing a satellite she knows getting into the place won’t be a simple matter. Malcolm Merlyn is clearly adamant about keeping Walter as a hostage because the place is swimming with guards.

“What is it?”

Oliver is clearly done with his contemplations for the moment. Whatever the results of those musings are, his expression gives nothing away. Knowing she shouldn’t pry anymore, Felicity focuses on the matter at hand and turns her laptop to face Oliver. He pulls it closer to study it.

“I found where they’re keeping Walter, but it looks… heavily fortified.”

He looks at the feeds for all of a few seconds before he declares simply, “I can get in,” and stands.
Felicity reaches over for her laptop and hurries after him.

“I’m coming with you.”

He turns to catch her arm. His expression says he’s ready to argue the issue and Felicity digs her heels in, ready for a fight.

“Felicity, no,” he denies, but she won’t hear it.

“No? Why not? Oliver, I can handle myself. The gunshot wound barely hurts anymore, so it isn’t that much of a-”

“Felicity, it’s how I’m getting in.”

Oliver gives her a pointed look, and the blonde goes pale as she realizes just what he means. And while she can apparently manage a plane ride, even a long one across the Pacific, under the right circumstances, she’s not sure she’ll ever be able to jump out of one and retain control of her mental faculties. Parachuting onto a ship only a couple hundred feet from shore had nearly rendered her catatonic.

“Although it does still bother you,” Felicity grimaces because he must’ve seen the way she’d clutched at the wound during their confrontation with Alonzo. “Even if it could take the landing…”

He puts his hand on her shoulder and opts not to finish that sentence. “Just sit this one out, okay?”

Felicity swallows, ducks her head, and ultimately relents with a nod.

“I’ll call you when it’s done.”

He gives her shoulder a comforting squeeze.

“I’ll drop you off at home.”

It’s an hour before he calls her, and it’s some of the best news she--and most likely Oliver as well--has heard in a long time when he tells her Walter is alive and on his way to the hospital to get checked out.

He called Felicity the moment Walter was in the hands of the paramedics--which he observed from a safe distance. Then he went back to Verdant to drop off his gear and was just entering the basement when the call came in from his mother. By the time he confirmed--within a minute--that he was on his way to the hospital, Thea had called and then left a series of texts when he hadn’t answered given that he was already on the phone. So, he changed out of his gear more quickly than his usual pace and headed down.

Everyone was laughing when he stepped into the hospital room, and he couldn’t help but smile. It had been so long since he’d seen his sister smile and laugh like she was. She spent the next fifteen minutes filling their stepfather in on things he’d missed during his imprisonment. That was when his mother turned to the door with laughter in her eyes and a smile she didn’t seem inclined to shake.

“Excuse me,” his mother said, “but who are you? This is a private meeting.”

Oliver turned and found Felicity standing in the doorway with a bouquet of flowers in hand. Given that it was almost five in the morning, he actually hadn’t expected her to make it down so soon.
Felicity gave a nervous smile.

“I know. And I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to barge, I just—”

Just a few sentences in and Oliver could see she was already on the verge of floundering—his mother often had that effect on people—so he stepped in.

“This is Felicity,” he said with a hand on the frazzled woman’s shoulder to settle her. “She’s my friend.”

Felicity cast him an appreciative smile.

“She’s a friend of mine as well,” Walter said, sounding and looking pleasantly surprised that she was there. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Miss Smoak.”

“You are acquainted with both my son and my husband?”

Oliver recognized that look in his mother’s eyes, and, after all of his father’s indiscretions, he could hardly blame her. All the same, it didn’t sit well with him that she thought this of Felicity, whom she didn’t know, or Walter, who as far as he could tell had been as faithful to her as his father should’ve been—and he’d done his digging on the man.

“I work at QC. And I’m Oliver’s IT girl,” Felicity supplied with a nervous energy in her posture, her hands twitching as though she wanted to wring them together, but then she got this look that said she was appalled for reasons he was sure only she understood. This didn’t bode well. “Not in a kinky or sexy librarian kind of—”

Oh, good God …

His mother’s expression tightened into something shrewd he recognized as suspicion, and Felicity thankfully chose this moment to glance at Oliver. She went quiet because he was giving her a look that said she should stop that verbal line of thought before she made it worse. It was fortunate that she understood this look. The last thing he needed was for his mother to take those words as the confession they weren’t.

“I fix his computers,” Felicity corrected herself, and Moira’s shrewd frown let up a fraction. “And his wifi. Basically anything electronic because, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen him try to use them, but he’s,” Felicity gave a laugh that was exaggerated by her nerves. “He’s pretty hopeless. But, of course, you probably do know that because he lives with you, and you’ve known him his whole life. I mean, you were there for the whole ‘party boy dropped out of four colleges—’”

While Speedy certainly seemed find amusement in this current line of verbal thought, his mother’s frown was deepening again, so Oliver took hold of the blonde’s elbow to silence her—he was sure she didn’t notice that he himself was smiling just a little in amusement in spite of himself, although he bit the inside of his bottom lip to hide it—and she took a breath, looking as though her babbling had physically pained her. She covered her eyes with a hand and murmured, “Oh, I really need to work on my introductions. Or just talking to people in general…”

“Baby steps,” Oliver muttered, and she turned on him because he’d purposefully let humor slip into his tone.

“How’s that judgement I’m hearing?” she asked with a subtle tilt of her head. “Because I’m an expert in a dozen different programming languages, and I’m fluent in the other major ones. I’ve finished my BA. You never even declared a major at any of four schools.”
“Sure I did,” Oliver quipped easily. “I majored in dropping out.” He gave her a look and quirked one corner of his mouth. “And talking to people.”

He marveled at his own good mood and knew it had everything to do with their victory that night, however small it was. Felicity’s face flushed with embarrassment, and she couldn’t seem to come up with anything to say in response.

A hearty laugh from Walter drew both of their attentions, along with those of Thea and the reigning Queen.

“I’m glad to see both of your spirits seem to be up since last we spoke. And I’m sure the boy only jests, Miss Smoak. Oliver must know as well as I, and I mean this as no small compliment when I say, that you are the most intelligent person in this room.”

“Oh, by far.” Oliver agreed.

When Felicity turned to him, he saw she was now aware that his entire purpose of trying to get a rise out of her had been for the sake of Walter’s mood. The man had needed a good laugh after his months in captivity, and Felicity always seemed to bring it out of Oliver without trying, so he thought he’d give it a shot. She glanced at him with a smile, letting him know she wasn’t upset.

“On that topic, how fares your education?” Walter asked, his attention back on the blonde. “I do hope you’ve not been neglecting your studies in my absence.”

“No, sir,” Felicity replied easily, and Oliver found himself wondering again when she found the time for everything she did. “That was part of our deal and I haven’t forgotten. I’m on the home stretch, actually. I’ll have that degree by Summer, just as planned.”

Walter smiled, pleased.

“That’s wonderful news. Our IT department is in need of your considerable skills.”

“We’ve all missed you at the office. I picked these up on my way,” Felicity said as she stepped forward to set the flowers on the side table, “and I’m sure you’ll be getting an official, and likely ginormous, ‘Get Well’ card in the mail from everyone after they hear about this.”

Walter laughed again, and Oliver was relieved to see some of those harsh lines of weariness around his eyes ease up.

“I look forward to it. And, thank you. Your concern is appreciated.”

Felicity nodded but then seemed to notice the tension still on the part of Oliver’s mother because she began to fidget.

“Well, I’ll take my leave then. Awkward fifth wheel and all. Sorry to take up so much of your family time. I hope you all have a wonderful night.”

Oliver glanced at her through his peripherals as she turned and left the room and there was a fleeting sense of potential seclusion that hit him from a source he had difficulty identifying.

For years, he’d been a solitary force, only occasionally accepting the help of others but never outright relying on them. Even now, he couldn’t view anyone as more than a passing acquaintance in his life. Sometimes appreciated more than others. Rarer times as friends. Never as someone he expected to stick around. But, as Thea and his mother turned their joyful attentions back onto Walter, Oliver had the sudden stark realization that Felicity had been right earlier.
He’d been back in his old life for seven months now, surrounded by people from a life he could barely remember and by the people he’d met since. Yet, somehow, he was alone. He’d returned a soldier, solitary in his motivations and goals and reborn to a crusade passed down to him by a father whose shadows had finally caught up with him. He had one helluva fight on his hands.

That being said, he realized he didn’t want to be isolated anymore.

On this sudden whim he turned for the door after giving his quiet word to return shortly. He scanned the hall in both directions and spotted the bob of a blonde ponytail halfway down the hall to his left. With his much longer strides and his hurried step, he neared her quickly and called out to her. Felicity turned, surprised to find him following after her, and stopped to wait for him to catch up.

Only, when he finally did, Oliver wasn’t sure himself what he wanted to say. So, he just stood there, staring and trying to piece together his jumbled thoughts into a meaningful, conveyable statement. But, what did he want to say? What had been so urgent that he couldn’t just call her later or bring it up some other time?

“Oliver?” Felicity took a small step closer, her brows dipped into a furrow of concern, and she lifted a hand as if to take his arm but stopped herself. He rubbed the pad of his thumb against his fingers. “Is everything okay?”

This was a good question after everything that had come to light over the past few hours. Honestly, most of it hat yet to completely soak in. Walter’s supposed death… Malcolm Merlyn… His mother…

Of course, this had nothing to do with any of that.

*Are you expecting me to leave too?*

This, he realized, was the kernel of his direct concerns and was what he’d kept himself from dwelling on since their conversation a little over an hour ago: Felicity’s imminent--to him, at least--departure from the team.

“About… what we were talking about earlier.” He paused to collect himself and saw recognition of the topic in Felicity’s eyes. He took a breath, struggling with something so exposed and… vulnerable. But, even so… “I don’t… want you to leave.”

It was all he could bring himself to say in the end. Nothing on how much she’d helped him over the months or how much he valued her presence in his life for however long she was willing to give it. Felicity, however, seemed taken aback by this meager confession.

She blinked, seemingly unsure of how to respond. But, then she smiled and, after a brief hesitation, stepped forward to grip his hand, stopping the restless fretting of his fingers. He stilled entirely when she reached up to press her lips to his cheek in a soft kiss. Oliver wondered in that instant if his heart had always beat so loudly in his chest. The contact was brief, but he felt in that moment before she stepped back like he’d missed something somewhere along the lonely road of his crusade. And in that moment his heart ached for a reason he couldn’t yet define because he’d been through the wringer that night and it was half past five in the morning which meant he hadn’t slept in over twenty-four hours. Felicity, unaware of these stirrings, gave his hand a comforting squeeze.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She said the words with a surety that implied the task would be as simple as the simplicity with which she’d spoken.

