She hadn't known what to do... so she'd said yes. To Slade Wilson. For Oliver and all the people he cared for. But she'd had no idea, no clue, just how far this would go. And that in making this sacrifice, she was playing directly into Slade's hands.

OR, how Oliver would gladly - and literally - go from 'you made me a hero Slade' to 'this is me killing you'.

Notes

Bear with me in this; I need to write chapter 11 of What Wouldn't I do and chapter 6 of Beautiful Crime, so in the mean time please tell me what you might like to see/what you think might happen next.
This has been swimming in my head for a while and it finally feels so good to let it out.
Indecent Proposal

As long as Slade is in town, neither of our families are safe... Oliver Queen

Everything hurts.

It was her first intelligent thought.

Her second thought was that she wasn’t remotely surprised by her first.

God...

Lately, pain had become a... prevailing presence in her existence.

How unlike Felicity Smoak.

To experience pain, to be hurt, like this. To step right on into those hands so willing to provide the torment, to afflict that specific kind of cruelty – the kind only a man could give a woman.

Maybe I was always this way, so eager to let herself be-

No.

No, she didn’t like it. Didn’t like the pain at all; didn’t like how small and utterly helpless it made her feel – since intelligence is no defence for physical agony – and how tired, how... alone. She’d been more ‘by herself’ in recent times than she’d ever been in her life. And considering her childhood was a lesson in absent fathers and overworked mothers, that was really saying something.
It isn’t like I can just tell my mother about this. It would kill her.

There were all sorts of pain. The kind you can’t escape from. The kind unfathomable to the naive, to the ignorant of its effects on you, to… to people like her.

The kind of pain you want to step into, at the same time that you want it to stop.

She’d discovered emotional pain a long time ago; she’d found ways to deal. Found ways to block herself, to raise walls and barriers. To step away from. To walk forwards from.

Physical pain?

She’d never given birth so, nope to that.

The only limb she’d ever managed to break was her ankle, when she fell out of a tree age 9 – the first and last time I tried to climb a tree – and the break had been clean. Wicked bruises. She’d been in a dull sort of pain, because she hadn’t dared move it, but real pain nonetheless for roughly 1 whole hour before the doctors gave her the good stuff. Her mother almost force fed her the rest.

An hour.

It hadn’t prepared her, didn’t help her during the night when the time came to submit.

But it was a power play.

One she hadn’t created but one she understood the rules to, one in which she had a modicum of control. Some control was preferable over no control… right?

Or maybe I’ve finally lost all sense of rationale.

However, she was under no illusions; her mind and body were under a constant state of attack. Like the never ending hangover from hell.

Yet, she’d started to get used to it. Isn’t that a good thing? As in useful? Or is it actually really, freaking bad and I was just the first to fly over the cuckoo’s nest?

And it would help, it truly would, if the solitary light in the room didn’t dangle so low and so without a lightshade. Every single time. The harsh glare above her head forced her to squint away, her forehead creasing, adding to the killer headache wrecking her nervous system into a shuddering mess.

Could I get more pathetic? The answer’s no, BTW.

Slowly, she regained her senses. I must have fallen asleep. Standing up. My arms will be in agony later… and wasn’t that perfect? Something else to hide. Her blurred vision focused and she sighed, deflating. A little defeated. Something she couldn’t be, not now.

For a moment… I thought this was the nightmare, not the reality.

Five weeks. Barely.

It was how long Slade Wilson had been visiting her; visiting Felicity Smoak.

Just thinking those words is bad enough. The actuality of it was worse.

Visiting. Such a pretty word in comparison to what he was really doing. A lover’s word.
Lovers.

*Sounds creepy no matter how you say it. Or think it.*

And ‘lovers’ definitely did *not* define her new association with Slade. The very idea made her want to vomit. *I might actually vomit if he doesn’t let me down soon.*

Her energy was too spent to do more than briefly glance upwards – again, the light killed her retina’s - to see her hands shackled to the ceiling by rusting metal. *How sanitary.*

Her wrists were bruised and… torn. Dried blood streaked down her forearms.

*Damn. There goes any chance of a quick morning nap* – she’d have to scrub down for infections and bandage her wrists. And wear a long sleeved top. Maybe she should be grateful for the wave of rain and wind that hit Starling a few days before.

The room she was in, where once white washed, was now covered with grime and filth from neglect. It was where he sometimes brought her; there were other places too and where they went always depended on his mood. *He always chose.* If he were angry it would be this very room. *I really hate this room.* If he were feeling nostalgic he’d take her to the bay. *I kind of get why Oliver doesn’t like boats now.* If he felt particularly whimsical he’d stay in her apartment. *Which was. So. Awesome.* A place she no longer felt safe. *Safe as houses? Never again.* If he was curious - by far the worst of his flights of capricious fancy – he’d take her to an old factory.

She really hoped he wouldn’t again; not any time soon. The last time… *I can’t do that yet; I need time. Please, just let me heal.*

For once.

As if in agreement, a wave of pain rippled down her arms from the cuts on her wrists. She hissed, eyes squeezing shut when a low throbbing from her back made her bend over - made her knees shake. *Keep it together. This is nothing new. Nothing you can’t handle. Just don’t fall asleep. Again.*

It was a difficult order to obey.

But she hated waking up in any old place that Slade deemed worthy to put her whenever she fell unconscious. *Like, say, Donahue’s corner; hooker central. That was not fun. Or the dead centre of the Glades were murders, rapists, pimps, mobsters and drug dealers roam aplenty. He’s nice like that…* 

Sadistic psychopath.

A psychopathic sadist who wouldn’t stop tormenting Oliver Queen.

A push here, a pull there, a rip, a tear… he wanted Oliver’s world to die slowly around him. Only… he’d chosen the wrong person to bring that about. *Or at least that’s what I’d thought.*

*How conceited am I, really?*

She’d recently discovered that her silence – the fact that she hadn’t made Oliver aware of Slade’s nightly visits to her – was *exactly* what Slade wanted. And she was so terrified to discover just why that was.

The cold air made her shakes worsen. *He didn’t hold back this time.*
It wasn’t difficult to remember every single moment of their time together. It slithered into her senses, snake-like. Unlike some victims who repress-

*I’m a victim.*

The thought was as much horrifying as it was hilarious. Victims don’t choose to be hurt. *Like I chose.*

That first week he broke her down, leaving her as nothing more than tears, terror and the trembling, tattered remnants of the wilful woman she’d believed herself to be. The urge to tell someone – to tell Oliver – had been so overwhelming she’d started suffering episodic anxiety attacks. *Episodic paroxysmal anxiety.*

The second week… pain. Just that. It’s all she remembered. Electroshock therapy, though there wasn’t much therapy involved. There was also a compound, which he wouldn’t explain to her, forced via injection – *lethal* – into wherever the hell he chose just to watch her scream her lungs out of her chest for ten minutes at a time. He was careful not to leave any obvious marks or evidence above the breastbone – the tip of her sternum - or below the waist, of their *meetings.*

The third week, the crying finally stopped. Not that tears didn’t come to bear with the pain but, in general, she’d stopped the sobbing, the cries, the *weeping.* Stopped screaming, stopped shouting out pain induced nonsense - sort of - stopped jolting at every surprise and sound. Stopped *begging.*

Stopped waiting for someone to notice that she was being tor-

Her eyes snapped shut at the rolling sickness in her stomach.

*Tortured; just say it. I’ve been tortured…* Her next breath was a whimper that she hated herself for. *I can’t believe I’ve actually been tortured.*

It wasn’t supposed to happen to her. *It wasn’t supposed to happen to anyone but it definitively wasn’t supposed to happen to me.*

Because Felicity… meant nothing.

In the real world – in the grand scheme of things really - she meant nothing. So her being tortured didn’t make sense, shouldn’t have been in the realm of possibility.

It had been just a few days after Slade’s visit to the Queen Mansion, three days where Oliver went from a happy – or *as happy as a man who’s so incredibly lonely he’d get together with a woman who he argues with day in and day out* – chappie to a fearful, brooding, grumbling, automaton *and* just a few days during which Felicity had noticed Diggle’s silent watch over her person – from inside his car at 4am - when Slade had initially visited her.

**Five Weeks Ago…**

…”What are you doing here, Dig?”

“Just keeping an eye on things.”

“Ok. And by things you mean my neck? The one you think Slade Wilson’s going to break in my sleep?”

“Yeah, something like that. Look I have extra security on Oliver’s mother. Roy’s keeping an eye on Thea; Sara’s staying close to laurel-”
“So I get you sitting outside my house like that Lacrosse player in my freshman year at college? … What? You know I had a life before you and Oliver, yeah? Right.”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay, Felicity.”

“And I love you for it. But if Slade wants to kill me he can. There’s nothing you can do to stop him. So go home.”

She’d meant it.

Originally, she’d planned to wait a couple of hours – it was still black outside - before taking Digg coffee because she hadn’t wanted him to be aware of little she’d been sleeping herself.

There really was nothing he could have done to stop any of this from happening. He’d have just gotten himself killed. Slade had made sure she understood that much.

Hurrying inside, Felicity notched the deadbolt back in place. The coffee she’d forced down her gullet just minutes before, threatening to upheave. *I’m going to be sick.*

She took a slow, shallow breath – *stop shaking, stop it* - eyes staring through the floor as she worked to regain the modicum of courage she’d all but thrown at Dig in the car before turning to lean against her front door. She faced the interior; her living room.

Faced the man - the nightmare - lounging sedentary in her favourite seat. Invading her in every aspect but the obvious.

Dark eye – a solitary black pit beside his eyepatch – looked through her. “He’s gone.” It wasn’t a question and it took everything Felicity had not to unlock the door again and bolt for freedom.

*I made John leave. God, why did I make him leave?*

“What did you expect?” The tremble in her voice was palpable.

He heard it and his head tilted, ever so slightly. It hurt that it reminded her of the other head tilt-er in her life. The feelings that one provoked were far from the terror each of Slade Wilson’s simple movements incited.

“Honestly?” He queried, looking supremely unbothered by, oh, everything; but indulging her nonetheless. “I thought you’d scarper the first chance you got. Maybe you wouldn’t tell the indomitable Mr John Diggle,” the obvious disdain in his tone made her twitch, made her pounding heart squeeze because she’d made Mr Indomitable leave when she’d needed him most, “that I was here but *maybe* you’d… take a ride.”

His tone… and then the *leer*, the suggestion, both leaving little to the imagination as to what kind of ‘ride’ he was referring to, made the muscles in her neck clench.

Though feeling foolish for allowing herself to be alone with this man, Felicity knew that John wouldn’t have stopped if he’d discovered Oliver’s enemy in her living room. She deeply knew that: it was instinctive. And he would have died for it.

Still, her eyes closed because, *how am I going to live through this?* “We aren’t like that. Me and Dig.” She added, then pressed her lips together: she’d explained herself to *him* of all people.

He gave a lazy half-shrug as he looked about him, taking in every inch of her living room. Every inch of her. Invading her privacy. She shivered. *Get out. Please. Just leave.* “You can never tell.
You think you know a person... but you never really do know them.” Though husky, deep and low; his voice wasn’t what you’d describe as a warm blanket of male sensuality and comfort. It was a grating ‘knife on wood’ sound that had the goose-bumps at the back of her neck bloom into a full blown anxious rash. “They show you their true colours and you’re stunned.” His eyes came back to her.

She didn’t say a word. What would she even say? What could she say? Or do? Except watch him, fixedly, like a doe freezing and waiting for the inevitable gunshot.

*Oh, that was a metaphor I just had to use right now-*

“Your home is lovely.”

She mentally halted, probably looking every bit as bulldozed-over as she felt. “I... what?”

“I’m paying you a compliment.” The way he said it, like he didn’t care what she thought but considered that she absolutely should care about what he thought...

It made her spine stiffen. “Forgive me if I don’t take anything you say the way you wish me to.” Her words and voice were small and brittle, and though there was an obvious boatload of real fear there, the iron couldn’t be denied either.

But then he smiled and her voice fled.

*Like a shark.*

Perfect white teeth sat behind a stretched smile. Like he’d rather stick a knife in her gut than smile. It was terrifying. Especially when his black eyes glittered, endlessly like quartz crystals; dark holes promising nothing but misery.

*Oliver had been alone with this, with him, on an island in the North China sea.* Taking another rattled breath she tried to straighten her back. And failed. *Come on.* Her body refused to move, as if she were prey knowingly in the presence of the predator that would eat her if she so much as twitched. *This is not the animal kingdom and my living room is NOT the discovery channel.*

It didn’t seem to matter.

Especially when he suddenly moved to stand, looming even as he stood several metres away. When she flinched she saw his smile twitch higher. *Son of a bitch.* Her heart was beating so fast she was stunned she hadn’t passed out. *I am not dealing with this well; I am not dealing AT ALL. What would Sara do if she were here?*

But she wasn’t. No one was. Felicity was on her own. With Slade Wilson. Heart in her throat she wondered why once more. *Why was he here? In my apartment? It isn’t me he wants.*

Waking up after four hours of sleep - even earlier than normal - she hadn’t guessed what would be waiting for her past her bedroom door. She thought she was safe, that out of everyone *she* would be safe. Slade didn’t know anything about her beyond that she was Oliver’s EA, if that even.

It had been four days since Oliver’s fragile hold on whatever peace he’d garnered these past two weeks had shattered.