For the first time in a long time, Oliver couldn’t find it in himself to think any differently.

“Goodnight, Oliver.”
She’d already released his hand and turned away to leave before he found himself able to reciprocate with a quiet, “Goodnight, Felicity,” and she turned mid-stride to throw a smile over her shoulder.

Oliver stood there for a time, unable to interpret his own reaction to any of what had just happened other than the relief that she intended to stick around and some nondescript longing for a life he was no longer fit for. He stood there until she reached the end of the hall and when she made to turn she looked back and, finding him still there, offered another smile and one of her little waves of farewell. He returned both. Then she was gone and he was left alone with his thoughts.

In the end, he chalked it all up to exhaustion and over thinking.

But, as he returned to his stepfather’s hospital room to rejoin his family, he knew there was one thing he still had to do before the night was over.

It was early. Most people were still asleep at this hour. John Diggle, it seemed, was not one of those people. Ten minutes after Oliver had arrived at the man’s apartment with no response from knocking, the soldier arrived from the stairwell in jogging gear. He drew up short for a moment when he found Oliver waiting but pulled his keys from his pocket and continued past the archer to his door.

“Oliver,” he said in greeting as he unlocked and opened his door.

Oliver turned with him, knowing there was a chance John might not hear him out.

“I met Nora Reid in Hong Kong,” he said, getting right to the point, and John looked up, pausing as he opened the door. “She was working for ARGUS at the time, and I ended up… falling in with them.”

John Diggle stared at him for a moment, hiding his reactions well. Then he pushed the door open the rest of the way and stepped aside, granting Oliver entry. Oliver took it, relieved, and stuffed his hands into his pockets as he stepped into the man’s kitchen just inside the door as John closed it behind them. Then John turned to study him with his arms folded across his chest, clearly waiting for further details.

“She was my medical handler,” Oliver continued. “But, someone found out her ties to ARGUS and tried to use her husband to get her to spill secrets. She refused and asked me to go after him instead. …Something came up, and I couldn’t get there in time. That’s how she knows who I am and it’s why she hates me. But, I meant it when I said she won’t turn me in. Waller always kept her people on a short leash and my identity is still classified on their database. She may have retired, but she won’t break orders.”

John just stood there for a few moments and Oliver accepted his scrutiny, allowing him the time to process this information and whether he believed it or not. When the man sighed and shifted his feet, the archer knew he did and he breathed a little easier.

He was going to need his friends for what was to come.

“While I appreciate the belayed honesty, it’s like I told you last time, Oliver. This all just isn’t for me.”

“I know, and I heard you. But, I need your help.”

This piqued the man’s interest, however he might try to deny it, as he shifted again.
“With what?”

Oliver took a breath and folded his arms across his chest as well, still having trouble digesting the information he was about to give. But, time wasn’t on their side. He couldn’t tiptoe around this issue.

“Malcolm Merlyn is the Dark Archer.”

Dig raised a single eyebrow, but his surprise, Oliver knew, was far more palpable than he expressed visually. If only it was the only bomb the archer had to drop.

“And my mother is working with him.”
Opposing Forces

Chapter Summary

This week on... Under the Hood. Our hero decides on a rather rash course of action in regards to Malcolm Merlyn, a man he now knows to be the Dark Archer.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry. I got swallowed up by Game of Thrones and a story I was inspired to write for it. I didn’t mean for so much time to pass... So, without further ado:

June 1st, 2008:

“You know what they say a-about- men who use large knives, right?” Felicity joked through a dry throat that made her voice crack with effort as she lifted herself into a slumped, kneeling position on the ground.

The Mask of Horrors didn’t seem to find anything odd about it when she used the motion to close her fingers around a handful of dirt. She couldn’t see the man’s face behind that terrifying mask, but she hoped her insult had gotten at least a little bit of a rise out of him. She looked up at him between frazzled strands of dirty blonde hair.

“Every offense intended.”

With a sudden abundance of energy that surprised even her, Felicity threw the handful of dirt up at Wintergreen’s face. She didn’t wait, couldn’t wait, to see if the diversion worked because then she was on her feet and running towards the open air outside the flap behind him—the only exit, unfortunately.

The hand that fist in her hair stopped her in her tracks and Felicity yelped as she was yanked back, her bound hands flying to her scalp with nary chance of freeing her. To be honest, she wasn’t even sure what she would’ve done if she’d gotten out of the tent. She was still in the middle of enemy territory, even if it was on fire now.

But, she’d tried to get free. That would have to appease Cooper’s ghost.

Felicity couldn’t even see where he was leading her as her captor pulled her back towards the interior of the tent because she was hunched over in pain, now being dragged along by her hair. She hated the whimper that escaped her throat as her bare foot landed on the sharp edge of a rock, blood then trailing behind each limping step she was forced to take. Several paces later, her hands were snatched from her own hair and she was lifted by her wrists until the bindings were draped over a hook attached to a chain that was dangling from a metal frame erected inside the tent. Even hanging as dead weight, there were a good few inches between her toes and the ground. Felicity swayed and the frantic thrashing of her feet as she fought for balance which was no longer hers to dictate only served to send her spinning.
Even as she was sure she was about to die in some horrible way, the thought that decided to take the forefront of her mind was that it was surprisingly hard to breathe with her arms pulling upward against all the force of her dead weight. The second and humiliating thought was that her shirt and bra hadn’t been replaced after her most recent session of torture, still cut down the middle. She was going to die and she was practically half-naked…

Wintergreen circled her as she spun and thrashed, an animal playing with its latest captured prey. She couldn’t see his face, but his eyes were grinning under his mask.

He disappeared behind her again as he continued in his slow circle around her but then he caught her around the middle from behind to stop her swaying and hold her still. Felicity jumped with a mortifying squeak of alarm and jerked and tried desperately to kick his knee or his shin or something. But, she missed and his grip was solid. Then he held up his combat knife and placed the dull beck edge of the tip of the blade against the underside of her chin.

Felicity went still as, slowly, the man drew the blade downwards, trying not to even breathe as the cold steel slid over her exposed neck. The knife paused and she feared he would slit her throat. He didn’t.

Slowly still, he drew the knife downward, over her collarbone. She flinched when the blade passed over the still fresh cut that arced around her breast, but he seemed to pay the incision no mind. Down the back of the knife slid. Down her sternum. …Past her naval, and- Oh God…

He was… He was going to…

Felicity sobbed. She couldn’t help it. She fought anew as terror and revulsion got her adrenaline pumping again. Wintergreen just tightened his hold around her waist as he now ran the blade along the waistline of her pants, apparently having gotten whatever sick pleasure he was looking for out of her reaction.

Then came a rasp of, “Billy.”

Felicity barely heard the voice given that her arms were covering her ears, even less over the sound of her heartbeat and the panicked cadence of her breathing, but all motion stopped in an instant. Because there stood Slade with a firm stance and a sword in his hand. Felicity thought she might have cried at the sight of him, but she couldn’t be sure.

She’d been so sure she was about to die…

But, the nightmare that was Wintergreen had frozen, the cool edge of the knife still frozen against the skin above her waistband.

“Step away from the girl, Billy.”

May 23rd, 2013:

“So, I’ve been thinking…” Felicity begins as they all settle into the booth after finishing their burgers.

“Is this a new development?” Dig quips and the blonde laughs and gives his shoulder a gentle shove because she’s missed him on the team.
“Anyway,” she admonishes lightly to get back on topic, “You know about those tunnels the Savior used?”

Both Dig and Oliver nod as she pulls out her laptop from her bag next to her chair.

“It would be an excellent way to move around without detection, don’t you think? What if we used them to get around the city? I mean, look at this…”

With a map loaded, she turns the laptop to face them and both men lean in to study it.

“We’d probably need to do a little reconnaissance, see which ones are closed off, but we’d avoid all the traffic.”

Dig makes a noise of thoughtful approval.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he says, following the lines on the map with a finger. “They probably wouldn’t be that useful during any kind of chase, not without vehicles stashed everywhere, but they would be excellent for getting from point A to point B.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” Felicity agrees. “It could- Oliver?”

His expression is an odd combination of anxiety coupled with a sudden, ground-shattering realization. Without taking his eyes from the screen, the man reaches into his jacket’s inside pocket and pulls something out: his father’s notebook of names. Only when he flipped to the inside cover does he turn his attention away from the screen to look down at it.

His entire frame was tense with a sort of eager energy.

“Oliver? What is it?”

The symbol in his father’s book… It was a carbon copy of a section of the tunnels running beneath the Glades. He’d stared at the symbol so much, hoping to find some sort of answers, that he’d recognized it instantly. It was the first real hint he’d found regarding the book’s purpose. He’d been so distracted by this realization that he missed something Felicity had said and thus garnered the full attention of both her and Dig who were looking at him for explanation.

His response was to flip the book around, so they could see it. Felicity caught on a moment quicker, but they both realized exactly the same thing he had in short order.

“Whoa,” the blonde breathed out as she turned her laptop back around to study the map as if to confirm the information. “I guess I’m not the only one who’s had that idea,” she mused. “And this section of the tunnels is beneath the Glades. That has to be significant, right? Why else would you print it in a book, especially one like that?”

“Right,” Oliver agreed with a nod.

Whatever it was that Malcolm was after, the Glades were an integral part of his plans.

“I mean, I suppose I get it,” Felicity continued after a moment of silent contemplation. “The Glades are in pretty terrible shape right now. Our busy schedule is a testament to that,” she added with an amused lilt to her words and a quirk of her brow. “But then what’s the bottom line?”

“Further a criminal enterprise,” Dig postulated the obvious and then added, “maybe move things
underground?"

A couple days ago, Oliver never would have thought Malcolm Merlyn capable of that sort of thing. Now…

“We know the book has to be a roster of sorts.”

“Yeah,” Felicity agreed, “sort of like a list of all the naughty club members, everyone who wants to get their hands in the cookie jar. A ‘who’s who’ for the criminally inclined. Everyone in that book has something to do with whatever is going on and they’re operating in the Glades in some form or another.”

Felicity leaned forward, elbows propped on the table, and closed her eyes as she ran her fingers over her temples in small circular motions, clearly fighting off a migraine. Oliver wondered if she’d gotten as little sleep as he had after their long night. He’d stared at his ceiling for almost two hours before deciding it was a hopeless effort.

“Crime rates are at an all time high. Now, aside from the obvious ‘revenue’, why would they do this? Why would they operate somewhere dangerous just to avoid the police?” Aside from that already stated reason of lacking law enforcement, Oliver was sure she meant. “…Unless the crime rate is what they’re after… Get the police to leave, but why? Obviously they don’t want the police around for their dirty dealings, but that just means they have to deal with the gangs and the Triad and the Bratva, so why…”

Felicity sat up straighter in her seat, an idea lighting her eyes.

“Now, there’s a thought… Maybe they want to focus city crime there, localize it. Remove the police, and it’ll be like a vacuum, sucking all the bad fishes into one barrel… Maybe they’re targeting the Glades, not operating there.”

That certainly was an idea, and Oliver admitted that it wasn’t one he’d yet considered. Across the table, he shared a grim look with Dig. Felicity leaned forward and reached for her keyboard, and Oliver and Dig slid their chairs over to look at the screen as she brought up a search browser.

“It’s something with the subway tunnels, so it’s underground,” Oliver added in his two measly cents to her rapidly spiraling thought process.

“Right…” Felicity conceded absentmindedly, her eyes ever locked on her computer screen.

“Tunnels… tunnels…”

Felicity kept mumbling the word under her breath as she continued to pull up and skim through a number of different statistics of the area. Notable buildings, crime rates, cash flow, suspicious hospitalizations, construction zones, energy and water usage, gas mains, sewer lines, and what seemed like a million other things.

Despite what Oliver’s educational record might suggest, he wasn’t an unintelligent man. His work with Amanda Waller had not only given him an incredible work ethic but also an insider’s understanding of the criminal mind. He was able to pick up on patterns that even the police had missed simply because of the different perspective he’d been allotted during his three-year tenure under her orders while in ARGUS. But, as he watched Felicity’s eyes scan critically and swiftly from one article and scientific journal to the next, he couldn’t help but acknowledge again that this particular woman was in a league all her own. Even an evident lack of sleep seemed to slow her mental faculties very little.
“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” she muttered as she rubbed at a wrinkle that had settled over her brow. “There has to be something I’m missing. Something obvious… easy to overlook…”

A moment later, Felicity perked up as she brought up a web page.

“Here’s something,” she said as she pulled up a news article. “Breaking news story… Apparently there was a massacre at Unidac Industries. That’s a subsidiary of Merlyn Global.”

“This was just this morning,” Diggle noted. “It’s dated an hour ago.”

“Oh no…” Felicity mumbled, her eyes near the bottom of the article. “The Dark Archer…”

“Malcolm,” Oliver corrected because they couldn’t tiptoe around this information, no matter how it troubled him.

“You okay, man?”

His expression must’ve revealed how close he was to losing the food he’d just eaten. Oliver schooled it quickly and muttered a dismissive confirmation. Neither Diggle nor Felicity seemed convinced, but they didn’t argue.

“Oh, okay, so… Why break into his own building to murder a bunch of his own employees?” John asked a very valid question.

Oliver realized how dry his throat was and swallowed.

“They knew something,” was his grim reply. “Whatever is going on… It has something to do with that break in. Felicity, can you get into their servers, see what they were working on?”

Felicity clearly wanted to say something, but his expression must have further stated just how much he did not want to talk about this. So, she nodded and turned back to her laptop.

Unidac’s systems, however, had been taken offline.

They’re walking ahead of her, locked in a heated discussion about Oliver’s gawd-awful plan. Dig is trying to reason with him, much as Felicity had tried to do for the better part of ten minutes as they walked down the street.

Oliver isn’t listening, though. God, why does he never listen? She gets that this is all very personal for him. She does. But, this is just ludicrous. It’s a suicide mission.

He simply could not walk into Malcolm Merlyn’s office and confront him.

But, he’s going to. That much is irrefutable. He’s going to tell Malcolm Merlyn who he is and try to reason with a madman to give up what has apparently become his life’s work. Oliver is going to get himself killed trying to save a man who massacred innocent people just because they worked on some super secret evil plot of his without knowing it. A man who had tried and very nearly succeeded in killing both of them five months previous. In the end, he’d only failed for a lack of effort and she doubts that will be the case this time.

Oliver is going to get himself killed and, one way or another, Felicity can’t let that happen.

Neither man notices Felicity slip off into an alley they’re passing by until she’s already gone.
June 1st, 2008:

Slade bellowed as he barreled into the man, throwing Felicity’s attacker to the ground, and then it was just a blur of movement and limbs to her weary mind as they fought. Much later, she would wonder why Slade hadn’t just shot him in the back while he was still unnoticed.

Later still, she would learn that William Wintergreen was the godfather of his son.

Felicity started to slip from consciousness the moment the direct threat to her life was passed, unable to recall a time on this island over the past few days when she’d gotten any actual sleep. Her vision was fading around the edges as she remained unable to really focus on the two brawling men or who was or was not prevailing over the other.

The next thing she knew, she was falling, caught by someone who was decidedly not Slade, still locked in bitter fisticuffs with his compatriot.

“It’s alright, kid,” said another familiar voice from very close to her ear as her arm was draped over someone’s shoulder.

Steven Trevor.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

She was barely able to focus as, leaning heavily on the marshal, she was lead out the back of the tent.

May 23rd, 2013:

“Miss Smoak?” Moira Queen asks in surprise, seated in the dining room of the Queen Mansion and enjoying a lavish lunch for one. “How did you get in here?”

It’s a fair question. She wasn’t, after all, expecting Felicity to stop by and she doubts the guards at the front gate would have just let her in. But, the grounds of the estate are massive and there are some rather concerning holes in their security which Felicity will be bringing up to Oliver later.

But, how she got in isn’t important right now.

“I know you’re working with Malcolm Merlyn,” Felicity declares.

The woman’s already shrewd expression tightens into something subtly darker and Felicity hopes, possibly more than she ought to, that she can get this woman to see reason where Malcolm surely won’t. Moira has, after all, been helping him in some form or another only because of a threat to her family. And right now part of that family is about to walk into the lion’s den.

“And I know he’s the Dark Archer.”

Felicity thinks briefly that this news might have actually surprised Moira.

“Just like I know Oliver is the Vigilante. Or the Hood or whatever you prefer to call him.”

Yet, she has the distinct impression that this news doesn’t surprised the woman quite as much as it
should have.

Unfortunately, there is no time to delve into the matter. This is also why Felicity hadn’t just broken into the Unidac building and hacked into their servers directly to find out what had been stolen.

She hopes Moira Queen might have some sort of monkey wrench to throw into Malcolm’s plans.

Felicity calls Oliver one more time as she drives back to town, tries to get him to see reason, but he’s adamant. This crusade of his has become even more personal than it had been at the start when he thought he was just doing it to atone for the sins of his dead father, and he’s certain that he can convince a madman with new tendencies towards mass murder to give up his evil plans. She feels for him… but Malcolm Merlyn has shown himself to be just as dedicated to his own endeavors as Oliver is to his.

And Oliver is about to tell the man that he’s his biggest obstacle to completing those plans.

Felicity is now very desperate.

June 1st, 2008:

“I stopped the launcher...” Felicity mumbled in a weary undertone as he eased her down onto a table in an empty tent.

Steve grinned in spite of the situation because, damn, this girl had guts.

“I saw that. Helluva thing, kid,” he mused.

The blast had taken out the munitions tent and taken down a considerable number of these enemy combatants. Slade and Shado had cut their way easily through the mayhem of disheveled enemy forces after that.

Steve was just glad they’d gotten to Felicity in time. She was in pretty dire straights and if they’d been any later...

“Just relax, now,” he urged the obviously and understandably tired student from MIT--what had he been doing his Senior year of college?

Felicity’s heavy eyelids drooped closed not long after and he assumed she’d passed out.

He removed his jacket and then his shirt, so that he could tear strips of the fabric off. He wrapped them around the worst of the cuts on Felicity’s arms and legs, wishing he had something for the terrible wound on her chest, which was barely covered by the torn folds of her shirt. Fortunately, the incision appeared to be clotting on its own, so he just draped his jacket over her to help keep her warm as blood loss was starting to lower her core temperature. They had to get some blood in her soon and he prayed they would find some medical supplies in this place before they left.

Yelling from outside the tent drew his attention then and reminded Steve that they weren’t quite finished yet with the skirmish. He couldn’t just leave Felicity unarmed, though, so he stooped to pull a spare revolver from the holster strapped to his ankle and he left it beside her on the table. If all went
well, he wouldn’t be gone more than a few seconds. He didn’t notice Felicity stir and look his way as he left, but the only thing he could focus on the moment he opened the tent flap was the standoff going on outside.

Fyers had Shado at gunpoint while Slade stood several paces away, holding a gun on Fyers and holding a sword towards the man who dressed very much like him.

May 23rd, 2013:

It had to stop being strange at some point. His new job couldn’t be a perpetual source of surreality for the rest of his life, could it? If nothing else, the view from his office was fantastic, but he just couldn’t get used to everyone calling him “Mr. Merlyn” and treating him inexplicably like a man who would inherit a fortune 500 company from his father just because he now walked through the door at the same time every day.

The early mornings had to be the worst part of it, to be honest. It was only noon, yet he’d already been in that godforsaken office for four hours already. It was a relief when the phone on his desk rang, and Tommy heaved a sigh of relief as he pushed the last quarterly report away and picked up the receiver.

“Thomas Merlyn speaking,” he answered in his best impression of his father and he wondered again when his life had gotten so turned around that he needed to emulate his father.

“Hello, Mr. Merlyn.”

The voice on the other end of the line sounded strange, electronic and almost androgynous but with a definite feminine undertone, and Tommy was put on instant alert as he sat up straighter.

“Who is this?” he demanded. “How did you get this number?”

“We’ve only met once,” the voice said and he couldn’t help but feel there was something strangely familiar about it. Then she said, “I was there when your father was shot,” and Tommy thought it a wonder he hadn’t recognized the voice the instant he’d heard it.

“I was the small one,” she reminded him unnecessarily, “not the large, growly one.”

She was the kid who was working with Oliver. His friend: the most famous murderer in Starling City. The only reason Tommy didn’t hang up right then out of anger-fueled spite was because this girl had saved his life that night.

“As for how I got your number, it’s really not important. What is is why I’m calling.”

He swallowed down the angry, ‘Go to hell’ on his tongue and asked instead, “And why is that?”

When the girl said, “Your father,” it got his attention more than anything he thought she might say.

“What about my father?”

Felicity notices the car as she’s returning to her own from her apartment. The detective is many things, but subtle is not one of them. Setting her bag, and the firearm inside it which she’d just
retrieved from her place, inside her car, the blonde locks the doors and walks over to the overly nondescript blue sedan parked across the street. Quentin Lance has the decency to look abashed as she opens the passenger door and climbs inside with a grunt of discomfort for her injured stomach. The silence as soon as she shuts the door behind herself is in stark contrast with the hum of noise ever present on the streets of Starling.