*I thought that... with his mother...*

Telling Oliver that his mother was lying to him about Thea’s heritage had been bad enough; one of
her worst memories. That he’d slept with Sara that same night hadn’t come as much of a shock. She’d almost expected exactly that to happen, or something in that area; knowing him the way she does. Even if Moira hadn’t. The woman had told her that Oliver would hate her. Turns out he didn’t. Nothing had changed.

He’d just slept with another woman. That same day.

*I’m not touching the psychological ramifications of that.*

Sex as a passive aggressive weapon against the women in his life.

Felicity would never downplay romance for Oliver with any woman – especially if that woman was Sara – for any reason. But the timing had been just… awful? A little disturbing? Telling of his character, of his life?

Sleeping with Sara allowed a certain weight to be lifted, allowed him to strike back at the world.

At his mother for lying - always lies - and defending those lies with a surreal diligence. At Laurel, who it should have worked out with but didn’t – *because, whether he’ll ever admit it or not remains to be seen, she hadn’t been able to out-rightly choose between two men who were in love with her, with all parties seemingly incapable of moving on –* costing them their closest friend. At Thea who he had to lie to now more than ever – *how lonely to lie to the ones you love; I now understand that hurt –* spending less and less time near her so as to avoid the subject best not spoken. Even at Sara herself for leaving so soon – *for dying twice; another boat load of trauma, pun intended –* and for the fact that Laurel wasn’t Sara and Sara wasn’t Laurel. *Ouch.*

And at himself – *guilt over a past love, over this ‘Shado’ –* for not saving her and maybe… for not loving her enough? For surviving when others didn’t.

At Felicity, who was always brutally honest with him. Even when he didn’t want to hear it, because she knew he had to.

Felicity understood Oliver in ways she almost wished she didn’t. Most of it because of the time they spent together in the foundry: time that had decreased recently but that was natural, being that he was in an open relationship and she was, well… not.

*Sara’s definitely a healthier option, comparatively speaking to, oh I don’t know, every single one of his relationships prior to Slade’s arrival?*

Sex as a gift from the planet to just be a man? And not be isolated. To feel warmth with another.

*How could I ever wish that away from him?*

It was why, after her initial terror stricken thought at seeing the Australian Commando seated quite comfortably against her cushions, she hadn’t made a mad dash for her phone to try and connect to Oliver.

*Even if every instinct in my body screamed at me to do just that.*

Oliver was currently, very hopefully, holding a strawberry blonde goddess as they slept. Or, more realistically – Sara was sleeping and Oliver was on the Salmon ladder. Moments of peace during war were hard to find and she would be damned if she ruined it for him. *This isn’t exactly a situation I can break free of like the Hulk and run to him anyway. But the moment Slade’s gone I. Am. There.*

To blubber in his arms like a toddler.
But right now… Slade. In my living room. With the Mirakuru. Too much ‘Cluedo’.

She didn’t exactly want to call Oliver. Knowing he’d be unable to really do anything. The catch however was what Slade had said; the only thing he’d said before she’d made Dig leave.

“Your friend is outside. Either he leaves, alone, or he leaves with me.”

Alrighty then.

That had cinched it.

Abruptly, Slade’s predacious smile left him as she looked; his face once more its usual serious profile: piercing and dark. The difference was startling. It made her heart, currently in her throat, drop to the pit of her stomach.

After his visit to the Queen Mansion Felicity had worked on all cylinders for three days straight trying to find him. Seeing his face on her monitors every night wasn’t helping Oliver’s mood but she was sure she’d soon find something. Looks like that ‘something’ found me instead.

She almost jumped out of her skin when he spoke again.

“This room is very telling of who you are Miss Smoak.”

Eyes flickering from him to the room about her, Felicity didn’t say a word. What’s the point?

But he reacted as if she had. “Yes.” Moving closer to her fire-surrounding he reached out a hand – the other nestled calmly in his trouser pocket – to tease the edge of a little Buddha statue (she’d bought it because it was cute, not because she was superstitious). “You have no photographs.”

Her eyes flew back to him; relieved that he wasn’t fully facing her but her shallow breaths didn’t slow down at all.

“Most people have mementoes of their lives, their pasts; banal things that have no real significance save in the eyes of the beholder. You have none.”

He’s profiling me. Edging to her left she tried to start shimmying away from her front door, past the window-

“How unexpected.” Moving on, his fingers brushed the antique Robin Hood poster above his head. “This is a nice touch.”

Fearful agitation flared through her and she momentarily forgot herself. “Did you do a profile on me or something?”

“Not on you.” His quick answer surprised her: she’d half expected him to charge her. “John Diggle, yes. Even Quentín Lance and the diabolical Sebastian Blood. But not you.” He took a moment’s pause before continuing. “Roy Harper I didn’t count on,” he raised a hand, a finger lifted in point though he was still turned away, “but no matter. It has been amended.”

“Coming from you ‘amendment’ sounds more like ‘destruction’.”

The words just spilled out of her, to her horror and she watched, statue-like, only about a foot - cause that’s not pathetic or anything (think I can forgive myself just this once) - from where she was, as his hand went back into that pocket and his head bowed. She had no idea how to read the line of his shoulders but it sounded as though he was… huffing a chuckle. One with little humour.
She waited. Wide eyed. Dread curdling her stomach. *I don’t know how to read him. And I don’t want him here.*

It was like being surrounded by dry ice: she couldn’t move, breathe or think normally; fear being the prevailing element.

When he turned, it was with a cool step to the side; smooth but still intimidating. It brought him closer. Feeling so very backed into a corner, regardless of how much space was actually surrounding her – and she wasn’t standing in a corner at all – his presence was suffocating. Like she couldn’t escape to any space in her home and not feel him there. *I don’t think bleach is going to cut it.*

His eyebrow twitched; as if he knew exactly what he was doing. *Bastard.* “You don’t have to be so scared of me.” He said and she swallowed anyway. “I haven’t done you any harm yet.”

Yet.

*God.*

Her mouth snapped shut. Once she’d collected herself again she responded. “That’s less than reassuring.” She hated, hated, how pitiful she sounded.

The look he gave her was simple; a gesture that said… that he didn’t really give a crap. “Are you afraid right now because of the things I know Oliver has told you about me?” He advanced; slow steps that she knew he could lengthen easily. “Should I tell you things about *him*? Will your fear turn on Oliver next? It could. The things I could tell you…” Her back hit the wall and he shook his head, mournfully, as if she were the world’s greatest disappointment. “Would it be that easy?”

*To turn me?*

Staring up into his eye – hateful, cold – Felicity opened trembling lips and whispered to him. “There’s nothing you could say. Or do. That would turn me against him.”

An air of silence seemed to follow Slade around but the quietness felt violent now. As if he were using it as a weapon, just as skilfully as he would wield a blade or a gun. Or his hands.

She felt them for a moment, around her throat, indescribably hostile in every single way before he finally spoke.

“We’ll see.”

But he didn’t move. He didn’t do anything. Except watch her. Head cocked sideways. He knew he could do anything he wanted, so why wasn’t he? Why wasn’t he doing what he wanted instead of staring at the way she pressed down on her lips, at the way her fingers moved in agitated circles against her thumbs, internally crumbling as she fought for external composure?

She lost that fight - a flinch and a blink - when he moved again, his hand lifting to trace a lock of her hair.

For the first time since his arrival, she stilled completely.

*No.*

He’d touched her. Barely a finger. Not even on her skin. But… it was there. The way his eyes moved over her, learning her; she knew he’d done that deliberately too.
“Everything about you is soft.” He muttered; his hand dropping as fast as it had risen. As if she had some contagious disease. But he’d still touched her.

For some reason, it felt as if he’d marked her. Like a taint.

It made her ask in a croak. “What do you want?” *Get out.*

He exhaled. “From you? Nothing, really. This is… an experiment, of sorts.”

“An experiment?”

He didn’t answer immediately; choosing instead to scrutinize how the light hit her hair.

*Creepy.*

“I didn’t just arrive in Starling and decide, ‘today is the day I will slowly crucify him’.” *Oliver.* “I planned this. To last. I… profiled, like you said.” He acknowledged, as if she’d accomplished a great thing. “Found that he had a new team; he had an old one too once, you know. I was a member. But this second team,” he hissed, as if they were all lacking some vital team ingredient and her chest hurt with the urge to snivel, “and the members were surprising. Until they weren’t.” His voice fell flat. As if he’d expected more. “John Diggle is my replacement. Laughable. Roy Harper; let’s just say it didn’t take three days to crack that skull. Criminality in Starling is abounding; it was easy to find people willing to spill on the lad. A street thug turned vigilante wannabe, now infected by Mirakuru, somehow leading him to the delusion that he is *special.* Sara, I fully expected to find. But not in Oliver’s bed.” He hadn’t looked away from her the whole time and she tried desperately not to blink away the wetness of her eyes as he poured a little of his venom into her. On the surface it was just words but beneath it all, the whole thing felt like a death threat. “Laurel Lance was the favoured sister. It seems I need more intel.”

“Maybe your sources are second rate.” Spilled out of her and his eyes flashed.

“Are you offering?”

*Not a chance,* but she didn’t speak. She just shook her head before licking her lips… and he watched. There was nothing there in his gaze. “Why are you telling me this?”

He didn’t speak immediately. Just stared her out and she began to think that maybe he didn’t realise he was doing it; that he really was as insane as he sounded and went through short moments of cognitive dysfunction.

“When I returned- no,” shaking his head his eyes finally left her, rising to some spot above her head; he was humongous, it wasn’t difficult to accomplish, “when he saw me – I’ve been in Starling for months now,” he actually explained. “I shocked him. It was intended. I also expected him to push away those closest to him as he tries to find me, knowing me the way he does…” It was a whisper, hitting her spine like a chill and she wondered about all the ways in which Oliver knew this man. “And he did. He has.” Nodding, muttering to himself as if he were alone he concluded. “I did not expect him to run to a bottle blonde IT girl who couldn’t touch a weapon to throw it away.”

It was spoken as a sigh. Everything about his expression screamed ‘I don’t understand’, before his gaze dropped back hers; a mere flicker of movement but powerful nonetheless. And his countenance… she finally placed it. His opinion – already so very low – was of the nature that mildly attractive brainiacs who clambered after Oliver on a daily basis, wearing glasses and two inch heels, had zero influence on the once playboy billionaire.

He was right though; *Oliver had* pushed Sara away. Literally the morning after he’d discovered
Slade at the mansion, Felicity had caught them arguing, had heard snippets:

‘I don’t need to do anything right now except focus on Slade’
‘We don’t even know where he is’
‘Then I’ll find him’
‘Then we’ll find him’
‘I don’t want you involved’
‘Too late’
‘Sara-‘
‘Did you sleep at all last night? You look awful-’
‘Not now Sara’
‘Then when Ollie?’
‘Not now’

But he’d had Felicity carrying out constant surveillance of the city and already she knew what he would do next: he’d go to his contacts in the Bratva. And stir up a hornets nest. She knew Oliver well enough to know that any interjection from her would be unwelcome. She knew… everything about him.

But she wouldn’t tell Slade; she wouldn’t explain to this man how she and Oliver trusted each other-

“Why would a girl, with an IQ surpassing all the members of the senior executive board at QI, work for someone like Oliver Queen?”

-Okay, that wasn’t the direction I expected him to go down.

“We’re partners.” She managed.

“Partners?” Yeah, he didn’t think much of that. “You.” He made it sound so ridiculous. “And why would Oliver,” and he’s continuing: fantastic, “choose you? There are several people he could have sought out to be his… guide, for lack of a better word. People with extensive backgrounds on analysing the morally repugnant.” Like you? She sorely wanted to spit the words out but her tongue had fixed to the roof of her mouth. “Why choose a girl, one with little experience in the horror lurking on this planet; a girl who fills her life with colour, in a way that Oliver cannot grasp?”

“And you can?”

“I wasn’t always a terrorist.”

Hysterically, she felt a laugh bubbling in her throat but her eyes still glittered with fearful tears. “Why does this even matter?”

“It matters because Oliver’s penchant for strong women doesn’t stretch to you.”

The air in her lungs left her like she’d been punched, hard, in her gut.
As though he sensed it he smiled; it was anything but kind.

“You’re soft. Weak. Easily broken.” Again, his head tilted. “Quaint. A pretty. Little. Girl.” Each word was spoken as if they were each a sentence unto themselves. “Not the stunning women Oliver’s been accumulating over his long lifetime of infidelity. Not the fighters with their own dark, wealth of history to match his own.” He gave her a quick once over and it was probably the most insulting look she’d been on the receiving end of. “The kid wouldn’t normally touch a girl like you to turn her away. From where I’m standing, you don’t make any sense in his world; Oliver Queen doesn’t do ‘friends’ with women.” He smirked at the double entendre. “He’s your friend because he doesn’t find you beguiling. You’re a tool.”

Punch after punch, after acid thrown… it was quiet in her head, it really was. But what felt like a chasm of insecurity, whispers of possibility and screams of heartache, or failure – of the past - opened up behind her spine; a great chasm filled with an alternate pain to physical.

Finally, a tear fell. She stood there, stunned, her words had been stolen into silence, a slow flowing lava rising inside her-

“Then again,” his voice was quiet, almost a murmur, “maybe I’m missing something.”

Softly, she blinked away the few tears she’d accumulated, that’s enough of that – I will not sniffle; her expression deadpan. Voice returned, though low. “I’m breathless to hear it.”

A chuckle left him. “I find it odd that that out of everyone he’d find stability in you. He’s already pushed away Sara: who better to aid him than an assassin? Or the war veteran with two tours in Afghanistan to preen over like a peacock? But, no, no, an IT expert will do just nicely. Security found in baby blues?”

She didn’t tell him.

Digital information was one of the few things Oliver could rely on right now to be accurate representations of truth. Numbers, facts, figures, appointments; they don’t lie quite as easily as people do.

“I think not.”

What did that even mean? When she opened her mouth to ask the crazy man in front of her make some sort of sense, he gave a tut.

“Consider this my proposition Miss Smoak.”

She frowned. “What proposition?”

Leaning ever so slightly closer, he stared her down. “I’ll be seeing you again.”

Her lips trembled, that isn’t an answer. “God, why? What is the point of this?” And, yes, she sounded a little hysterical. “I’ll just end up telling Oliver-”

“Oh please do. I’ll enjoy watching him try to stop me.”

His words shut her up faster than any gag.

“Watching how hard he’ll push to come after me once he finds out that because of him, I’ve been visiting you. During the night. Night after night.” Every ounce of courage she’d managed to regain liquefied; a cold-burning sensation toiling through her oesophagus. “And after he’s come at me in
every way he can, stumbling as he spreads himself too thin, after I’ve destroyed each avenue for him to choose, after he’s realised he was never going to succeed, and after I’ve broken him down to his smallest parts… you can revel in the fact that it was you’re doing.”

No...

“How dare… you can’t- I won’t.” Her head was shaking as she stood toe to toe with him, “That will never-”

His hand, full and large blurred into colour within a centimetre of her face: his palm all she could see.

“Careful.” He whispered.

She gulped.

“Tell him, don’t tell him; I don’t care. I want him to know that his every effort is useless.

Then what was the point in all this secrecy?

He didn’t need to read minds to know where hers was as he pulled his hand away, “You should be more concerned about yourself. Is it you I will be visiting after all.”

Then she got it. Oliver wasn’t being tested. She was.

“You want me to tell him?” She asked, confused and shaken. What would that accomplish? “What do you mean by ‘visiting’?”

“Oh, you thought I meant for tea and light refreshments? For a chat?” He smiled again. “No. Understandable a thought – you’d definitely prefer that to the reality - but, no. I want you to consider something: you have a choice to make. Either I visit you or I visit Thea Queen.”

Horrified, she examined his expression for lies and found none.


She tried to ask again, she really did, what these visits would entail but-

“On each of these people I will exact a vengeance meant solely for Oliver. But you can save them all. Each time you choose me,” he made it sound so personal, like he was asking her to love him, “you’ll be saving them from pain, humiliation and terror. Oh, you’ll suffer for it,” he added, enjoying every twisted moment of how her eyes watered and enlarged, of her mouth remained open and silent, of each hill and valley of her face that screamed ‘help me’, “but maybe you’ll rise to the occasion knowing that you’re taking on this burden all by yourself.”

“That isn’t any choice.” No choice to make.

“Maybe not. But remember: after you’ve selected the person who I am to visit next, it’s your choice whether or not you tell your beloved Oliver Queen.”

We’ve been through this-

“Knowing he can do nothing to stop me from continuing. And I will continue. Don’t question my resolve; you’ll lose. If you say no and I have to kidnap his sister, his mother… Miss Lance, I will.” He drawled; a derisive smirk playing on his lips. “It’ll drive him insane.”
The crowning touch.

It really would.

Her breaths were loud in her ear. *Think; if you’re good at anything then you’re good about thinking, so think!* She could tell Diggle- no, Dig would immediately tell Oliver and even if he brought in Lyla, Felicity figured – after two days of research – that Slade’s resources stretched far and wide. He’d accrued financial, military and management level backing from some secret source; no matter who they called in, it might not be enough. Not with Mirakuru running in his system; not if he’d allowed his sycophantic followers to share in his strength. And she couldn’t even imagine asking Sara to call in the League of Assassins. Like inviting the terror squad. It would do more harm than good.

*I can’t tell him*, she realised in a dumbfounded haze, *I can’t tell Oliver. Slade’s right. It’ll destroy him; wondering who of his loved ones will be next and just what exactly Slade is doing to them.*

She wouldn’t think about the ramifications of this proposal. The consequences of his visits. Just that she had no idea what to do next. “You hate him that much?” She breathed.

His head tilted. “I love Oliver.” *Uh, what?* “He’s like a brother to me. And hate is a side of the same coin. Like Caine did with Abel, some brothers need to be destroyed for their many evils Miss Smoak.” Then his expression turned from considering to completely emotionless. “He took away colour, made me blind, and made it so that I would never tell the woman that I love that I did love her. That I worshipped her every breath. Made it so that I would have to live in this world alone. Without her. Made it so that she could never grace this godforsaken earth with her children, as she so deserved.” His tone was grating, like metal against metal. “All because Oliver decided that Sara Lance was who he preferred to fuck.”

She flinched, felt it in her abdomen. *Stop it. Oliver wouldn’t-*

**Oliver, what happened with Slade?**

**Me**

**Someone killed Shado**

**Slade loved Shado and it was my fault**

*What happened there… on Lian Yu?*

Then he was twisting the handle to her front door, pulling it until a waft of cold air drifted in. It was still dark out. “It’s going to be a lovely day.” Taking a gander outdoors he turned back to her. “As I said; I’ll be seeing you again. What you say to Oliver… well, that’s up to you isn’t it? Either he knows and is damned or he doesn’t and he lives his life in blissful ignorance.” Sending her a smile that didn’t touch his eye – *none* of his smiles touched him there – he began to saunter down her drive.

“Why return?” *To me?* Why waste the energy to come to her?

She didn’t need to raise her voice; she knew he heard it.

Pausing down her drive, he spoke. “Sometimes the ingredients that make us who we are requires a closer look beneath the surface. And I’m intrigued with whom the kid keeps company with. I have plans; plans that involve all of the kid’s friends and family.” Looking briefly at her over his shoulder
he met her eyes with stone. “This is yours.” There was a moment’s pause. “I wonder how high your
tolerance is.” He muttered before leaving completely, a jaunty sound leaving him as he strolled.

He was whistling.

*The idiosyncrasies of psychotic madmen. Bad-guys really do have their own theme tune.*

She'd promptly closed the door - pausing momentarily as the shock kicked in - before racing to her
bathroom to dry heave…

**Present Day…**

In the end her choice had been simple.

Tell Oliver and slowly watch as he loses it? Or: don’t tell Oliver and slowly watch as… *as I lose it?*

There had been no choice to make.

So here she was, weeks later – chained to the ceiling.

(And before anyone thinks it – and I know everyone did – this isn’t kinky foreplay.)

Her apparel was deliberately pitiful; a tattered, old hospital gown. They’d – Slade and his henchmen
– disrobed her, a polite way of saying they’d stripped her bare, when she’d arrived. It was something
she was now used to.

But she didn’t think he’d *cane* her.

He’d been angry. *Again.* Frustrated with something. The back of her thighs, her hips and waistline
attested to this; it was becoming a more frequent occurrence; that he’d stray from her middle section.
Like he just couldn’t help it.

And he’d talk to her, occasionally asking her questions - some oddly basic and banal. Others,
obscenely personal and intrusive.

When all was said and done… if he’d blemished her, he’d softly stroke her skin. As if to say ‘well
done’. ‘You survived another night’.

It always made her skin crawl, the way he’d appreciate the raised hairs on her arms. And legs. And
neck. He’d blow on them softly, knowing that she was already freezing and enjoying the sight of her
shuddering and shivering, of how her nipples tweaked the colder she became, of how she contracted
into herself.

*Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

Maybe that was his problem; maybe the Mirakuru – having been a host for years - had a major
impact on his mentality. Or at least, that’s what she’d originally thought; she hadn’t known enough
about it in the beginning.

*Now* she knew he was beyond reason. Beyond forgiveness. On Oliver, on his family, he would do
every single twisted want; every sick notion and desire played out in a constant loop in his head.
He’d carry out every scene he’d dreamt of fulfilling, as if reading from a script, and twist the blade a
little further into Oliver. He would do it all.

And smile.
Like he does with me.

Past the point of no return. The point of ‘if and when- okay, Felicity; rise and shine sweetie.

Huh… she was hearing her mother. I really must be losing it.

The door to the room opened then – typical; I regain conscious thought and he comes right on back – and Slade entered, a heavy exhale leaving him at her belligerent stare – more of a sleepy mope really – as if to say ‘are you going to cause trouble again’?

But, as he took out some old keys - the keys to her chains, he just uttered four little words that almost made her cry. “Time to go home.”

Because there was no such thing. Not anymore.

5am.

True to form, he’d taken her to her home. Instead of starting her day – instead of putting up that wall, applying her war paint and pretending her nights only existed in her nightmares – Felicity simply stood there, motionless, in her living room. Remembering.

‘Oliver, you need to come back. I know you’re about to have a meeting with your contacts in the Bratva but I have information you should hear before you do. You need come back to the Foundry. Now.’

That morning, one hour after her very first visit from Slade – still five weeks ago – she’d made her first lie. A small, white one. But a lie, nonetheless.

Because even though she actually hadn’t acquired any information Oliver could use to find Slade, she knew he was about to destroy a connection that might be needed in the future. Having contacts in the Russian Mafia could prove – already had - endlessly useful and, in the face of his despair, he was going to lose it. In knowing that his enemy – an enemy he couldn’t see or touch, who knew everything about him; an enemy far superior in strength and ruthless ability – was out there, that he could pop up anywhere and they’d be helpless against whatever threat he threw at them, that he could taunt and tease his way around Oliver’s life before striking like the python he is and taking something that Oliver held close; something dear and precious to him.

So… it was why she’d made him come back.

After Slade’s very first visit – with his proposal still ringing in her ears – she’d made it back to the Foundry in record time. Initially, her plan had been to spend a few hours just basically… loving herself. Taking a bath. Washing away the experience of finding him in her living room. Getting breakfast at her favourite coffee shop. Spending an hour reading in the dimly lit café; anything she didn’t normally get to do. Because she knew… she wouldn’t get to again for a very long time. Maybe not ever again. So it wouldn’t be selfish, right?

Except…
'Either I visit you or I visit Thea Queen’

She couldn’t. It was impossible. She had to do something; something to fight him.

So in its place, she’d sat there; waiting for Oliver to return knowing he’d be mad as hell at her…

*I can’t believe it was only five weeks ago…*

**Five Weeks Ago…**

…She’d been there, in front of her monitors, her seat – her HQ for all intents and purposes - was her true home, her castle, in the Foundry. It usually provided a sense of stability; that she knew her place in Oliver’s world – she actually had a place that he’d mapped out just for her – and it was a place that would always be available.

*Except now…*

It wasn’t doing anything for her.

She’d been sitting, waiting. For 20 minutes.

*I mean; 20 minutes was 20 minutes. Doable. But when you’re debating whether to tell your close friend, your partner – in every way but the obvious – and your comrade in arms, someone you know will be there through hell and high-water, that his enemy – an enemy he apparently created, *I don’t believe that for a moment* – had come to see her. Bold as brass before daybreak. At her house. In all his terrifying glory. To threaten her. To propose something so heinous she couldn’t think about it… it made 20 minutes feel unbearable. *Like an itch you couldn’t scratch but times it by ten and maybe you’ll understand.*

So she pushed up from the chair, quietly. It was barely dawn and Sara was still dead to the world, on the cot towards the latter end of the Foundry.

Oliver had been there. She could smell the soap she’d bought for him permeating the lair… and it didn’t help; picturing him showering, picturing him rolling in the hay with the strawberry-blond warrior.

*But why hadn’t he taken Sara with him-*

*-I find it odd that that out of everyone he’d find stability in you. He’s already pushed away Sara: who better to aid him than an assassin? Or the war veteran with two tours in Afghanistan to preen over like a peacock? But, no, no, an IT expert will do just nicely. Security found in baby blues-*

*Stop it, Felicity.*

Shaking her head, Felicity tip-toed up the staircase, making her way into the club that she knew would be utterly silent and empty. A lingering odour in the air from the night before – an amalgamation of light sweat and the sweet trace of spilt alcohol – made Felicity oddly aware of how alone she really was. Of how she hadn’t been, *wouldn’t* be, releasing herself from anxiety to party the night away; to be young, wild and free, even if just for a moment.

Taking a seat at the bar she eyed the various spirits and liquids behind it and, for the first time in her life, considered getting blind drunk before breakfast.

It wasn’t an answer but it was tempting.
I won’t fall into this trap. There was no way she’d let Slade get into her head like this. He’s only visited me once, how am I going to manage-

She’d already decided… hadn’t she?

For Slade to visit her. To not tell Oliver. Even though she desperately wanted to. All it came down to, for Felicity, was the fact that Oliver would never forgive himself if Thea was hurt by Slade’s hand.

He just… he wouldn’t survive the guilt.

For now – I mean, I have zero idea what his visits could mean – she’d keep her mouth shut and search for a way to bring Slade down.

Easier said than done.