“So, what can I do for you, Detective?” she asks as she looks his way.

The man gives a rattling sigh and runs his hand over his jaw.

“Look,” he finally says in his gravelly baritone, “you know I like you, kid. You remind me a little of my daughter, sometimes, with your big heart and your willingness to do whatever it takes.”

Felicity really has somewhere she needs to be and she wants to tell the Detective to make his point, so she can go. But, she just can’t bring herself to, not when he’s talking about his dead daughter.

“I pulled the footage from the shootout at the mall,” the man says then and the blonde feels the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, hoping nothing in her expression gives her away. “Funny thing is,” he continues, “there was this girl there. Blonde hair, MIT jacket. I was just wondering if that description made you think of anybody in particular.”

“Is there a point to any of this, Detective?” Felicity asks, pretending like he doesn’t know what he clearly does because if he had anything more than suspicions and gut instincts, she would probably be on her way downtown right now regardless of his opinion of her. “Because I actually have somewhere I need to be.”

Quentin sighs heavily one more time and scratches at his jaw again before he lets the arm drop to the windowsill and turns to look at her directly.

“Just tell me who he is, Felicity. You haven’t killed anyone. Don’t let him take you down with him. If you work with us, I can work out a deal for you: immunity for anything you’ve done while you’ve been helping him.”

Felicity tries her best not to swallow and turns to hold the man’s stare in defiance, well aware that, while he may not have proof, Quentin Lance knows exactly what she’s been doing with her spare time for the past seven months.

“I need to meet with some friends, Detective,” she dismisses and the man, while frustrated, does seem like he hadn’t expected any differently from her. “You can either arrest me or let me go.”

He doesn’t want to do that. She can tell by the set of his jaw and the fidgeting of his fingers on the windowsill, so Felicity pulls the lever of her door and gets out of the car.

She stops as she passes the front of the vehicle, however, and on a whim turns to walk over to his window. Seeing her approach, he rolls it down.

“I know you think he’s a criminal, Detective,” Felicity says and the man looks away, almost childish petulant in his grudge against the Vigilante and who he correctly assumes he is under the green hood. “And maybe you’re right,” she allows because that’s one thing she herself has never been able to deny, about Oliver or herself. “He breaks the law. I won’t deny that. But, whoever he is and whatever you think of him…”

The weight and emotion in her tone draws his attention and Quentin looks back up at her from inside his car and she knows she has to make her next words count. She ponders for just a moment over those words, putting the abstract thoughts and feelings she has for the leather-clad man in her life into
coherent sentences.

Eventually, she says, “He puts his life on the line for the people of this city. He gives them hope. He fights for them when no one else does. That makes him a hero, doesn’t it?”

Even if he can’t see it himself.

She can see Lance wants to refute this claim with every fiber of his being, so Felicity cuts him off before he can.

“I know you may not see it that way,” she allows, and the fire in the Detective’s eyes settles a little, “and I can’t tell you what everyone else in this city thinks… But, he saved me. He’s a hero to me.”

And with those words and one final, loaded look at the man, Felicity turns and walks back to her own car, leaving Detective Lance alone with her confession. He doesn’t try to follow her when she pulls into the road and she’s grateful because she really does have somewhere she needs to be.

There’s a very stubborn man fourteen minutes away who’s about to offer himself up to the monster who still haunts her dreams.
Announcer: This week on Under the Hood... things heat up as our hero and an unexpected guest confront Malcolm Merlyn about his dastardly plans. Meanwhile, back in 2007, an already dire situation ends up in the water.

Chapter Notes

Just two more chapters for this season.

May 16th, 2007:

He didn’t know how long he sat there like that, slumped against an alley wall in an unfamiliar city halfway across the world, staring at the now unmoving form of his father who had just fired a bullet into his own skull. All Oliver knew was that, when he felt a second bout of bile rising in his throat, his mortification was put on hold by Sara dropping down in front of him, blocking his view of the corpse.

“Come on, Ollie, we have to go!”

He barely even heard the words, her panicked but insistent tone implying that it wasn’t the first time she’d said them. She was right, of course. They had to leave, if not to run from the men who would be coming for them then to get away from the bloody corpse of his father.

When Oliver still couldn’t get his feet to move, Sara grabbed his arm and cast a hurried glance back at the mouth of the alley before hauling him to his feet with surprising ease. Listless, he went along with the motion but made no move to leave as she stooped to pick up the gun his father had just used to end his own life.

“Sara? What are you-”

“Go, Ollie!” she ordered, pushing on his back to dislodge him from the spot he couldn’t get himself to move from.

And she kept her hand there to keep pushing him even as she raised that pistol to shoot a slug into the chest of the first faceless agent who rounded the corner in the other direction.

The next couple blocks went by in a blur as they ran and then Sara was pulling him onto a busier street, tucking the gun into her waistband and slowing their pace, so they would draw less attention to themselves. His father had just killed himself, their detail had been wiped out, and Oliver was in a foreign land with absolutely no idea what to do.

So, he just followed in a listless stupor, Sara’s hand clamped in his like a lifeline.
May 23rd, 2013:

Malcolm had just shaken his hand to greet him when the door to his office was thrown open and Oliver turned to find Tommy. For the anger in his expression, the vigilante thought his friend had heard of this meeting and was there to yell at him. But, Tommy’s eyes were fixed on his father.

“Thomas, we’re in a meeting-” Malcolm protested to his son barging in.

“Is it true?” the Merlyn heir asked as one of Malcolm’s staff noticed and closed his open office door.

“Is what true?” Malcolm replied, his tone impatient. “I can’t answer without more information, Tommy.”

“I just received an… interesting phone call,” his son began to elaborate and he glanced in Oliver’s direction then and seemed relieved for some reason before he turned his eyes back on his father. “She said you have some plan to level the Glades.”

And then Oliver finally knew what was going on.

Felicity.

Malcolm stared at his son a moment, calculating something, and then turned to address Oliver, “Oliver, could you please give us a moment?”

Tommy refuted the request with a swift and firm, “No, dad, I want him to stay,” and the tension in the room was stifling as father and son stared one another other down. “At first,” Tommy continued a moment later when it became clear the Malcolm wouldn’t object again to Oliver’s presence, “I thought the woman was crazy, or that she was up to something. You’ve made enemies who would want to slander you. I thought, ‘No, that can’t be right. My father could never do something so terrible. And even if, God forbid, he could, he wouldn’t when all my mother had ever done was try to help those people.’”

This was not how Oliver had wanted this meeting to go. As it was, he was only able to stand there and watch as his best friend did the very thing he was there to do, confront Malcolm about his plans. “But, the more she talked, the more I began to wonder… Where is it you disappear to? All those sudden ‘business meetings’?”

Malcolm had at last heard enough, indignant as he attempted to shoot down these ideas. “Tommy, if you are insinuating that you have begun to doubt me, your father, that you think I’m behind some sinister plot of mass murder, simply because you don’t have a copy of my itinerary, than you and I need to have a very serious conversation about trust.”

And if Oliver didn’t already know who this man was, he might have believed him. “But, you see, it’s not just that, dad,” Tommy said, hardly persuaded. “The skipped lunches I can understand. As CEO, you’re a busy man. But, you want to talk about trust?” His eyes were hard as he stepped towards his father. “Well, as this woman was asking me if you seemed… different since you came home, I couldn’t help but stop and think back. I thought of how cold you’ve been since your two years missing. At first, I told myself that it was just grief, your way of distancing yourself from what happened to mom.”
Malcolm was about to say something in his defense, so Tommy took another step forward, cutting him off.

“And then I thought of how easy it was for you to kill those men.”

Oliver wasn’t sure what this meant, but it certainly gave Malcolm a noticeable moment of pause.

“Thomas, as I’ve told you, those men would’ve-”

“Killed me. I know. But, you didn’t even flinch, dad. You blew that man’s brains out, and it didn’t even give you pause when I couldn’t eat for two days afterwards!”

Malcolm didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Back then, I believed you. You did it because they would’ve killed us, and that was why it didn’t bother you, because you’d justified it to yourself. Now I wonder if it wasn’t because you’ve killed before. So, you wanna’ talk about trust, dad, then let’s start with that.”

“Tommy, stop!” Malcolm protested loudly once more. “Who is this woman who’s put these ideas into your head?”

“That doesn’t matter! You just need to answer me, and if you tell me, look me in the eye, and tell me she’s lying, then I’ll believe you! But, believe me when I tell you that I’ve gotten pretty good at noticing when you’re feeding me bullshit. So, tell me, is any of it true?”

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May 16th, 2007:

“How do you know how to steal a car?” Oliver asked what he felt was a very valid question as Sara sped down the unfamiliar streets of Hong Kong in what had become their getaway car.

“My dad wanted me to be ready for any emergency,” was all Sara said as she glanced in the rearview mirror.

Oliver didn’t have time to ponder over the irony of her policeman father teaching her how to commit grand theft because then Sara was pushing the gun she’d taken from his father’s corpse into his hands and all thoughts of Detective Lance flew from his mind.

“Take this,” she said, but Oliver’s stomach rebelled strongly against the thought.

“Sara, I don’t want this-”

“You have to! They’re behind us, Ollie!” Sara shouted in urgent protest as she held the gun firmly in his hands, one hand still on the steering wheel and her eyes flitting from the road ahead to the rearview mirror.

He’d been so sure they’d lost them, but, sure enough, when Oliver turned to look out the back window he could see a black SUV weaving through traffic to catch up with them.

“There isn’t time to give you a lesson on guns, Oliver, so just flip off the safety and do your best!” Sara said as she pressed on the gas.

Oliver gripped the top of his open window firmly as she jerked the car to the right, cutting off another driver who pressed on his horn with angry, indistinct shouts. Looking down at the gun in his
hand, the billionaire’s son skimmed over the device and noticed a small lever near the grip that said ‘on’. He flipped it with his thumb and it said ‘off’, so hopefully that was the safety Sara was talking about because she was too busy narrowly missing one car after another to pay attention to anything he might ask. She was keeping a good distance from them.

Until a second SUV came roaring out of a side street. Sara veered in an attempt to avoid them, but there wasn’t time. Turning onto the street, the masked men plowed into the driver's side door with the corner of their vehicle much larger than the old Chery Fengyun they’d been able to find. Oliver was jerked harshly to the side and he heard Sara scream as shattered glass sprayed around the cabin. When he was finally able to look, he found they were still on the road and moving, but Sara’s arm was laying limp in her lap. Had it been broken by the collision? Dislocated? Whatever the case, she struggled to control the vehicle, particularly with the SUV still driving alongside them.