Anyway, that’s where she remained – leaning against the bar with her head in her hands – as she waited. It was sort of peaceful…

Until Oliver slammed through the front doors.

Oops. Jolting, her hands fell away and she whipped around on her chair, her heart pounding to see Oliver marching towards her.

He looked livid.

Oh. Eyes narrowed – he looks so tired – they focused on her as he moved, pinning her down on the barstool. “You had a reason for me cancelling my meeting with the Bratva?” The words were barked out, but his voice was still low.

He didn’t want to wake Sara.

She flinched, eyes briefly flickering shut. “Well, I-”

“A meeting where,” he interrupted, coming to a halt to stand imperiously over her, making it so she had to crane her neck to see his eyes, “I might actually be able to get some solid intelligence on Slade’s whereabouts.” He bit out, glaring down at her; everything about his eyes were on the edge of some unknown precipice. “Since you haven’t been able to help in that arena, I thought it might be wise to do everything I could to expedite the process. Felicity.” Everything about his tone was scathing; deliberately hurtful. It told her one thing.

Oliver was petrified.

Still… it didn’t give him the right to be a jerk. She’d gone through his intimidation routine last year. She didn’t take it from him then, she wouldn’t take it from him now. Or in the future.

Definitely not after this morning.

Voice controlled, it was still surprisingly louder than she was expecting. “You done?”

The muscles in his face spasmed.

Eyebrows rising when his expression quickly ventured into beyond enraged territory – and strained; like he’d snap at any moment - she empathically stated. “I’m trying to help you here Oliver. You know me.” She tapped a finger against her chest. “You know that I wouldn’t have made you come back without having a damn good reason for doing so.” A reason she’d come up with about 60
seconds before he’d exploded through into Verdant. “Right?”

And she was right; he did know her – and he knew that.

She saw it in the flicker of repentance that flashed through his eyes but it was short lived; the tight set of his jaw and the luminous promise in his face extinguishing it; a promise that he was about 3 seconds from exploding at someone.

At her.

Because he knew – again, like she knew it too – that she could take it. And give it back in spades. Because she knew that he didn’t mean it, no matter what he said or how he said it.

What better way to rid himself of all that repressed anger – though it’s not so repressed right now.

Better question. Why wasn’t he sharing this anger with Sara? Not that she wanted her friend to deal with Oliver’s blunt edges but, being with someone meant accepting all those parts; it meant helping them through tough times. Why was he pushing the formidable woman away?

“Right?” She pressed; her tone telling him to cool it, pronto.

Gritting his teeth – the action visible through the skin above his lips – he forced a breath through his teeth.

She waited.

He stared right into her.

Then, his face stony, he blinked. Once. A ‘continue, please’. It actually made her feel better.

And it was better; helping Oliver through this made her forgot about the fear she’d felt only an hour before.

“What you’re doing, right now?” She said; her voice quiet. Calm. “It’ll destroy a relationship we might need in future.”

“I’m not going to-” He started, with a furrowed brow.

“Go in there, guns blazing?”

If cynicism were an art form, the look on his face would have won first place in the Guinness book of records for ‘constantly aggrieved since birth’. “I don’t carry a gun.”

She cocked her head. It’s never stopped you before. Just that.

He took a deep breath. Followed by another. The only outward tell he had to convey he was ready to actually listen to her was the slight drop in tension in his shoulders. That was it.

That was all she needed. Thank you.

A deep breath helped steady her. “You’re upset…” she started and when he immediately pulled away, shaking his head – jaw clenched once again – she hurried forwards. “Which means you’ll get angry; it’s your go-to emotion whenever you’re feeling anxious-”

“I’m not anxious.” He pushed out.
“Or afraid.”

“I am not afraid of—”

“I’m afraid of Slade Wilson.” She was. I really am. And he’s going to visit me, because I’ve made a choice. “I’ve never met him,” get used to the lie, “but I’m still afraid of him. He’s a scary guy.” She said, as if commenting on the weather.

The words practically rang out in the space around them.

He stilled… and the slow twist in his expression, the heavy set of his brow, how dark and so very deep his regard was when he finally turned to face her fully, told her he was about to say the words. Those words.

The, I’ll keep you safe words. I’ll never let him hurt you. He won’t even get close to you. He’ll never know your name…

Too late.

And even if it wasn’t, she didn’t want his reassurance, wasn’t looking for a place to hide. She’d rather be unsafe and with him than very safe, without him. Being as ‘safe as houses’ was no longer a safety net, not for me.

She could see it on him; the added pressure, the burden of thinking – of knowing – that his past was literally coming back to haunt him; to threaten the ones he cares about, the guilt. The shame. And again, the anger.

She wasn’t so conceited to believe she was at the head of that curve, that she was on his priority list; it was absurd. But we’re friends; he and I. And she knew he cared; she’d felt that care quite strongly at certain moments in time. He would view her as one of the people he needed to protect. And that was something she couldn’t allow.

So, a reiteration was necessary.

“I’m afraid of him.” Now that she had his full attention – eye contact and everything – she was able to say it – in all seriousness, because she was; serious – and hopefully, make him believe it. “But he’s just a man; albeit a super human, military empowered, monetary enabled man,” she continued as a sound escaped him; one full of irritation and disbelief, “but he’s still just a man. And every man has an Achilles heel.”

“And in the meantime?” It was almost a snap – almost. He understood, she could tell, her underlying message. You can’t do this by yourself. “He may just be a man Felicity, but in the time it takes to find him it might already be too late for somebody.”

It already is.

Her gaze fluttered down. Don’t let him see. “And what are you going to do about that Oliver?”

Seeing his feet told her nothing but she could also see his hands. His fisted hands.

His voice was gruff. “You’re just telling me what I already know.”

“What do you know?”

Immediately he took a step back, away. From her. He didn’t speak and she could feel that he
wouldn’t, regardless of what she said.

So she spoke. She said the words he couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

“That you have no idea what to do?” Eyes slowly lifting from the floor – slowly, because she needed to build up the courage and squash down the sheer need lying just under her skin to fall into him and tell him everything she no longer could – she continued. Ignore those eyes. Ignore Slade’s words-

I did not expect him to run to a bottle blonde IT girl who couldn’t touch a weapon to throw it away

-And tell him. Tell him what he needs to hear.

“That inside you’re freaking out.” Stated so simply, he must have seen it – felt it – like he would an attack; everything about him was coiled, his face a scream. Oliver. “Because you know that he could target any one of us at any time and there would literally be nothing-

Knowing he can do nothing to stop me from continuing. It’ll drive him insane.

“-you can do to stop him?” Like he’d been punched, a breath broke out of him. It looked painful. It sounded like he a piece of him was dying inside. Listen to me Oliver. “Would working alone, pushing others away – would that make it less painful later? Me, Sara, Dig- we’re all right here. More than ready.” She tried for a caring smile but the backlash of emotion beneath made her lips tremble, made her have to swallow down her dread.

The muscles in his neck taut, his eyes flickered there. To her mouth.

She turned away briefly before he could catch it, eyes tracing the bar. “Anyway, since when do my plans suck?”

Silence was her answer.

Until…

“…You’re plan to catch Mathis was-”

“Neither here nor there.” Looking at him again – when she was composed – she caught the arched brow thrown her way on his otherwise un-amused face. “What? It worked. Or, it would have.”

His head tilted.

It was so different to Slade’s that her heart… broke. Into little pieces.

Pull it together.

Licking her dry lips, she gave a mock eye-roll; though inside she was shaking. “Okay, so some of my plans suck,” she lifted a finger to empathise and shot him a pointed look, “but all of my plans work.”

One last deep breath had his eyes closing. She felt it then; his acquiescence. It may not last, but for now, he would let her help. Good.

Thank God.

A hand came up over his face, rubbing over his eyes and dragging down. “Monetary enabled?” He muttered behind his palm.
She blinked.

Wiping away those barest traces of vulnerability, Oliver looked back at her; not quite calmly but much more level headed. “What did you mean?”

“Oh. I hacked into his account, his cards – even the car he drives.”

Eyes flickering over her face Oliver looked confused at best. Unimpressed at worst.

She shrugged. “Well he has to get around somehow. Also his account doesn’t have a known registration and when I tried to follow it,” she slashed her hands, “bupkis.”

“Felicity-”

Her hand raised in a silent indication of ‘wait’. “So I broke into the public’s security feed; you know, like on street corners – the camera feeds for roads cut off around 10th and Seven – so I went for streets. He disappeared somewhere south of Queen’s Park. There are only two ways he could have gone but the area is pretty…” she slumped. “It’s big. Even if we had you canvassing the area every night, you’d never find him.”

The space in-between his brow was so deeply furrowed, she was surprised he hadn’t started with a nosebleed. “Then what’s the point?”

“I need to go out there and place my transmitters at specific points. I’ll need…” Biting on her bottom lip, she mentally tallied. And he waited. Patiently. Mostly. “Twelve. At least.” His grimace made her wince because, yeah, that could take hours. “Sorry, but… Oliver if I can’t find him, chances are the Bratva won’t be able to. That isn’t my ego talking either. And don’t you think,” she added at his sigh, “that Slade would make it his priority to target your resources?”

Like he’d targeted her. A resource. *I’m just a resource to him.*

As his finger tapped and rubbed against his thumb, she watched Oliver process. His forehead was still sharply focused; tension detailing just how much Slade Wilson was obviously his nightmare come to life for him.

“Fine.” He eventually muttered, nodding slightly and lifting his arm. “Come on.” His fingertips brushed her shoulder, a conversation all on its own.

She peered at him, confused.

“I’m coming with you.” Stated so forcefully, he left no room for refusal.

*Obstinate man.* “Oliver, you don’t-”

“Yes.” Eyes narrowed, his words were said with his body just as much as his voice. “I do.”

A contest of wills had them staring at each other for a minute or two… until she gave in. Simply because - by the way he hadn’t once softened, *constantly* on edge – he needed it.

Because his eyes *begged.* And they *never* begged.

She exhaled. “Okay.”

“Oh.”
Blowing a fallen piece of fringe out of her eyes, she clipped the wire extension into the plastic case hiding her mini – but powerful – weather resistant camera. “Did you get it?”

“Got it.” Connected by their com links, they were able to set up her surveillance pieces two at a time. “You done?”

Stepping back from the lamppost, Felicity eyed her work. “I think that’s as good as I’m going to get it.” There weren’t many places to place her equipment that wouldn’t get them stolen or vandalised… it was the Glades after all.

“Are these the last ones?”

“Kind of. I said 12 because I literally only had 12 cameras to spare.”

“It’s a big area…” Leaving his mutter hanging - because he didn’t need explain that even though there were now eyes on an zone in Starling previously invisible, maybe they didn’t have enough coverage – he said, “Head back to the car; I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Seen something you like?” She asked, walking across near empty lot towards the vehicle parked just round the corner. Oliver’s car, not hers. He’d made her take it, meaning he had to walk – run, sprint - to half the places she’d sent him and he’d done it without complaint; as if having something solid to do about Slade helped him prioritise his emotions.

“Kind of.” By his tone alone she could he was distracted by something. “I’ll be there in a minute,” he added before cutting the line.

Ten minutes later, Oliver joined her inside the car where she’d been… fretting. Thinking far too much about Slade Wilson and his promises… *Will he actually visit me? Tonight? Tomorrow? Or was it just an empty threat to put me on my toes- to put Oliver through his specialised version of hell?*

It didn’t feel real.

But her flinch, when Oliver suddenly pulled open the passenger door to her right, was *very* real.

Focusing on closing the door, he didn’t see it - thankfully – and, as she pulled out of the alcove they’d parked in, she heard him give the loudest exhale of the morning.

“I think he’s been here.”

She blinked at him – briefly because, well, driving and all. “What did you find?”

“There’s an automobile place down on Lexington. It’s shut down, boarded up. But someone recently did business there. Dumped license plates, welding and an abandoned Mercedes.” He added at her frown.

*Mercedes?* “What makes you think it’s Slade’s doing?”

“His car – the one he drove to the mansion - was a Mercedes.” Voice quiet, *lethal*, he gazed out the side window. Thinking about the memory of Slade Wilson violating his family’s personal space near killing him inside. “I recognised the license plate. It was thrown in with some used parts.”
Nodding, “Right,” Felicity puffed out a breath; her cheeks bloating momentarily-

“You were right.”

Blinking, she turned to look at him, already finding him looking back. “I-uh, what?”

His eyes, eyes that had been stone cold since he’d burst into Verdant, had mellowed. “You were right.” And his voice was almost a whisper and, adding to his very masculine maleness, was… really nice. Soothing, especially now.

Still, it didn’t mean she wasn’t stunned at the admission. “About what?”

“The Bratva don’t operate in or around this area.”

“Yeah, you said the Triad are top dogs here.”

“Yes.” Licking his lips, pressing them together, he gestured out the window. “They wouldn’t have ventured out here. They wouldn’t have known. Thanks to you, we now have eyes on the place.”

Blown. Away.

“An ‘I was right’ and a ‘thank you’?” She knew she was smiling, even with everything. And if her voice was gentle and low, if it was a little (just a little) flirtatious – kittenish, really, because were friends - well… that was all his fault. “I should really be recording this.”

Eyes that had been gazing into the headboard trailed across the panel until they hit her. A brow arched. He didn’t say a word.

She pressed her lips together, desperately trying to halt her smile. And failing. Miserably – but happily – failing.