Then Oliver saw the man in the passenger seat of that SUV raise a pistol to shoot either Sara or himself and he just reacted. He lifted the pistol in his hands and he pulled the trigger. In the moment, he thought he pulled it once, but in reality it was three times. The first hit the gunman in the head. The second went through the far window. The third hit the driver in the chest. All Oliver knew was that the man in the passenger seat went limp as his head jerked and blood sprayed the interior of the car behind him.

The SUV veered off, out of control, and they hit a light post, and Sara breathed a sigh of relief. All Oliver could see was the image of that man’s head bobbing around on his shoulders

“Don’t think about it now, Ollie,” Sara said beside him, her voice grim and apologetic, and Oliver wondered if she was forcing herself not to dwell on the man she’d shot back in the alley.

The next thing either of them knew, their back window was being shot out, and both of them were hunkering down in their seats as glass and bullets blew through the cabin. Oliver cried out as a burning pain shot through his left arm and the noise finally died out as Sara veered the car to the right. Her door flew open, the latch apparently broken by the collision with the SUV, and Oliver remembered how she hadn’t taken the time to put on her seatbelt after hot wiring the car. Now with only one usable hand, she couldn’t.

They were heading towards a bridge now and traffic on their side of the road appeared to be moving slowly. That was when Sara made the drastic decision to swerve onto the other side of the road against Oliver’s vocal protests. There was less traffic there, but it was now moving at them. Getting hit, he felt, wouldn’t be a good alternative to getting shot. Yet, despite having the use of only one arm, Sara managed to avoid hitting anyone.

When he heard the sound of a collision behind them, however, Oliver looked in his side mirror to find their pursuers had followed and, in their much larger vehicle, had no problem pushing other cars out of their way if need be.

These guys just wouldn’t give up.

May 23rd, 2013:

Malcolm glanced over Tommy’s shoulder at Oliver before addressing his son once again.

“If you want Oliver to leave, now is the time,” he warned, his tone grave. “I won’t be held responsible for what he learns.”
“Oliver stays,” Tommy said with a hard edge in his tone and Oliver realized that his insistence might very well be because, if he was right, Tommy had reason to be afraid of his own father.

Malcolm looked between Oliver and Tommy once more and then said nothing to explain himself as he turned to walk behind his desk. Grabbing up one of the awards on its polished surface, he pulled the base apart, revealing an old phone inside. Dropping it out, he set the device atop the desk with something akin to reverence.

“Before I answer anything, there’s something I want you to listen to,” he said at last.

Oliver felt a buzzing in his pocket then, his own phone, but he ignored it because the matter at hand was simply too important to ignore.

“The night your mother died,” Malcolm continued, “she called me. I woke to a voicemail from her.”

Oliver saw Tommy’s shoulders go tense as he took an involuntary step back, warily eying the phone on Malcolm’s desk.

“Dad?” His voice was hesitant, and Oliver recognized the fear in it.

“Her final gift to me,” Malcolm said and he pushed a button on the phone’s keypad.

“Malcolm,” came the trembling voice of a woman long dead, and Tommy went deathly still.

“Dad?” His voice was hesitant, and Oliver recognized the fear in it.

“H-he shot me. I screamed for help, but… But, no one would come.”

Tommy began to waver on his feet and Oliver stepped up beside his friend to steady him with a hand on his shoulder, feeling his own stomach turn as the recording continued to play.

“Help, Malcolm, I don’t want to die alone…”

“Turn it off!”

At last Malcolm acquiesced to his son’s pained request, cutting off the dying pleas of Rebecca Merlyn and plunging the room into a tense silence. Tommy, after a few deep breaths, covered his face with his hands and moaned into them as he hunched low, pressing his fingers harshly into his eye sockets as if to pluck out the images of something he had never before known to imagine.

“She bled out into the pavement while people passed and did nothing.”

Oliver, his hand on Tommy’s back, glared up at Malcolm because the least he could do before he continued his justifications for the man he had become was give his son a moment to come to terms with the troubling and gruesome nature of what he’d just heard. He seemed not to care, though, and that was the moment Oliver realized the truth.

This wasn’t the same man who had been like a second father to him.

“Your mother built her clinic in the Glades because she wanted to save this city. It can’t be saved. Those people there don’t want it to be.”

Oliver’s phone buzzed again, but he ignored this message too as Tommy finally stood up straight again, his face red and his eyes wet and accusing as he glared at his father.
“So, this is your solution?” he shouted in protest. “You’ll kill them all?”

“Yes!” Malcolm roared and finally there was a glimpse of the madman grief turned him into. Tommy recoiled a step in the face of it. Oliver, who had much more experience with facing the monsters of the world, did not. “They deserve to die! All of them! The way she died!” Malcolm’s living ghost shouted with a forceful gesture towards the phone on his desk, even as Oliver ignored another buzz in his pocket.

This was his chance. Malcolm had revealed his plans and Oliver owed it to their history and to Tommy to give him a chance. If he revealed to the man who he was, maybe he could get him to reconsider his plans. Some part of him, a part he’d lost touch with for so many years, wanted to believe wasn’t too late to stop the madness.

But, as he opened his mouth to speak, Malcolm’s phone, not the one on his desk but his personal phone, began to ring. He took it from his pocket and glanced at it and Oliver glimpsed the words ‘Blocked Caller’ before the man declined the call and put it away again. Oliver tried to speak one more time, but it happened again and Malcolm ripped the phone from his pocket again and pressed down on the answer button harshly.

“What?” he snarled into the receiver, an aggressive tone which made the archer’s fingers yearn for his bow and an arrow.

The barely distinct words of, ‘Turn on the news. Any channel,’ sounded from the phone before Malcolm pulled it away from his face, and Oliver knew the person on the other end of the line had hung up. And so, Malcolm turned the TV on his wall to the news.

And there was Oliver’s mother, standing at the podium of a press conference, looking grim-faced and full of so much remorse, and his stomach turned to lead because he recognized that expression. It was the same expression his father had worn before he’d shot himself.

“We don’t have much time, so I’m going to keep this brief,” his mother said. “For the past five years, under a threat to my life and the lives of my family, I have been have been complicit in an undertaking with one horrible purpose.”

His mother struggled to say her next words, but Oliver already knew them on some level. It didn’t lessen the blow of knowing she had been part of something so terrible for all these years and that his father had been before her.

“To destroy the Glades and everyone in it.”

Oliver watched Malcolm then as his mother continued, and when she finally outed him as the mastermind behind it all, he saw in the man’s eyes that nothing would have persuaded him to abandon his plans.

Malcolm roared as he threw one of the weighty metal awards on his desk at the TV and smashed it, bringing an abrupt end to the the broadcast, though the rest of the people in Starling would continue to see it and would probably never forget it. Tommy took another step back as Oliver dropped into a wide and firm-footed stance, ready for an attack of retribution for his mother’s actions. But, Malcolm didn’t round on them. He stayed behind his desk, pacing behind it, the world’s most dangerous predator backed into a corner.

“You’re not him,” Tommy said simply from behind Oliver and Malcolm turned at last to look at him, pausing mid-stride. “My father never came back.”
Father stared at son for a moment and then Malcolm turned to give Oliver a glare and, for the first time, Oliver saw not Malcolm Merlyn but the Dark Archer looking back at him.

“Your mother may think she’s won this round, but I am far from beaten,” the man said in a vicious growl. “And, neither of you will stop me.”

Oliver was unprepared when Malcolm reached under his desk and pulled a gun from beneath, not because he hadn’t considered the possibility—on the contrary, he’ had expected the man to have some sort of weapon readily available—but because he had been unable to bring a weapon of his own. What he hadn’t expected was for Tommy to step between them, putting himself between Oliver and any bullets Malcolm might send his way. It gave Malcolm pause, in the least, which was clearly Tommy’s intent.

“Can you take him?” he asked quietly over his shoulder.

His mouth set into a firm line, Oliver thought back to a cold night in December and he had no doubts in his answer.

“No.”

Malcolm had wiped the floor with him the last time they’d fought and he’d very nearly killed both him and Felicity. In that office, with no weapons and Tommy to look after, he didn’t stand a chance.

It was Diggle who ultimately saved the day, barging into the room and opening fire on Malcolm from behind Oliver and Tommy. Oliver pulled Tommy aside as Malcolm ducked the shots, fired less than accurately for John’s allies who had been partially in the way, and ran. Oliver realized what the man was doing too late. By the time he moved after him, Malcolm had already slipped inside a hidden room which opened from the wall and barricaded himself in. When a SWAT battalion forced their way inside the office, Oliver was given no option but to leave with Tommy and Diggle.

May 16th, 2007:

As soon as they hit a patch of open road, where no one could get in the way, the passenger in the SUV let loose a volley of bullets from his automatic rifle. Oliver’s initial instinct was to duck again. Then there was a pop and the car lurched drastically. Sara, with only one usable arm, failed to maintain control of the vehicle as it swerved on it’s now flat back tire, and the next thing Oliver knew they were facing the edge of the bridge. He barely had time to shout in alarm before their car plowed through the railing. After the scraping of metal receded and they were in free fall, the next thing Oliver heard was a scream and he turned just in time to see Sara slip out of her now open door.

“Sara!” he cried as he reached across the seat, but it was too late.

She was already gone.

May 23rd, 2013:

Tommy had a feeling the police wouldn’t be able to take his father. Oliver, who spent his nights hunting down such men, had said he wouldn’t be able to beat him and those men had no idea what they were walking into. No, his father would get away.
Which meant that everyone in the Glades was in grave danger.

“You have to stop him.”

Oliver turned to face Tommy as they crossed the barricades, and he seemed unsure. To be fair, Tommy had wanted nothing to do with his vigilante work just that very morning—hell, even an hour ago.

“Right now, I don’t care, okay? You came back, and you put on a hood, and you started shooting people full of arrows. You’re not the Oliver who left, and I get that. But, right now, you need to be the Oliver who came back! My father is going to kill everyone in the Glades, Ollie. You have to stop him.”

“Tommy, I-”

“Oliver!” a female voice cut them off, calling his friend’s name in search from a short ways off, and Tommy saw his old friend’s demeanor completely shift. Gone was the look of a man who had no idea what he was supposed to do next and in its place was a tense look of frustration as he clenched his jaw and his fists and turned towards the voice.