Maybe he understood, maybe he needed to or maybe… he liked how her eyes were pleasantly warm, gratified and playful. Like his were becoming.

It would be asking far too much for an actual smile given his mood – given Slade – but the fact that the side of his mouth had turned up slightly, that his eyes began to change with it…

A buzz from his phone brought the moment to a crashing halt – crashing because the distance between their car and another, since it was roughly 9:10am, was a close thing, oopsie – and he took it out of his pocket, checking the screen.

Frowning down at it, suddenly silent in more ways than one, he swiped across the screen to ignore the call.

Uh oh.

Tentatively she took a stab at a guess. “Sara?”

Placing his phone back in his pocket, he didn’t say a word, his stare unaffected through the window. Closed off.

Guess correct. “Sara wouldn’t appreciate being kept out of this Oliver-”

“Sara would appreciate being alive.” He cut in. He sounded so hard. “She’d-”

“I said earlier,” she spoke over him – two can play that game, “that pushing away the people that
you care for wouldn’t make anything that might happen in the future any less difficult to bear.” She reminded him, as comforting as she could be.

Everything about him tightened; something inside of him struggling and she knew what it was. He understood where she was coming from but it was so difficult for him to go against his natural instinct to simply loath himself. To deny himself even the simplest of pleasures in life. To protect others by pushing them away. It was a cruel way to love, for both himself and those around him.

*I need to tip the scales.* “In fact it would make it worse; you’d just regret the time not taken with them,” because if anyone deserved a love life or a social life; it was Oliver Queen.

Finally, he looked back at her and he asked. “And if they get hurt?” And it was rough, his voice. “Because they’re with me?”

Oh God…

“You… you aren’t at the root of all the bad things that happen.” Full of compassion, she searched his eyes - they were so sad – and laid it out on the theoretical table. “They’ll still get hurt if you’re not.” She watched as he took a breath, heavy and wretched. “It’s worth it Oliver.”

“And if you get hurt?”

Thrown, her mouth opened, closed and she shook her head with a frown as if to say, *and?* He didn’t seem any more impressed by this than by her subsequent smile and innocent blink.

Eyes fixed on her, telling her so many things – the foremost being to listen, almost had her missing the stop sign. “I need the people around me safe.” Glancing away and back to the road, she slowed as he continued. “To know that they’ll be safe. And this…” With half a head shake he trailed off and she could see in her peripheral as he looked away, unable to stand the thought that everyone he knew was a target by a man from his past. “I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to keep everyone safe if they’re so close to me.”

“Then don’t try. Oliver,” she added at his breathless, humourless chuckle – *denial isn’t just a river in Egypt* – and decided that driving whilst convincing an Oliver Queen in full ‘guilt Arrow’ mode was a lesson in skill she did not possess with any confidence to succeed in.

Pulling over, she caught his inquisitive glance and held him there with her eyes. “If you push us all away, it’s going to break.” She didn’t need to explain what ‘it’ was, their system, their crime fighting escapades; he already knew. “Then we’ll all be alone, including you.” Why *can’t* he see that? “It’s like deliberately making sure that when the time comes, we all die.”

He winced, eyes briefly flickering away from her.

“We’re all adults Oliver and we’re more than capable of choosing for ourselves whether we stay or leave. Do you see any of us actually leaving?” Eyebrows raised, she waited for a reply yet received only silence. “Do you see Sara leaving?” Staring down, somewhere past her knees, he remained stoic.

So it was a shock for her – like, she actually jumped in her seat – when he spoke, his voice as testament to *I’m having a bad day.* “Sara would leave. If she wanted to leave, she’d leave.” He admitted, as if he were actually planning to make this a reality. “There are places she can go…”

“Really?” She asked quietly. “Out of all of us, she’s the most equipped – excluding you – to deal with this and you want to make her leave the team?” *Make her leave you?* “After she’s only just joined? Sara?”
One gentle blink after another, she waited; watching him take it in.

“Sara isn’t…” he began, before clearing his throat. “I need to speak to John; maybe get him to spend time with his nephew for a while.”

“Oliver…”

As if knowing – he really did – he was slow to look at her and when he did it was both hard and wretched.

“No.” His eyes were covered by his hand but the mutter was heard nonetheless.

“Do you see John listening to you?” She asked. “Do you see yourself making your mother leave? Or Thea?”

Eyes closing, he rubbed a hand over his face.

“Do you see me leaving?”

Please don’t say-

Looking him over, she watched his head lean back against the seat. He didn’t move, didn’t speak… his chest contracted and held steady for so long she almost reached out to him before a surprisingly shallow breath left him. Then, as the muscles in his arms loosened, it was like he’d suddenly found it in him to relax.

“He’ll come after her.” He eventually whispered, and her throat dried. “After what happened on the island… If there’s anyone he’ll target, it’ll be Sara.”

He said it so decisively, as if there was never any doubt.

…A part of her wanted to scream at him for how very wrong he was. God, why did that hurt so much?

“I need to take precautions but,” he began – with his eyes closed he couldn’t see how she’d paled, how she’d turned away to face the window, how she was taking the time to regroup after such a simple statement from him had sent tremors through her – and paused momentarily before continuing, “there is no defence against someone like him.”

And the lack of control is something you can’t stand?

It was with dry, dark humour that Felicity smiled. Do I believe I have even a modicum of control here, with Slade’s request? I’m going to say yes, but… am I really saving anyone?

“It’s the hardest thing to give up control.” She supposed, after a full five minutes of silence. “I know I’m not like you guys,” she spoke down to her hands, where her fingers played with her seat belt, “but it doesn’t mean I don’t understand the risks.” Eyes flickering back up to his face she saw him observing, unseeingly, the outside world through the front window. “It doesn’t mean I don’t understand you. You want so much to keep everything covered in bubble wrap, you want to believe so much that you can…” insinuating how big an idiot he was for trying… and yep, that was a glare, “even though you’ve been proven, over and over again how ridiculous an expectation that is in real life, you still want to try. And it’s great, really, how much you care about people – even strangers –
but,” she shook her head, an exasperated smile dominating her features. “That’s not how this works. That’s never been how this works.”

“Then what do I do?” If there was anything she hadn’t expected, it was this; Oliver pleading. To her. “I’ve thought about every angle, I’ve looked everywhere for a solution but…” and he sounded so lost, right then, “I don’t know what to do.” With another shallow breath he turned to her; his eyes, head and body leaning in her direction. “What do I do?”

She blinked, still smiling – and it was for him, her smile – with her brow a little crinkled. “You’re asking me?”

“You were the one with the idea to survey a corner of the Glades based on information you obtained on a hunch.” Never before had she seen him look at her with such intensity, he’s completely serious. “And it’s something.” He stressed, holding her there with him, making her hear him. “It’s something that might actually allow me to…” searching for a word, he shifted; his eyes fluttering over the interior of the car, “to sleep.” So worn-out with his world, his face crumpled with the half deprecating, half incredulous smile. “Something to focus on.”

She swallowed because Jesus. “On that note.” Inhale, exhale. “Oliver. Thea’s cell phone.”

Confusion briefly brushed away at the stress of the situation. “What?”

“We need to put a GPS tracker on your sister’s mobile; and by ‘we’ I mean, you.” Reaching in the backseat for her bag, her hand rummaged through the front compartment before pulling out the tiny nodule. “I’ve already got it ready. You just need to slip it in her phone.”

Eyes moving from her face to her hand, he plucked the tiny device off her palm, seemingly assessing it.

“There’s one for your mother too.” Felicity added, under her breath.

His mother was a touchy subject after all.

But he simply hummed. “Hmm.” Pocketing it, he didn’t ask for his mother’s.

“We can get Dig to put it on her driver.” She mumbled. Or something.

He nodded. Once. Taking a moment, he breathed… Then his eyes and head searched behind her.

“Coffee.” He muttered.

She gave him a loquacious; “huh?” before looking out of the window herself and promptly chuckling at how well her body understood the needs of her brain.

They were parked outside of her favourite coffee shop.

Smiling, she turned back to him. “Want some?”

“Yes.” He reached for the door handle – being all devil may care he never wore a seat belt – before pausing. “I’m buying.”

Swiping her hands – my college professor told me my excessive use of physical expression might get ahead of me one day – through the air, she puffed out her cheeks with a happy anticipatory breath. Coffee, coffee, coffee. “You’ll get no complaints from me.”

He didn’t smile. But he did look better, at least in comparison to how he’d looked a couple of hours
before.

*I’d call that a win.*

His curious frown, as they stepped form the car, had her realising she’d said that out loud.

“Er…” she floundered. “Free coffee!” She offered in flamboyant enthusiasm.

His slight eye roll gentled his otherwise – still quite sharp – exterior.

*Definitely a win…*

**Present Day...**

Now, weeks later – in the present - it was the reason why she suddenly started moving again; the prospect of him smiling.

Walking, as if in a dream, Felicity wandered towards her bathroom; ignoring the stinging ache that a cane against skin can create. She concentrated on other things.

*Oliver’s smile.*

These five weeks he’d tumbled in and around a pacifying sort of ‘existence’.

Pacifying. *Good word.* Appropriate.

He wasn’t… happy. *Not exactly.* More of a borderline calm – an acceptable state. The* same *acceptable state he’d been under the previous year. Were he’d lived his life to honour the dead, his father.

Since that morning, he’d maintained a slight distance… not from her. But to others. An emotional coiling. Because there were so many areas in his life that needed his attention; attention retracted from the time he wanted to – *needed to* – hunt Slade Wilson. And there were many forms of strain.

Under constant pressure to heal QC from the inside out whilst keeping a *handle* on Isabel and her odd surge of compassion towards him since their Russian interlude? Hiding a multitude of secrets – secrets he viewed as sins – from Thea: that her Mirakuru infected boyfriend was working with him, that her father wasn’t his father – *talk about adolescent trauma.*

Staying clear of his mother; a woman who he both loved and subsequently hated right now.

But the most stressful, Felicity viewed – excluding Slade – wasn’t any of this.

Odd to say that this was a reason but Oliver had endeavoured to remain cordial with Laurel Lance who had been popping in and out of Verdant to speak with her sister. And the strain was beginning to show, because where it normally wouldn’t have aggrieved him to see her, almost every single time she showed up, Laurel would pull Oliver aside to speak to him on what he was doing with her sister. *Sara.*

After their coffee – which he did indeed pay for, including a pastry she’d been salivating over – they’d gone back to the Foundry, where she’d left him alone with his girlfriend.

She’d given them… 20 minutes? Close to half an hour where she’d texted Digg, who was with Lyla somewhere and, more importantly, nowhere near her house or Slade. Half an hour where she’d finished her perfect breakfast whilst linking the new feed to her tablet to monitor. A period of time
where she tried not to think about the sex those two downstairs were probably having…

_{There comes a point where you’ve just got to stop Felicity…_}

But… when she heard the door leading downstairs open, Sara had stepped through; fully clothed and… somewhat absent. Troubled.

“**You okay?**” Felicity had asked her, concerned.

With this small smile on her face, Sara had shook her head. “I’m okay; don’t worry about me.”

“I worry about everyone. Everyone includes you.”

Pausing in her movements, Sara - already behind the bar – had just stared at her.

“What?”

“He’s been pushing me away, the past few days, afraid that Slade would come down harder on me for being with him than if I weren’t.”

Already having known this, Felicity had simply nodded.

“I don’t know what you did but,” she’d gestured behind her, “he’s letting me in again.” Leaning over the bar, Sara then grasped her hand. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Still smiling, Felicity remember holding on and speaking pointedly. “Yet, you still look troubled.” She’d pressed her lips together at how Sara had suddenly pulled back; emotionally, not physically – and Felicity had waited until the woman grew used to her inspection. “Anything I can do?”

Eyes crinkling slightly, Sara then answered, “No.”

But ten minutes after that – ten minutes after Felicity had gone downstairs to find Oliver on the salmon ladder – Laurel had walked into Verdant.

Seeing her on the camera, Felicity had pointed it out to Oliver; immediately thinking he’d called her.

But, leaning on one leg, he’d stared at the screen in total disbelief.

…She’d been very wrong.

_Seeing him standing there, looking like he’d just seen his sister get run over by a car, Felicity had approached – reaching out to bring him back, because he wasn’t there with her in the Foundry._

_As if sensing her there he’d turned, escaping her proximity._

“**It’s fine.**” He’d muttered.

It really hadn’t been.

And Felicity had been confused by the disparity between Sara’s obvious happiness at Oliver literally coming home to her with her calling her sister… because it wasn’t until much later, two weeks later, that she realised.

*Sara* had called Laurel, and she only ever did so when she and Oliver were in trouble.
And by in trouble I mean their relationship, not actual trouble.

He’d gone downstairs to let Sara back in and Sara had… called her sister for a heart to heart? Add to that, Oliver’s hurt expression and Felicity figured that all wasn’t at all what it seemed.

Not to mention that it was probably the worst idea in the history of ideas to have the ex-girlfriend commenting on the current girlfriend’s relationship with her ex-boyfriend who was now dating her sister, the girlfriend in question.

Saying like that makes it sound so toxic.

Though, in a way, it was.

Felicity knew Oliver.

The look on his face… he’d been flabbergasted at Sara for bringing in her sister. Floored. Like, he hadn’t thought she’d go that far.

Because he thought they’d be fine? Because he thought they could handle it – whatever ‘it’ was - without outside intervention?

But they did that a lot. They argued. And after they argued… in comes Laurel.

He has so much to contend with… She just wanted him to smile. To see it, just once. It held power that smile. Over her, into her… surely it would give her the strength to be brave for one more day. To be stronger. To last longer…

In the shower she stood still again, watching the water run in rivulets down her legs.

A small amount of red trickled down her side… so that’s why it smarts. He’d broken the skin.

Desensitized.

She really was.

If he’d started with the cane, on the first night, Felicity would have gone straight to Oliver. She’d have considered it a step too far in the wrong direction. But Slade Wilson… he’d been smart. Beginning by emotionally terrorizing her; pulling down her shields and defences one by one… like a frog in a pan of gradually heating water.

Until she accepted. Until she acknowledged that she’d chosen… she deserved-

Her eyes squeezed shut under the spray. Those were his words.

After an intermittent period of time that Slade had deemed pertinent, he’d pulled out torture.

And she’d been fine with it… well, as fine as she could be. As in, ‘not at all fine’ but, she still hadn’t thought of saying anything. She’d considered it, quite strongly in fact.

But she couldn’t do that, not anymore. The idea of Oliver discovering… no. He’d be so hurt. That she was in pain. That she hadn’t told him; had hidden it from him…

If the shoe was on the other foot, she’d be devastated.

But she was in love with him.
So she couldn’t say a word.

*There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some madness in reason.*

*Friedrich Nietzsche*
PLEASE READ THIS!!
I need to say right now that there will be no rape in this story! Phew. I was so worried after the reviews came in: everyone thought I was setting her up for rape! I know that was the logical assumption but I couldn't let you all continue to think this. First, I'd put it on the tags, second; I couldn't write a rape scene. Not for Felicity, not for any man or woman... actually I could but emotionally it costs too much for me. So no way. I'm not saying that there are things Slade doesn't do that are disturbing and cruel or unforgivable, but... not rape.
Something does happen in this chapter that is the closest he'll come. It is not nice but Slade isn't a nice guy. The writers barely touched the surface of his depravity, especially after everything I've read about what they could have done with him. Things they may have done if it was HBO and not CW. AND it's also the one time it happens, but it happens for a reason. Please trust me. This story starts off dark, but it definitely won't end up that way ;)
I love all my readers because they take the time to read my writing. Please be kind; this is brand new territory for me.

(Picture by the Amaze-balls Candykizzes24)

I look like hell.
Whether she truly did or not, remained to be seen but... *It's been three days.*

A three day stretch of blunt pain at her sides, the cane having left bruising that was... extensive. Aching. She'd studiously avoided looking in the mirror but as usual her brain held a picture perfect image of the damage done. It wasn’t pretty.

As usual she still ran through her morning routine, cleansing and toning until she felt that place of normalcy settle upon her.

It wasn’t that she was lying to herself: the whole time, as she saw her face in the mirror, she’d tell herself to move. To walk forwards. To leave her house with her head held high.

Wasn’t that the ultimate insult to Slade Wilson?

Taking a deep – not quite as fortifying as she’d hoped for – breath, her nose crinkled.

*But I still... I don’t look the same.*

It was getting to her now; her appearance. How it wasn’t easy anymore to look like she’d slept a full night’s sleep. *A full night meaning 6 hours.* Felicity wasn’t a vain person but she took pride in her appearance always. It was different now.

Somewhat pasty, the skin under her eyes were gaining that slight grey finish to them - *coffee will fix that* - and the emphasised outline to her jaw and cheek bones, because of the few pounds she’d lost, *just a few*, were more apparent to her today.

When she was smiling and radiant, it was imperceptible. But when she was tired, so very tired, this was incredibly noticeable. *Like right now.*

And as each week passed, her exhaustion incrementally increased. As was natural.

*“Like hammered shit.”*

Her chest pulled, eyes flickering away from her image in the mirror.

Not the squishiest of phrases.

It was something she’d heard used once or twice by a friend. By Tommy Merlyn; who’d heard it in a movie and decided it sounded good enough to make his own.

She’d known him once, known Tommy. Thomas. Tom, *he’d always wanted someone to call him Tom because he thought it sounded innocuous*, briefly. Slightly awkwardly.

Until it suddenly wasn’t.

Until they were drinking from each other’s self-pitying wishing wells, nursing the stings of each other’s unrequited wants, wishes and needs, shouldering a hurt so much like their own that they found it didn’t really hurt any more.

And then they’d laugh, over everything about the other. Any idiosyncrasies - her super nerdy status and the fact that he was a closet Sci-Fi fan - or old tales to tell, any weird quirks and habits...

They’d been friends. *Just friends.* Oddly, neither had considered the clearly available alternative. Not once, not ever. *No way.* Not even when those they loved were very obviously not in love with them. *Complicated histories notwithstanding, there wasn’t a chance in hell that I was getting between that particular love triangle. Like stepping on a landmine, which I did come to think of it. Lian Yu. Good*
times. Treasured memories.

It had helped having someone who got it.

So in turn, she got him by not telling Oliver that he’d turned up at her door at 3am once because he was blind drunk, begging her to stop him from dropping to his knees before Laurel and proposing - with a sparkling diamond ring that made her eyes water and her hand feel five pounds heavier - just days after he broke off their relationship. Because he’d missed Laurel, so much so that he couldn’t help painting a very detailed picture of the many reasons why he did so, things I’d have preferred never hear, since Oliver probably enjoyed the same traits in her that Tommy had. Super. One of Tommy’s reasons primarily being because Laurel made him feel whole. Because he’d felt like a fool just as much as he felt like he was doing the right thing by leaving her.

Knowing that laurel would always remember him leaving sooner than she’d ever understand his reasons for why.

Felicity would also never explain that Tommy had gone to her one night at the club when Oliver wasn’t around. He’d taken her to his office during a rave - and on a Friday night it was the equivalent to a Motley Crew concert- to ply her with expensive wine and decadently crafted chocolates, just so that she would listen to his laments and let him rest his head on her lap... or that he’d almost cried when she’d said he didn’t need to get her drunk to buy her affection or her shoulder or her ear. Though she absolutely ate the chocolates. They were an upper class level of deliciousness, which should be a given considering he’d paid $40 for them. For chocolates. Laurel had been a lucky girl. Or that after he was settled with her - a bottle of wine, 3 vodka shots and a bag of peanuts later - he’d confessed that he’d wondered how much better his life would have been if Oliver had never left on the Gambit in the first place. And worse still.

If Oliver had never returned at all.

She’d never tell Oliver how Tommy had been the one to hold her after Roy was kidnapped by Joseph Falk.

Never speak a word of how Tommy told her that Felicity was a wish too far out for a man like ‘Ollie’ to reach.

And she’d never tell Oliver that, before he died, Tommy had called her. And how his words - his desperately sad and regretful voice - made her bleed inside and weep. And love a man who she’d had too young a friendship with, a man who’d deserved more than he’d ever received. How she’d saved his words, forever immortalised on her phone and on her computer. Because it was beautiful:

“Tommy?”

“Hey.”

“…Tell me you’re not in the Glades.”

“I would, but it’d be a lie.”

“Tommy-”

“No, listen to me Felicity-“

“Get out of there!”

“I can’t, the city’s coming down and I might not make it out-”
“Exactly! At least come to the Foundry-”

“But you just told me Laurel’s in CNRI and I can’t just... It’ll be worth it.”

“Wait a second, I’ll-”

“It’s my choice. Just like leaving her in the first place was my choice - the worst fucking mistake of my life kind of choice - and hating Ollie was also my choice instead of finding my way back to him, to my brother. And he’s not going to get there in time is he? There’s a whole city out there for him to protect; he doesn’t need to be worrying about his friends who didn’t listen to him...”

“He doesn’t think like that.”

“But if something happens he’ll blame himself for it, won’t he?”

“Unfortunately, he thinks like that a lot.”

“Maybe if I’d believed him about my dad, if I’d helped him, none of this would have happened. But it’s done. I can’t change the things I’ve said.”

“Tommy, Oliver would never see it that way.”

“I know. You’re right. You were right, back then. About me and Laurel and Oliver. We’re all idiots, Felicity. We’ve practically killed each other. God help you but he’s going to need you.”

“Tommy, now isn’t the-”

“No, will you do something for me? Felicity?”

“...Yeah?”

“Be there. Just be there, let him know you’re there. Kick his ass when he needs it and hold him up for me when he doesn’t, okay? Whatever happens here, make him see how much more he already is than what he sees right now. And I’ve helped him see the worst in who he’s become, but... I didn’t think. I didn’t think Felicity! I didn’t realise that years, years, spent fighting for survival changes a person. We, me and Laurel, we’re so lucky he is who he is. Could you imagine what he could have been like? How bad he could have been? I called him a murderer. But he’s not, is he? He’s killed people but he doesn’t aim for it, does he? You’d know, right? You’ve seen him in action; he doesn’t aim to take lives, does he?”

“No... he doesn’t do that.”

“All those people he’s helped, whether he meant to or not, it means something. Something bigger. Something more. You said that; you said he was becoming something else, something that couldn’t be destroyed. An ideal. Someone to look up to in a city that desperately needs a wakeup call. I fell short of being the hero I wanted Laurel to see me as. Maybe he can change that too. Maybe he can make her believe...”

“Tommy, you’re making it sound like something’s going to happen to you and I am not okay with that. What about Oliver? He wouldn’t be either. He’d be devastated knowing you were talking like this.”

“There you go again, thinking about him. About me. I’m not writing myself off babe, I’m just saying that, if this all goes to hell, tell him. Be there. He’ll be hard work but if there’s anyone who can make him see straight, it’s you. You made me see too. You can make anybody see. Hell, if I’d been smart,
I’d have fallen for someone like you instead of Laurel. But you’re Oliver’s girl. And you always will be.”

“Tommy…”

“Don’t ever change. Make him want to keep you there. Show him that light I keep all for myself when I’m with you. He already sees it, you know. He just ignores it, because it hurts to look at. Smoak gets in his eyes. Corny, I know. But… tell him for me. Tell him to live. No matter what happens, tell him he deserves to live. Taking on the burdens of others is no choice to make. Tell him I love him. Will you do that?”

“Of course.”

She’d never gotten the chance to do that. He’d – Oliver – vanished just after the funeral. And after? It just… hadn’t felt right.

Felicity missed him too. As brief a friendship as they’d had, she missed him. But more than that, she’d missed him for Oliver. Missed him in all the ways Oliver didn’t allow himself to miss him. In ways that it would mean he deserved kindness in return and that wasn’t something he could accept yet.

Eyes back to the mirror, she watched as her hands moved on auto-pilot; crafting her hair into a complicated little knot that somehow softened her features even though she wasn’t trying to be soft. A few ringlets bounced at the sides of her face. No dress for her today; black pants, tight, form fitting. Comfortable.

They hid marks.

A long sleeved, cream and cotton shirt that completely covered both her wrists. Her arrowhead bar with simple silver ringed earrings.

Felicity focused on what she was doing and why. Why it was important. Why she placed all of her care on looking the way she did, the way she does. Every morning. To be a specific person, a person she liked and respected; the person she was. Her true self that couldn’t - wouldn’t - be buried by Slade’s machinations. Colourful. Bright. Serene. Without nightmares badgering her doorstep. Reliable.

The person she had to fight to continue to be every day, the person she wanted to remain as. The person who had become the perfect mask.

A person who was strong.

It was a war.

War isn’t always exacted out on a battle field. It didn’t always involve violence. It didn’t always feature large groups of people. Wasn’t always a confrontation between two. Sometimes it lived solely in an individual. Sometimes it was from within; a conflict of contradicting thoughts and feelings. A battle of shaking hands and resolve, of fear and courage, of a pale face in a bathroom mirror and each attempt to bring some colour into it that didn’t scream ‘somebody save me’.

Clean up. Make up. Perfume, glasses…

It was Felicity’s routine for after.
After Slade. After the fact. After every night... every hunt. It suited, in a way, that word. Hunted. She was every bit as much prey as he was predator.

A cleansing ritual of sorts. It was her way of picking up the pieces of herself that had dropped off during the night. Her resolve. Her smile.

*But it won’t be long now.*

True.

She was so close.

So close to a breakthrough, so close to getting him.

Shaking her head –*not the time* – she applied a light amount of foundation but no lipstick. She wasn’t in the mood for it. *Getting Oliver to call in at QC won’t be a cake walk and I think he’ll notice if his EA isn’t-*

-she stopped, brain frozen. Realising.

It was *Sunday*.

Blinking at her reflection, she then peered round the doorway to see the digital clock next to her bed. It was indeed Sunday. It’d been so hectic recently that she’d missed a day. *Or three.*

Sunday was her day of rest.

*Oh.*

It was like she suddenly remembered how to breathe again.

Taking a step back, then two, until her butt reached the cabinet at her back, every single part of her *drooped* in relieved. Her heart, so tight in its hold, suddenly eased and she felt almost light-headed.

*Thank God.*

Eventually, she slouched slightly forwards, her shoulder curving as her hands braced against the cabinet behind her. Her eyes gently closed and she took a deep, shuddering but fortifying, breath. *I’m fine.*

Strong as she was, it didn’t mean her relief wasn’t palpable. Having never begged him for anything - not even a reprieve - it didn’t mean she wouldn’t take everything she was given.