“Oliver! Oli- Oh! There you are!” The owner of the voice said, and, given Oliver’s reaction, Tommy hadn’t been expecting the relieved and eager looking blonde girl who ran up to join them. “Thank goodness. I thought maybe you weren’t able to get away from-”

She didn’t get to finish this thought because Oliver took her by the arm and pulled her into a nearby alley. Curious, Tommy followed.

“Where’s John?” the girl asked, clearly acquainted with Oliver’s bodyguard. Oliver didn’t answer her question, that the man was pulling the car around the barricades.

Instead, he demanded of her, “Felicity, what were you thinking? You’ve blown this whole thing up. Why couldn’t you just let me do this? I could’ve talked him down.”

The now dubbed ‘Felicity’ gave a huff of irritation.

“You’ve been ignoring me, Oliver, so yes, I took matters into my own hands,” she said with no apology in her words, and Tommy was surprised that such a small woman so readily held her own against his intimidating friend.

“And calling Tommy? What was that?”

“You’re the one who called me?” Tommy asked in surprise, thinking of the strange voice on the other end of his phone and the hooded girl working with Oliver.

His question went ignored.

“It was me deciding not to run into the building dressed as an American ninja, Oliver,” Felicity argued back. “I very much doubt they’d have let me through security. Just be all, ‘Hey, I just need to have a quick word with your CEO. You don’t mind, do you?’ ‘Oh, of course, we’ve been expecting a visit from the Association of American Ninjas for some time. Why don’t you go right on up, Miss?’”

It certainly painted an interesting picture, though, and Tommy felt some of the tension leave his shoulders as he resisted the urge to grin.
“Felicity,” Oliver interrupted, clearly impatient, and Tommy wondered if these tangents were a common occurrence.

Felicity shook her head as though physically clearing it and got back to the matter at hand. “Ignoring the fact that he deserves to know,” she continued, “I needed to put Tommy in the room with you, so, yes, I called him. It was my only option. I had to believe Malcolm wouldn’t hurt his own son.”

It had worked, Tommy thought with a grim frown, though he found he didn’t actually know if his father would spare him if he got in his way again.

That was a painful thought he quickly pushed aside.

“That wasn’t your call to make, Felicity!”

“Well, it’s not like you were exactly willing to hear my opinions on anything in regards to this entire matter. I have been telling you since last night that this was a terrible idea, but, no, you had to go off all lone gunslinger, ready to tell the leader of Evil Incorporated that we know what his evil plan is. And now he has a head start on us! He’ll probably accelerate his plans. For all we know, he could do this thing tonight, and we still don’t know where he’s put that earthquake machine to level the Glades!”

“Uh, I’m clearly interrupting something here-” Tommy tried to intercede because, while they clearly had their issues to sort out, this probably wasn’t the time or the place for it. There were far more pressing matters to deal with.

Both of them, however, turned to him with an angry and simultaneous shout of, “Not now!” before they turned back to one another to continue this loud—and still rather public—argument.

“I had to give this a shot, Felicity. I owed Malcolm that much. I’ve known him for years. I wasn’t just going to-”

“You seem to have forgotten that he shot you,” Felicity countered before Oliver could even finish his justifications. “Twice! In the back!”

“He didn’t know it was me!” Oliver shot back, “If he had, he wouldn’t-”

Finally fed up, Tommy held his fingers to his lips and let out a long and loud whistle to stop the bickering. It worked. Both Oliver and Felicity recoiled with their hands over their ears, and when he finally let it up they turned to him with varying visual degrees of surprise.

“Don’t you think this can wait?” he asked because there really were more important things to deal with. Though, he did find himself drawing up short for a moment after one of the previous comments. “Although the ‘Oliver got shot in the back by my father’ thing… I want to revisit,” he said and the two of them exchanged a look which he chose to ignore in light of the situation. “But, as you said, my dad is out there right now, and if it’s anything I know about him it’s that he’s never been one to abandon a plan just because it looks like things aren’t going his way. The Glades are probably being swept as we speak, and people are probably fleeing, so I have to assume that he’ll do this thing as soon as he can. Maybe even in a matter of hours.”

Letting out a sigh as the energy from his argument with Felicity began to fade, Oliver said, “That still doesn’t change the fact that we have no idea where to go.”

“We’ve been looking for weeks,” Felicity explained, “and all we’ve narrowed it down to is ‘in the Glades’ and ‘underground’. Even Oliver’s mother didn’t know...”
Tommy saw Oliver swallow as his jaw shifted, hurt by the betrayal, and Tommy felt they had more in common in that moment than they had in a long time.

Both of their parents had been keeping terrible secrets from them.

But, perhaps these two heirs could still make it right.

“Actually, I might be able to help with that,” Tommy claimed and Oliver’s surprised gaze lifted to meet his. With a stern determination, the youngest Merlyn said a simple two words: “Mom’s clinic.”

They stared at one another for a moment then, a non-verbal debate between very old friends. A silent, ‘Are you sure?’ and a subsequent, ‘It makes sense, doesn’t it?’

Ultimately, Oliver found value in the suggestion and he turned. Tommy glimpsed Felicity glance between them before turning to follow. But, none of them knew how the night would end, so Tommy wanted to give appreciation where appreciation was due.

“Wait, uh,” he said, and they both turned. Felicity seemed surprised to find his attention on her and she looked confused when he held his hand out. It didn’t seem to help her understand at first when he said, “Thank you. For saving my life, I mean.”

But, a moment later, recognition lit her eyes, and Felicity reached out to shake his hand with a smile.

“That bullet was meant for me, Tommy,” she said so very simply. “Not you.”

And then, with a wink, she turned back to Oliver who, now that the situation was over, turned back to lead the way to where his bodyguard had probably pulled the car around to. Not quite sure what to make of this last comment or such an unassuming girl saying it with such a lack of concern, Tommy hesitated a moment for his shock before he hurried to catch up.

“Hey, where’d you find this girl, Ollie?”

“QC,” the man said over his shoulder as if it explained everything.

Clearly understanding that it didn’t, Felicity turned back to him, amused.

“I’m his IT girl.”

Tommy couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him because his initial instinct to that statement surely wasn’t what she meant.

“I’m guessing that’s not in a sexy librarian kind of way,” he said in jest.

What he didn’t expect was for Oliver, who had just engaged in a very loud confrontation with this girl, to stop dead in his tracks and round on him. Tommy actually feared his friend might hit him before Felicity stepped between them, pushing on Oliver’s chest to keep him at bay.

“Whoa, there, Oliver,” she said. “No killing the best friend over a joke. Which I myself have made, I’ll remind you... To your mother...” she added in an undertone with a groan.

Oh, Tommy would’ve paid good money to see that.

“Anyway--” Felicity backtracked as she pushed Oliver onward. “Come on, boys, we have a city to save.”

Tommy laughed again, mostly because this was something to focus on other than the ache in his
heart when he thought of his father, off to kill thousands of people.

“‘Everybody get along.’ I like you, Rapunzel,” he said as he followed the pair of them who were odd in their interactions.

Felicity cast him a confused look over her shoulder, and Tommy didn’t understand the implications of making a pop culture reference this particular blonde didn’t understand.
Counterattack

Chapter Summary

The Glades come crumbling down as Oliver watches helpless from the sidelines. Meanwhile, Felicity goes off in search of a missing teen who used to live in a town that is now reduced to little more than rubble.

Chapter Notes

Hey, everybody! I know, it’s been so long since my last update. I keep thinking I’ll whip the next chapter out in no time flat, but life usually has other plans… Anyway, you didn’t come here to listen to me gripe, so, please read on and I hope you enjoy the chapter! We’re nearly to the end here in season one. Just one more chapter to go.

May 16th, 2007:

The airbag probably saved his life. Of course, it also dazed him and, by the time Oliver regained the presence of mind to look around, the car was flooding from the broken driver’s side window and the shot out back window. Nothing in his life had been as challenging as getting his seatbelt off with water pouring over him, failing each time he tried to take a proper breath, and by the time he managed it, the car was pretty much filled. He struggled to lift himself enough to get to the air poke still left at the top of the cabin and then, underwater and resisting the current, he pulled himself across the driver’s seat and out the window.

June 1st, 2012:

Oliver had gone to that rooftop hoping that, if he revealed his identity, if he showed Malcolm just who was under that green hood, that he would come around. …It hadn’t worked and now Malcolm was beaten, physically at least, slowly bleeding to death from a blow Oliver himself had dealt. He would probably die on that roof. Diggle had taken a severe beating in the confrontation and Oliver was sporting a self inflicted chest puncture which he could tell had missed his lung, if barely.

And as he stood there, staring down at a man who continued to show no remorse for what he had planned to do, he found he was staring at a stranger, wearing the skin of a man he used to know well. Oliver wondered in that moment if this was how Thea felt whenever she looked at him, the cold and distant brother she used to know. He wondered if it was how she would forever look at him if she knew what he’d really become. The only real difference between himself and Malcolm, after all, was the aim of his convictions. When he’d returned to Starling, he’d been prepared to complete his mission by any means necessary, often at the expense of the lives of men he didn’t know. Even now, he struggled at times to resist his worst instincts, usually only tempered by those closest to him. If the roles had been reversed… If it had been Thea or Tommy or Laurel who had been taken from him instead of his father… Would he have become this? Would that tragedy have driven him to mad
fury and set him on a path of terrible vengeance as it had Tommy’s father?

Was he so desperate to save Malcolm because, on some level, he was hoping he himself wasn’t too far gone to be saved?

Malcolm gave a wet sounding cough that made Oliver assume his lung hadn’t been spared by the arrow the vigilante had driven through both of their chests.

“You’re- too late, Oliver,” he rasped out, dying but somehow with a grin twisting his lips, and Oliver’s gut churned with an instinct of danger. “You an- and your friends. They- may have sto-stopped that device,” the man posed, fading fast and barely able to lift his head to speak. “But, i-if it’s one thing I’ve learned as a su-ccessful businessman, it’s- redundancy!”

After forcing out that final, spiteful word, Malcolm went limp, the rest of the air in his lung rasping out, and Oliver felt his veins run cold as the air was knocked from him as if by a physical blow. With dread saturating his entire being, he turned to look out over the eastern portion of the Glades from that rooftop, too far away to do anything now but watch what he knew was eminent.

He’d forgotten the comm system was open until he heard Felicity say in a voice that was quiet with terror and the same dreadful surprise, “Run…”

He hadn’t wanted her to go. It was too dangerous. If they failed and Merlyn’s device went off while she was trying to shut it down… And, to make matters worse, she wasn’t talking to him. Laurel’s father had gone with her. And Tommy… He’d refused to stay away when it was his father’s plan to level the Glades, so now they were all out there.

And a second device was about to go off.

“Run!” she repeated more urgently to the two men in her company who had apparently hesitated to comply.

That was when he heard a distant rumble and his stomach dropped near to his feet as his heart stuttered. The escalation was swift and terrible. Earthquakes were rare in Starling and the tremors were small when they happened naturally. The buildings just… weren’t designed to resist them. So, even as the deep and persistent rumble continued to grow, the devastation was quick behind. Oliver stood there on that rooftop, feeling the ground beneath his feet begin to tremble as he watched. The buildings gave little warning beforehand. They didn’t shake. They didn’t sway. They just… collapsed. An entire block, one of the oldest with the weakest infrastructure, went down all at once as, around it, the odd building tumbled down as well. Roofs fell in. Walls crumbled. Entire buildings were reduced to little more than rubble in a matter of seconds and all Oliver could do was stand there and watch it happen.

He’d spent so long trying to save a man who was too far gone. He’d told himself he could do it, that he could break through the mania of grief and hatred, but it had only culminated into this. It was the second time the masses had paid for his inability to do what was necessary. He’d known. He’d known who was planning this and still he’d…

He should’ve killed Malcolm before it was too late.

Oliver’s legs gave out and he fell to his knees, listening to the distant sound of sirens and… and the screams of terrified people whose worlds were literally crumbling around them. He felt dizzy and winded and nauseated, and he knew he should be doing something. In his ear, Felicity cried out in either alarm or pain, followed by a clattering commotion before the signal went silent and he raged within himself. He just… he couldn’t get himself to move. He was screaming at himself to get up
because he could be doing *something*, but his limbs wouldn’t respond to his commands.

It wasn’t until John dropped down next to him and shook him by the shoulders with a shout of his name that Oliver was able to break himself from his stupor. The breath he took in ached as though he were trying to force water into his lungs and it left his throat raw.

“We need to go!”

Of course they did. They had to get down there. So, Oliver forced himself to his feet, feeling but ignoring the pain the motion incited in the hole in his chest. Diggle wasn’t in much condition to walk, so he helped him inside and to the elevator. Medical help would be closer from the bottom floor. As the elevator descended, Oliver took his phone out of his chest pocket and tried to call Felicity, mashing his fingers on the buttons more forcefully than necessary for the panic-induced adrenaline coursing through him. The signal didn’t even go through, too many people trying to make phone calls at the moment or a downed cell tower or both.

“Come on!” he raged when he was met by the same failure after he tried to call Tommie’s phone, and he was barely able to keep himself from smashing the device that was his only lifeline into the chaos of the Glades.

His entire body was vibrating with stress and terror and a pent up energy he had no outlet for and he was left pacing the small space of the elevator, putting all of his effort into not punching the wall because that would probably only break his hand- and why was the elevator so damn slow!?

“Oliver, you need to calm down,” Diggle advised from a pace away where he was slumped against the railing, presenting with the level head Oliver was deprived of in that moment. “You won’t be of any use to anyone like this.”

Oliver knew John was right and that was the only reason he kept himself from snapping at his friend, from unleashing some of his turmoil on him if only because he was the only one there to unleash it on. So, to keep himself from lashing out, Oliver turned his back and braced his hands on the elevator rail as he ducked his head to rest it against the cool metal surface of the elevator wall. He dug deep to find a place of even moderate calm, breathing deeply through his nose.

When at last he was no longer threatening to vibrate out of his skin, turned his attention back to his phone and dialed a third number. This one, thankfully, went through, but the four rings until the recipient answered dragged on for an eternity.

“Yeah,” came the distracted reply of Laurel’s father and Oliver sighed in relief for getting through to someone.

He almost didn’t remember to activate his voice modulator before he spoke. “Detective,” he greeted, the normal calm of his voice stilted and forced. “Is she with you?”

There was only one woman he would be asking the detective about, so there was no need to specify.

“Afraid not,” came Lance’s distracted reply. “Girl was lookin’ at her phone. Next thing I knew, she was runnin’ off. The Merlyn boy did the same. Looked back and he was gone, not sure where.”

Oliver’s grip on the elevator railing tightened in frustration and more worry. But, at least he knew they’d all made it out of the tunnels.

“You didn’t go with either of them?” he asked through a clenched jaw.

“I’m a little busy at the moment,” the detective snapped with defensive fervor. “In case you haven’t
Oliver swallowed the scathing retort on his tongue because, of course, they weren’t the only people out there with the detective and he knew Felicity, at least, could take care of herself. That served to lower his concerns, but very little.

“If you hear from Felicity, contact me,” the archer said with gruff urgency, more of an order than anything else. On a second thought, however, he added a tense but earnest, “Please,” which had the detective hesitating before he returned with an affirmative ending the call.

He needed to get out to the Glades.

The tracker in Cindy’s phone was leading her east and this knowledge only made Felicity move with more haste because that was where the worst of the quakes were localized. But, for the ongoing artificial seismic activity her progress was still slow. The ground was shaking so much that she was nearly knocked from her feet several times as she wound through the crumbling, burning streets. She had to stop every now and then when she stumbled on someone in a tight situation, unable to just move on without offering her help. Her path was soon closed off half a block ahead by a building that had collapsed into the one across the street, so she made to cut through an alley where she would hopefully be able to continue down the neighboring street. She drew up short, however, when she noted a situation unfolding ahead, two people surrounded by four others. One person, she recognized instantly.

What was Oliver’s sister doing in the Glades?

Felicity was too far to make out all of the words being said by the three men and one woman who were surrounding Thea and a young man in a red hoodie who was trying his best to keep Thea at his back, between him and the wall a couple paces behind them.

One phrase she caught clearly was “Her mother’s doing,” and that told Felicity everything she needed to know about the situation. That was even before she noted the knife held by one raging man and the severed pipes and rebar wielded by the other three maddened Glades residents. They were scared and, more importantly, angry after the attack on their homes and Thea just happened to be an easy and accessible outlet, the daughter of a woman they knew to have helped orchestrate everything.

Felicity reached back under her jacket, ignoring the pain in her shoulder from the rubble that had struck her earlier, to pull the glock she had holstered there as she held her phone up. The loud, high-pitched screech her phone gave off upon use of an app designed to do just that drew everyone to an immediate halt and six pairs of eyes snapped in her direction. Now with their full attention, Felicity deactivated the app, loaded and very real gun aimed between two of the closest aggressors—though with the ground shaking like it was, she wasn’t sure she would even be able to shoot straight.

“Everyone back off,” she warned in a hard voice her mother probably wouldn’t recognize. When no one moved, either to acquiesce or reject the order, she added, “Now! I’ll shoot!”

Three of them followed her order and backed away from Thea and the unknown young man. The man with the knife lingered, but he didn’t move to advance, either, so she held her fire but kept a watchful eye on him.

“Thea,” she said in that same tone and, in her periphery, she thought the girl might’ve been taken
The girl listened to the unspoken order, however, and started to drag the guy in the red hoodie over to Felicity by the hand.

The blonde watched as the man with the knife became agitated the farther Thea got from him, but she only pulled the trigger of her glock when he made to lunge after her. She’d been aiming for the guy’s leg, which was a mistake because her aim was so unstable that she missed. It hit the ground in front of him and Oliver’s sister shrieked in surprise and fright and stepped behind Red on instinct, her nerves wound visibly tight. Red was surprisingly calm despite a gun being fired. He probably lived in the Glades, she reasoned and this was probably why Thea had run off into a proverbial warzone.

“The next one hits center mass,” Felicity threatened, playing it off as a warning shot.

The four aggressors bought it and backed off a little more. Felicity indicated the alley with a nod of her head and Thea and Red followed her nonverbal instruction. She stepped in after them, only holstering her gun when she was sure they weren’t being followed. She caught up to the pair who were currently waiting for her lead and reactivated the tracking system on her phone.

“What exactly do you do for my brother again?” Thea asked as she and Red started to tail her.

Felicity was glancing at her phone, trying to orient herself on the decimated streets along the path it was giving her to Cindy’s location, so it was a distracted reply when she offered a simple, “I’m his IT girl.”

Red asked a quasi-hesitant/ amused, “Is that like a kinky thing?” and Felicity started to wonder if she shouldn’t find different title for herself because this misunderstanding seemed to happen a lot.

“What? No!” Felicity protested and it was perhaps a little more insistent than it needed to be because she recalled then that there had been that one dream she’d had a couple weeks ago… a dream where she’d filled that very implied role for a business mogul, non-vigilante, had-no-idea-who-she-was-before-impromptu-steamy-hookup Oliver Queen.

She blamed her mother’s trashy novels.

Felicity didn’t know why she only remembered about the dream in that moment when Tommie had even made a similar joke not two hours earlier that same day with no recollection resurfacing, but perhaps it was just the Universe’s way of spiting her. Why , she asked into the ether? With Oliver’s baby sister right there ? Although, at least it wasn’t with Oliver standing right there. She’d probably never be able to look him in the eye again without blushing a deep, full-faced crimson. Of course, he was hardly a mind-reader, so it wasn’t like he’d be able to deduce the direction of her thoughts, but-

God, she hoped Oliver was okay…

She hadn’t been able to get through to him after the quakes had started and her earpiece had fallen out down in the tunnels, something she hadn’t even noticed until she, Lance Sr., and Tommy, were already out.

Thea, fortunately, didn’t seem to notice how uncomfortable or troubled she was because she asked a very to the point, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but what sort of computer nerd carries a gun?” and Felicity thanked her few lucky stars.

“The kind with serious trust issues,” she replied with careful nonchalance, and it technically wasn’t a lie.
She merely omitted the laundry list of vastly horrible and wildly traumatic reasons behind those trust issues.

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**May 16th, 2007:**

Oliver spluttered for air as he washed ashore and tried to both breath in the air his lungs longed for and cough out the water in his throat at the same time. Rolling over onto his back to look around, weighed down by his waterlogged clothing, he found he’d been washed pretty far downstream before he’d made it to dry land.

The bridge they’d driven off of was alight at least a mile in the distance with the flashing colors of emergency vehicles, and what was surely some sort of news outlet helicopter was circling in the air above. They wouldn’t notice him this far out and he had no way of getting their attention. Worse yet, those men might be searching the shoreline after they went over. As he stood, looking out over the dark water for any sign of Sara, Oliver knew he had to keep moving, but he hesitated because how could he just leave her there? He stood on that shoreline looking for any sign of her until he noticed the chopper moving down the shoreline, shining a spotlight, surely trying to spot any survivors.