Tonight, she wouldn’t be seeing him, because-

*“Even God rested on Sunday.”*  

He’d actually said that to her, in the first week. *Cocky bastard.* He’d looked down at her – *from high atop his demon spawn steed* – to her huddled form, with her pyjama’s damp from the naturally dank warehouse he’d dragged her to, and he’d added:

*“You get Sunday, one day, to sleep. Then it starts all over again.”*  

*Yay me.*

One day. One Night. It was never enough. Right now though, it didn’t matter. She’d take it, she’d
take the day.

With Oliver.

Felicity settled into her space of calm; it came from a place deep inside her, where no secrets and lies lacerated the flesh. A place she could just be.

A place made solely - perhaps shamefully - of all things Oliver.

She chewed on her lower lip…

The man was the pinnacle of what she considered a truly strong individual could be. And he’d taught her that: taught her what true strength could mean. If only he didn’t demand the life of harsh rebuke it seemed he felt like he deserved.

But it wasn’t just that.

The comfort his voice alone gave her on a daily basis made her burden easier to bear. And it was something she honestly couldn’t repay. Or explain. Ever. Ah, nope. Not happening. His presence lay over the Foundry like a warm blanket; making her want to stay each time she had to leave.

What she was doing, all of it, it was to save Thea. Save Laurel. Sara. Digg. Everyone. Making them untouchable.

There was one other. And eventually, she’d tell Oliver just who that person was.

But as for Oliver?

…All she wanted was to keep him sane, for him to be happy. If he couldn’t be worry free then she’d settle for him being okay.

Her mental fortress of solitude had taken weeks to build and she wouldn’t take a hammer to it for anything. Oliver didn’t know and he couldn’t, not ever. She couldn’t explain to him that even when he wasn’t trying, he was protecting her. Saving her.

Being her hero. Over and over again.

Don’t go there. She shouldn’t be thinking about this, not like this, not at all. He wasn’t hers to think about.

He was Sara’s.

They looked good together; the archer and the assassin. The Arrow and the Canary.

Me and Oliver… they were friends and partners. They were close. And he made her feel better without trying. He made her feel safe, secure. Protected.

And worthy of that protection.

All without lifting a finger. In touches and glances.

Though, she’d backed off, just a tad. After all, it was more difficult to hide things from the people you care for when you’re so close to them.

And I need to get a move on. Shaking herself free of all things that couldn’t be, Felicity strode towards her purse - no jacket: not with long sleeves - and left her apartment.
Monday, Sunday; it didn’t matter. Traffic was traffic. And living in a city made it so that almost every hour was rush hour.

It’s quite light today, glimpsing a row of cars on the interloping road overhead Felicity drove along a vehicle absent lane, on her way to Verdant.

She felt tired. She looked tired.

She didn’t want to look or feel tired right now so she made a pit stop for coffee. She was mid-sip of a tall latte with a double espresso shot as she’d opened her car door when the memory of another time, when she’d been stood inside this very same car door hit her right between the eyes.

And the events preceding it.

Those eyes closed. Even after weeks, the memory was fresh. The memory of that second night, Slade’s second visit.

And it was, in many ways, the worst of them all…

Waiting all day for the inevitable, the hours had crawled by at a snail’s pace.

Knowing she couldn’t stay at the Foundry – couldn’t stay through the night the way she used to, the way she wanted to – and not just because Oliver and Sara were sharing bed space but because Slade had told her, clearly, that if she weren’t available, Thea Queen was.

Again, what choice was she to make save one?

Part of her had decidedly spent the day not thinking about the entire thing whilst the rest of her had gradually made herself sick to death with it. What did he mean by visit? What would it entail? Was he actually going to do anything at all or was all this some kind of test? Was he waiting, secretly – somewhere – just to see if she’d say anything and then end it once he found out either way? With the effort it would involve for him to visit her, she found it difficult to believe he’d go through with it.

And if it wasn’t that, if he really was intending on coming to her then-

Oh, you’ll suffer for it…

Well… it didn’t sound good. She knew– if this whole thing weren’t in jest – that it wouldn’t be good, at least not good like Big Belly Burger and lattes from Catharsis: yep, that is actually the name of my coffee shop. The irony hurt.

She just needed to find out. It might literally be Slade droning on at her; she needed to see what he had in mind because, honestly, mint choc-chip could easily cure that. Only then would she second
guess her choice – there was no need for a riot squad. The riot squad being Digg armed up to the teeth, bursting through her front doors guns blazing. He really would.

If it were something indecent - exactly like this proposal, I’m not thinking about it - she’d go to Oliver. And tell him everything… even if it meant invoking the wrath of original team Arrow -I only call us that in my head - even if it meant forever changing the rules of their very important nightwork.

And Oliver…

Heart in her throat, she’d almost told him, like, a bazillion times that day since their morning hooking up cameras together. Seeing Thea’s face in her mind – on constant replay – made her hit the pause button on that.

Because it might all be for nothing, the worrying, the drama.

Still, her thoughts… the ones that said ‘tell him. He needs to know how far Slade will go. What if he’s lying? What if he still goes after Thea? What if his promise was just that; a word?’

Yet, something about the way Slade spoke, about that little titbit of information Oliver had let free:

‘Slade Wilson always keeps his promises.’


Little did she know it would become her mantra in the coming weeks.

And she would have stayed with him this night, with Oliver, if only to lighten the tight mask that fell over him after Laurel’s visit; one that lingered even hours after she’d gone.

Even without John, the Foundry never actually felt empty; she and Oliver had always been comfortable with one another that their combined personalities filled the cavernous space. But with Sara there and Roy…

Despite Sara’s assistance - after Laurel left - in their endless debates on when, where and how to strike at a foe determined to remain hidden, plus Roy’s form flittering in and out of focus whenever he took a break from his archery training, it felt like a push. Something forced, something that wasn’t really needed at this very stressful time.

She’d noticed too.

During the course of the evening, Sara and Oliver, they’d share this look. A question, a puzzlement and a denial from one to the other.

They didn’t touch each other, not once. It had made her frown because, whilst Oliver and Sara weren’t exactly touchy-feely, they didn’t usually endeavour to remain ten feet apart at all times. They didn’t offer stony silences - much - in place of arguments.

Even more noticeable, unlike the past two weeks, but very much in accordance with their dynamic prior to Roy and Sara joining the team, Oliver kept looking to her for input. To Felicity. It wasn’t out of the norm for him to do so; he used to always-

Right there: he used to ‘hadn’t recently’.
They’d had a routine… which had broken. He’d broken it.

A dance in its early stages of development – into something that could have been truly wonderful – where they’d touched each other for reassurance, talked long into the night about anything and everything, trusted and enjoyed their friendship, a partnership where their differences made up a whole instead of two separate pieces.

The moment he’d started seeing Sara, he’d just… stopped. Called it off, subconsciously taking a step back, a step away from her. And she hadn’t understood why. For two weeks.

Part of her had speculated at the possibility that now he was in a relationship, maybe he was getting everything he needed elsewhere and no longer required to be closer to her for any reason.

**The kid wouldn’t normally touch a girl like you to turn her away**

Right.

Now… he was repairing it. He’d chosen to, maybe. Or at least, it felt like he had.

_It felt different._

With all these thoughts, these predicaments floating in her head, it had been thankfully difficult to think too much about her, ah, problem.

But when she stood at the precipice of her apartment - midnight - she froze; not wanting to enter. It was still too hard to believe this would happen. Slade Wilson coming to her in nightly visits? It was absurd. It sounded absurd. Like a seedy novel. And he had more important things to do, surely.

She knew she did. Catching him, for instance; that’s what I should be doing, what she’d rather be doing. For the entirety of the day she’d deliberately maintained the position that his very early morning appearance had been a hallucination on her part due to three night’s uninterrupted sleep.

Felicity wasn’t an idiot, but… None of it felt real. And she preferred it that way for now, until she was given evidence to think otherwise, until she could compartmentalize it.

Which meant thankfully, the fear didn’t come, didn’t overwhelm her.

*Oh, she was nervous.* Definitely nervous, butterflies everywhere – and not the nice ones either. _But… it didn’t really touch her._

Plus it helped that, when she finally made it into her house; her living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom were all Slade free zones. Rushing through her space and flicking all the lights on chased away some of the shadows. Since it was almost midnight – Oliver having asked her to run an extra sweep on the surveillance they’d placed up that morning before she left – she was so very close to thinking that maybe, just maybe, he wasn’t going to come.

She released a deep sigh; relief and other things singing through her as she deposited her coat on the back of her couch, fumbling with her mobile. “This was silly. I’ll call him.” Call Oliver. Slade obviously wasn’t coming, making me feel like a supreme idiot. _But it meant now she could tell someone, warn them._ Fingers flying over her touch-screen she moved towards the kitchen. She needed a glass of-

Strong arms, hard hands on her back, shoved her forwards.
All air in her lungs forced free as she barrelled into the kitchenette, before she could string two thoughts together, except-

-No.

*She shouted on impact but it didn’t quite finish, not with the rough hand suddenly covering her mouth, half of her face hidden under a layer of tanned, coarse skin.*

I thought… that maybe he wouldn’t…

Fool. *She was a sucker. But she hadn’t expected this, not like this.*

*And he was utterly silent, this man. Slade.*

*She knew it was him by how quietly he breathed, by how she curled away; instinctively reacting to him, by how large his body was behind her own. But it wasn’t until his arms were there, wrapped tightly around her - it wasn’t a pleasurable thing, not a lovers embrace - making movement almost impossible that she discovered the very new – very visceral, very real – sensation of being so completely overpowered that she felt like she finally understood what it was like to be truly defenceless… Like a child.*

*And how irresponsible she’d been to not utter a word to her comrades.*

*Slade hated her.*

*It seeped through him, into her. And it was for no reason other than choice. For her association with Oliver. That he could choose to do something like that, choose to loath rather than welcome – that it was his go-to emotion – terrified her.*

*It opened the floodgates, her actualisation; knowledge drowning her senses in cold comprehension.*

He could kill me and no one would know.

*Why didn’t I say anything?*

*Oliver…*

*And she did move, she tried to. She tried hard. She couldn’t not, since her heart was racing and demanding that she do so, that she succeed – no matter how impossible and improbable the task. Thinking of him helped in that effort. And it was a cruel shot of chemicals to her system because part of her knew it was futile, but her body didn’t get the memo. Since the blood thumping madly in her ears beat a drum of GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE, since panic flooded her system exactly 1.6 seconds after the very real fear began to seep in like a poison…*

*But it was like he was unbreakable.*

*He is unbreakable. Like Roy.*

*It was brutal, the way his arms pressed inwards, digging deep into her stomach and breasts. When her effort to escape made him actually stagger sideways, he yanked at her, swiftly bringing her airborne and for a brief confusing moment her legs flailed and her world tipped slightly sideways…*

*Until the hand over her mouth moved to her throat, tugged her out of his arms and before she could understand why, she was thrown back. It was less than a second before she smashed, hard, into the glass cabinet standing at the side of her couch.*
All her senses were blinded with white.

A dull throb that made her nauseous accompanied it, along with an absent realisation that they were moving, echoing through the ache.

But she couldn’t think. Because there’s a certain fractured sense of time loss that occurs when one’s head gets rammed into a solid surface.

In a haze of images – being roughly pulled upwards and forwards by her arms, an unwanted grip in her hair and around her waist – it took her several precious seconds to grasp that she was being dragged away from her front door, away from any hope of freedom… towards her bedroom.

Something about that shot ice cold down her back. Slammed into her stomach. Jolted through her heart. A shard of glass behind her eyes.

It brought her back.

Back. Come back-

And she did.

Gasping, she shuddered in his hold, her mouth opening in a wordless, soundless scream because oh God, why there? Why are we going in there? In my bedroom?

She couldn’t think of the ramifications of that – she hadn’t all day, hadn’t even occurred to her that he’d go that far – it was too much, too horrifying to understand, too sickening to stomach- so she fought.

Of course she did; it’s what we do. Fight. We fight.

It didn’t help her.

Get off me! The hand around her throat made sure she couldn’t speak but that didn’t mean she couldn’t move, couldn’t challenge his hold; it didn’t mean she’d ever stop trying, that she’d never stop hindering him, because hindering was all she could manage - if I do anything here it’ll be to piss him off. And maybe it would move him to cease and desist. Maybe it would make him worse.

But she wouldn’t ever lie down and let him just…

Moving as forcefully as she could whilst being so wrapped up in him, she twisted and writhed – grunts and gasps and whimpers escaping her mouth with the little amount of air he allowed through – and, taking advantage of the smallest freedom of movement during his attempt to cover her mouth again, she managed to shirk off his hand by ramming her head backwards, connecting with his jaw.

Lights exploded behind her eyes and she choked on air.

But it didn’t move him. Not an inch.

Sheer, sickening dread hooked its claws in her as his hand pressed over her lips again, forcing her head back again to meet his shoulder.

He made a sound left him and it wasn’t pleasant. An intake of air – chilling her because it chased the tail end of a laugh – and a sigh; as if he found her attempt depressing. Or humorous. Or both.

“Stop it.”
Belittling.

But she didn’t. Hearing his voice – that rasping, empty tone - shook her to death: she couldn’t not resist.