Survivors such as himself. And if they found him, those men surely wouldn’t be far behind, might even be well ahead. He… He had to go. It turned his stomach to do so, but he finally managed to tear his eyes from the river and muttered a fractured, “I’m sorry, Sara…” as he fled into the city.

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**June 1st, 2012:**

Felicity glanced down at her phone again, noting with that same dreadful concern that the location of the marker which denoted Cindy’s phone on the map still hadn’t moved. She could be hunkered down, she reasoned, waiting for assistance, or she might have lost her phone. But, Felicity’s mind kept wandering down to that dark place, envisioning the girl crushed beneath a fallen building or burned beyond recognition any one of not a few fires the quakes had started. She clutched her phone a little tighter and picked up her pace.

As she looked away from her phone, however, it rang. Oliver. Felicity nearly blacked out, her relief was so potent, and she mashed her thumb on the answer button before her phone even had a chance to ring a second time.

“Oliver!” she exclaimed before the device was even at her ear and she felt one of her two shadows bump into her back when she came to an abrupt halt. Thea rounded to face her at the sound of her brother’s name, her eyes wide and hopeful.

“Felicity!” The relief in Oliver’s voice as he breathed out her name was ample and it made her heart flutter. Felicity told it to settle down because they had more important things to deal with than her feelings for the man.

“Felicity!” The relief in Oliver’s voice as he breathed out her name was ample and it made her heart flutter. Felicity told it to settle down because they had more important things to deal with than her feelings for the man.

“Are you okay?” she asked because she’d heard the gruesome fighting over the comms not fifteen minutes before.

She could tell by the tense nature of the, “Yes,” he gave that Oliver was being liberal with the definition of ‘okay’, but there wasn’t time to press the matter.
“And Digg?”

“He’s here. He’s-”

“I’m fine,” Digg’s more distant gruff tone cut in and Felicity sighed in relief.

“You both suck at lying,” she said, but she was grinning because it was so good to hear their voices.

“Felicity, what’s going on? Detective Lance said you left.”

“Yeah, I, uh, I lost my earpiece when the quakes started. I tried to call, but…” Oliver had probably been having the same issues she had in contacting anyone, so she didn’t bother elaborating. “Cindy ran off to the Glades to help, probably when she saw the news earlier. I’m tracking her now and-”

There wasn’t any forewarning before it happened. The quakes must’ve caused a leak in a gas line somewhere in the building a short ways ahead because one minute they were just walking along and the next a deafening explosion blew the wall out, sending heat and rubble flying. They weren’t super close. The shockwave caused by the blast wasn’t even strong enough at that distance to make Felicity do any more than stumble.

But, the terror which overtook her was instantaneous and all-consuming even though it was misappropriated from more than five-years previous, the terror of a girl sitting on a crashing plane passing over an island off the coast of China. Time slowed to what felt like a standstill as she watched the fire breathe out into the air, roiling and feeding on the oxygen, yearning to feed on whatever else it encountered.

It was only after that night that she realized she may not have a fear of flying at all but rather a fear of explosions, of fire.

Later, she couldn’t recall any of the next couple of minutes. The next thing she remembered was hearing Diggle’s voice calling her name and then a somehow both hasty yet antithetically calm, “I need you to listen to me, okay? Focus on my voice. Can you do that?”

Thea was kneeling in front of her, she noted next, holding her phone to her ear so that Diggle could speak to her. She was kneeling because Felicity was crouched onto her haunches with her back pressed to the nearest wall, but she couldn’t for the life of her remember how she’d gotten there.

“D-Dig, I-I can’t-” She couldn’t even catch her breath enough to say anything else, and Felicity gave a pitiful whimper, feeling in that moment like she might suffocate because she just couldn’t breathe.

“Felicity, you need to relax. Focus on your breathing, just like last time. Breathe in and out, and remember, you have to make sure you breathe out.”

Breathing too fast. Too much oxygen.

“R-right, right…”

It felt counter-intuitive because the last thing she wanted to do in that moment was force air out of her lungs when it felt like she didn’t have any there to begin with, but Felicity managed one brief, ragged, forced exhale before she sucked in a quick breath and tried again. That exhale went only marginally smoother, but smoother it was and soon she was breathing somewhat closer to normal. With a shaky hand, she took her phone from a relieved Thea.

“That’s… a little better.”
“You found Thea?” Dig asked and he’d probably spoken to her, so of course he knew she was there.

“Um, y-yeah. She’s with… some guy,” Felicity answered and she winced, “and it occurs to me now to ask if Oliver knows him. I mean, I’m sure he doesn’t want his sister hanging out with some random guy who might turn out to be a-

“Is he wearing a red hoodie?”

She’d been referring to him as Red in her mind, so Felicity wasn’t sure why she glanced at the guy to make sure, but she did. He seemed tense and Felicity couldn’t even imagine the things going through his mind with his hometown literally in flames.

“Yeah, how did you-

“Okay, that sounds like Roy” Dig cut in because they were all short on time here. “He’s one of her friends. Are you all okay?”

Well, she had guessed by their interactions that this was the case—although ‘friend’ might be understating things a little—but it was still nice to get confirmation.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re fine. Most of the damage is contained in the eastern section of the Glades, and we aren’t quite there yet-

Felicity realised too late that she shouldn’t have added that last part.

“What do you mean ‘yet’, Felicity?” was Dig’s gruff, papa-bear response to her intent to head deeper into the Galades in the middle of a local Armageddon. “You’re not going down there, are you?”

In the background of the other line, Felicity could hear Oliver’s muffled voice offer equal protests of disapproval.

“I am, and I’m not asking for either of your permission here.”

Before she knew what had happened, the phone had apparently been handed back to Oliver, and he was yelling in her ear—or, at least as much as Oliver Queen ever yelled.

“Felicity, the area is too dangerous right now!”

“Which is exactly why I need to go!” she reasoned, but Oliver wasn’t hearing it.

“You cannot go down there!”

“No-” He cut her off again and she only partly succeeded in suppressing her growl.

“Felicity-”

“No ;. She shouted over the line. “This is not a debate, Oliver! I pinged Cindy’s phone and she’s in there, so I’m going to go find her. End of discussion!”

If anything, at least this argument seemed to have brought an end to whatever effects had lingered from her panic attack.

“Wait-” That was Thea this time, trying to get her attention by pulling on her arm, and Felicity looked up, only half-listening now as Oliver continued to tell her to stay where she was. “Did you say it’s the eastern part of the Glades?”
“Yeah—Hold on, Oliver!” she yelled into the phone to interrupt his very adamant vocal protests, and it only partially worked as she heard him continue to talk very loudly with Diggle about how she refused to listen. Ignoring this, Felicity turned her attention back to the youngest Queen. “Why?”

Thea looked grim and pale as she said, “CNRI is in the eastern part of the Glades.”

And then the girl’s worry made complete sense and Felicity felt her eyes go equally wide. She turned back to the phone with urgency.

“Oliver—...Oliver!” Although he hadn’t seemed to hear her the first time, arguing with Dig about something she didn’t care enough to listen to, all talk on the other end of the line died out the instant she shouted his name. “Is Laurel working tonight?”

The tense silence which followed was all the answer she needed in order to know that the woman was and Felicity’s heart dropped. It must’ve shown in her expression, too, because Thea pivoted as she started to spring to her feet, ready to bolt, and Felicity was barely able to grab the girl’s wrist before she took off.

“No, Thea, wait!” she called as her grip on the surprisingly strong girl’s wrist practically dragged her back to her feet, and The rounded on her, looking almost ready to attack her physically if Felicity didn’t release her.

Fortunately, the guy, Roy, set a hand on her arm and it calmed the girl. Due to her distraction over these events, Felicity missed most of the first half of what Oliver was now telling her over the phone.

But, she knew even without hearing the words what he was saying.

“She’s going to find her,” she informed the man’s sister, and Thea looked instantly relieved.

Felicity tried to no avail to ignore the pained ache in her chest at the thought of Oliver heading into the epicenter of the chaos, but she knew she has absolutely no right to tell him not to go when she was refusing that very order from him—although Cindy wasn’t in as unstable of an area as far as she can tell. CNRI was in a hotspot of seismic activity.

“I know I can’t talk you down, Felicity, so at least keep Thea with you. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

Felicity hesitated in her answer. She didn’t mean to, but she did, and it caught Oliver’s attention. Now wasn’t the time for indecision, so she didn’t want to make him have to choose. But, he deserved to know.

“What is it?” he asked.

“There’s something else you should—”

“Felicity, what’s wrong?”

She turned away from Thea and Roy and muttered into the receiver, “Tommy’s going after the second device.”

Felicity had been about to follow after him on this mission, in fact, but when he’d seen her expression after she realized where Cindy was, he’d told her to go after the girl. He had assured her that he would figure something out and then he’d disappeared after she’d been distracted by a car crash very nearby.

“He’s—”
The blonde could hear how the news had drawn Oliver, a man so often sure in his course of action, up short and this was the very reason she had hesitated to tell him in the first place. How could she tell him he had to choose between going after the woman he’d been in love with for years and his best and childhood friend.

It was why she decided to make it easier on him.

“Go, make sure Laurel is safe, and then come find us.”

She knew where he was going. There were, after all, only two locations that would be important enough to Malcolm Merlyn to warrant planting his horrible devices. The location of his wife’s clinic was one. The location of her murder was the other. Felicity would go find Tommy; she was already going in that direction anyway. Oliver could go after Laurel.

“Okay…” He sounded less than sure, but, hey Felicity couldn’t blame him.

Nothing in this situation could make a person sure in any decision they made and the uncertainty of it all was making her jittery and anxious and nauseated.

Felicity was sure Oliver was about to disconnect the call then, so she called out to him one last time. “O-Oliver, wait!” When the line didn’t go dead, she knew he was listening, and she hated how close she was to tears because she had to believe he’d be okay and crying wouldn’t make it any easier. She was sure her voice gave her away, however, when she asked, pleaded, “Please be careful, okay?”

Oliver was silent for so long after this that Felicity started to think he might’ve actually ended the call, that she’d somehow missed it. When he did finally speak, there was something in his tone, a quality she couldn’t remember ever hearing before, something she couldn’t quite decipher, and it left her both flummoxed and inexplicably speechless.

“I will… Be safe, Felicity.”

And then the line went dead.

Felicity just stood there for a moment to collect herself before she finally lowered her phone. When she turned to the two teens with her, she ignored the curious expression of Thea--discussing her certainly quite obvious feelings for the man with his sister is not high on her current list of things to do. Or her list of things to do ever. Then again, after all of this was over, perhaps coming clean about a few things wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Assuming she ever got the chance, that is…

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