Yet when her body rolled away from him and when she used everything she had in an attempt to throw herself out of his arms, he clutched her so tightly the blood in her veins slowly rose to her face, turning it purple. His thumbs dug into the soft tissue inside her elbows.

“You’re just hurting yourself.”

You’re hurting me.

“It’s embarrassing to watch.”

The insult made her eyes sting and she hated that she knew they were watering, that he was affecting her, making her cry. Again.

“Come on.” He softly cajoled: it was all a joke to him. “We’re almost there.”

Blood rushing to her head, Felicity blinked raw eyes.

Her bed was right in front of her.

Suddenly, the rush of adrenaline was back. She kicked backwards, a snarl loosening in her throat—He just laughed.

I’m going to die.

Because there was no way she could live with herself after this. She could hear it in his tone, feel it in the careless way he held her, as if her skin and her bones and her cells weren’t priceless but replicable and unworthy. And the very deliberate way he knew she understood what he was doing and why… that he would make sure that he pushed her just far enough to want it all to be over. But not quite far enough to do squat about it.

Realising it… somehow… made everything in her turn silent. Resolve settling in her gut as she vowed to herself, no. Not a chance. No matter what happens next, no matter what he does, she would never submit. She would never stop fighting. And she would not let it – him – change her. Not this way. Not in any way.

As if sensing her thoughts, Slade shut her down. “Whatever makes you feel better.” He stilled. “Sweetheart.”

With that he threw her, turning her bodily away from him as he did, so that she hit the bed on her back with a bounce. She looked up and flinched, wanting to scream.

Glaring down at her was the mask Oliver had described to her that morning.

She choked; she couldn’t not. That orange and black stain suddenly petrifying.

But he gave her no time to process it before he was there.

Hands on her thighs, digging in, making her hiss and cry out and move away, but he pulled on them until they aligned with his hips, making them arch upwards, around his own.
It was instinctive then, how she shouted out, shouted ‘NO’—no fucking way—and clawed at his hands, at his face; desperate sounds escaping her that she never wanted to hear herself make.

Until he hit her in the stomach.

Air abruptly a problem; he gave her a minute—how kind—for her to find that first gasping breath. “If you get any louder you’ll wake your neighbours.” Watching her control her panic, he followed this with. “And if you do I’ll have to finish this with Thea.”

Thea.

The loathing in her gaze, because he knew she’d never let him do this to the 19 year old sister of Oliver Queen—hot tears were grazing her cheeks now—actually made him smirk. Bastard.

“Your anger’s quite endearing.” He muttered, his huge form leaning over her—as if taking in her scent—and inhaled. “I don’t think I’ve ever been looked at so hatefully before.”

Get used to it.

But she didn’t speak; he’d chased her words away, and even if she could, she wouldn’t. He wasn’t worth the oxygen. Wasn’t worth the fear and the tears and all the words she knew would simply bounce off him.

Every muscle in her body held tight, screaming at her to loosen up—that maybe if she were lax he’d drop his guard and she could try to get away again—but she couldn’t. Petrified, she couldn’t.

A hum rippled through him and she quaked with it, bile rising to her throat. “Let’s see.” Hands slowly trailing down her legs again, to her hips and up… he tugged at her blouse. “Off.”

No.


She just looked at him.

He sighed like she was being difficult, quickly easing the material off her stomach. “Lean forwards.” He asked.

Asked.

It was aggressive, the moan—a desperate admission—of frustration, of fury, of humiliation that rippled up from her stomach, getting stuck part way as the grip on the back of her neck dragged her up off the mattress.

As if he was persuading her. Not forcing.

There isn’t a pit in hell deep enough for him to fall down.

“There we go.” He breathed, staring down at her when he set her back down. There was nothing to see in those dark eyes. “Ah.” Contemplating her bra, he pulled at the front clasp until the joining material of her cups separated. Her breasts weren’t quite on display…but it was a close thing.

“You’re quite lovely, you know.” He said, and—God—it was a murmur. She whimpered, lips trembling until she bit down, knowing she could do Jack about this, about anything. “To look at.” That he needed to clarify that, the implication that all he saw her as was a warm body and not a sentient being—a terrified one—was intentional. And deeply unsettling. “In fact,” shut up. Just.
Stop. Talking. “I’d say you were the most naturally beautiful creature,” creature, not woman, “I’ve ever seen in the dark before.”

His hand moved off her neck but before she could thank the universe for small mercies, the same hand stroked across her collarbone… then down between her breasts, resting there with his fingers splayed. “The softness of your skin is exquisite.”

She couldn’t help it; she lashed out - rejecting him and everything that he was and is - her arm swinging round and punching him square in his granite jaw. And it would have hurt, would have made her yelp but she couldn’t feel it. She couldn’t feel anything under that cold gaze.

She’d ripped off his mask.

Hand moving off her - honestly, getting hit back was preferable to what he was doing right then; this perverse seduction - he flippantly stopped her second attempt.

Flinching, heart pounding wildly; she waited for it, for the backlash.

He saw it in her expression. “I’m not going to hurt you. Not like that.”

She couldn’t be more astounded if she tried.

His head cocked sideways, it isn’t yours, not that gesture, he couldn’t use it against her like that. “In fact I appreciate the respect you have for your skin. A lot of women wouldn’t think twice, wouldn’t care. But I do.” He whispered. “I care.”

It was horrifying; this insanity, his malevolence… wide eyed, she had no defence for it, save one.

That she wouldn’t quail before him. That she’d meet him inch for inch. That even though she was crying – because she was a very sane woman about to be molested – she wouldn’t break. That she wouldn’t change. That she was a good person who knew what was right, what was wrong, what was easy and what was grey, because black and white no longer existed.

His fingers deftly undoing the button of her skirt, Felicity didn’t mentally flee into the safety of her memories, didn’t bask in the warmth of a smile, his smile. Oliver’s. His voice, his words…

She couldn’t. Her brain was hardwired to never stop calculating, to never stop thinking.

So she just kept her eyes on Slade’s face, staring at him, into him.

I’m going to look at you and I’m not going to stop. Like a dare, she would never look away from him. She’d force him to see her as he took pieces of her away with him. And one day, in your dreams, the only thing you’ll see is my eyes staring into yours. I’ll force you to relive how vile you really are. Because the part of him that was once a very good man, will detest himself for this. I’ll haunt you. I’ll drive you to an insanity you couldn’t reach before. And when you die, my eyes will be the last thing you see.

Fists clenching into the covers, she ground her jaw.

Her skirt hit the floor… then her underwear.

Eyes wanting to instinctively shut – because she couldn’t fight back, couldn’t scream and vent her anger – she watched his hands leave her and land on his belt. Her eyes remained on his… and he stared back as he moved. In moments he was there again; between her thighs but no closer, no further attempt to invade. Just… breathing.
Seconds crawled by… then minutes.

He still didn’t move.

Unable to take any more - this precipice - she pulled away swiftly, scrambling upwards on the bed and expecting him to follow her, to drag her back to him and hold her down… but he did nothing.

Curl over her pillows – completely naked save the bra hanging from her shoulders – she looked at him, wide-eyed.

His stare… it was almost soulful. But it was also absolutely rigid, harsh.

He flinched like something had hurt him.

Then he slowly pulled himself off the bed, re-arranging himself in his pants and her eyes flickered away - I’m going to throw up - as he straightened.

But the whole time, he never took his eyes off her face, not once. She didn’t like that; there was something in it that scared her even more than what she was sure he’d been about to do to her.

And then he just turned, picked up his mask and strode away, leaving her dumbstruck. Frozen. She watched him leave, walking down her short hall and hearing him mutter to himself in too low a tone to be understood.

Felicity heard her back door – her apartment was on the bottom floor – leading to the fire escape, slam shut. For several minutes everything was suspended; she didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Didn’t make a sound. Didn’t believe…

Then, with agility that would have surprised her had she been clearer of mind and thought, she was flinging herself off the bed. Huddling into a ball in the crevice – flooded with that childlike view of the world, when close spaces equaled to safety – between her wardrobe and vanity desk, her heart rammed into her rib-cage.

When she realised she was shaking, she started to cry.

Those cries became sobs when she realised she could feel him now, on her skin and it felt like shame.

When she thought of him doing this to Thea, her teeth sunk into the skin of her arm to muffle the scream that ripped out of her.

When she remembered her mistake – her choice to not tell a soul – nausea lined her stomach and, as she bolted for the bathroom, she swore to herself that she’d tell Oliver. When she could breathe, after she’d thrown up what little she’d eaten that day, after she’d showered off the sensation of those hands and fingers, after she’d inhaled enough coffee to feel semi-normal again, she’d tell him about Slade. About all of it.

It took her two hours for her to return to a functional state – her new normal: functional – and when she did, she immediately went to the Foundry.

It didn’t matter if Oliver and Sara were in the middle of a hot session, didn’t matter that it was just after 2am; what mattered was that neither he or his girlfriend had known, not even close, just how warped Slade Wilson really was. The things he would do and the lengths he would travel down, just to torment one man, were despicable. Unthinkable. Oliver and Sara… they had no idea.
And she was afraid. I’m so scared. Seeking security, comfort. Needing someone to be horrified in her place. Because other than a frozen pit in her stomach, she couldn’t feel much of anything right now. Not exactly looking forward to when it wears off. Maybe feeling nothing is better than everything. Tubs of mint chip seem like a great idea right now, I’ll stock up.

Parked outside of Verdant she took a minute to calm herself, so that she wouldn’t run inside like a lunatic. So that they wouldn’t know just how much she’d been hurt. Emotional hurts were easier to hide after all. It was what she told herself, anyway.

Her heart wouldn’t slow; it was pounding so powerfully she could hear it in her ears.

She jumped when her phone began to ring, get it together.

Without thinking she palmed it and answered, her thoughts going directly to Oliver, thinking – hoping – it was him. It would make everything so much easier to bear. Perhaps then, he could extract her from her seat because she’d been sitting there for more than ten minutes and still found it impossible to-

“How the hell did you get this number?” So low was her tone, the words were practically growled.

Yes. How?

A shiver slithered down her spine and every cell seemed to focus like a shark on the fact that Oliver was only a few hundred metres away.

“Is that the question you really should be asking Miss Smoak?”

The drawling coil to his tone made her hands fist. “Screw you.”

“Look to your left.”

“Why should I?”

There was a moment’s quiet.

“Oh. I see. So you’ve changed your mind?”

She didn’t reply, couldn’t say a word; not when all of her screamed yes.

Hearing his exhale, her tense shoulders tightened further; it sounded like the worst of caveats. “Look to your left. You need to see this before you say anything else.”

“I don’t need to see anything you wish me to see.” Trying to be brave made her come across more mouse than lion.

“If you’re going to say no to our agreement, then you really do need to see this.”

He… actually had a point. Loath to admit but still, he did, because she planned right after this call to spill the proverbial beans.

So she did. She looked to her left, because honestly, what could he-
Thea Queen was stood outside of the front doors to Verdant, searching — presumably — for her keys in the tiny, glittering handbag around her waist.

Insight turned to horror. She couldn’t breathe.

“Wait for it…”

She did. Wait. She couldn’t not. It was Thea.

And when she saw the imposing figure of Slade Wilson - she could recognise him anywhere now, like he was a taint in her blood - slide out of hiding from the shadows a few doorways down from the unwitting young woman, lead dropped to her stomach.

Though he was simply standing there, he couldn’t have made his purpose any clearer.

“You...” It breathed out of her, like a prayer, a hope; at once a primitive fear and an urge to protect those weaker than oneself. She’d beg if she had to. “Please.”

He turned to face Thea; watching her. “Please what?”

“Please don’t hurt her.”

“Alright.”

She blinked, finding it difficult to focus, to understand. “W-what?”

“I thought I already explained. It’s your choice what I do next.”

Either I visit you, or I visit Thea

“I’m going to tell him; I’ll tell Oliver that you’re here, right now.” Yes, it was redundant, yes; she knew what he’d say. That Oliver wouldn’t be able to do anything regardless but… it just spewed from her mouth.

Oliver. Her safe place.

“Last reminder: I’m not here to stop you from telling the kid.” He whispered and it would play in her nightmares. “Do what you like. And when he runs to his sister’s side tonight – or to yours, you decide— he’ll find me standing there. And we both know he won’t leave, not without trying to stop me. He’d never let me hurt her, not if he had breath enough in his body to fight me on it.”

Again, he was a right.

“He’ll force me to either kill him or hurt him enough that he can’t move. And I will. Gladly.”

She got it and he needed to stop repeating it.

“It’s all your choice to make.” He quietly reminded her. “Either way, it won’t stop me from doing what I want. Like tonight. In your bedroom.”

It was like being on a rollercoaster, the whirl of her emotions. She didn’t know which took precedence; she could only taste a metallic sourness in her mouth.

“Thank you for that memory, by the way.”

Bile rose from her stomach and her palm smacked into her dashboard without her telling it to. “I’m
“going to find you.” She vowed, biting down on her lips with her jaw locked tight as a solitary tear struggled down her cheek. “I’m going to find you and I’m going to stop you.”

“I look forward to it.” He dismissed. “In the meantime…” She watched his figure shift slightly as Thea started to walk from the club. “What choice will you make?”

Then he took a step in the girl’s direction and another until he was strolling. He was roughly ten paces behind Thea - and gaining speed - before Felicity finally answered.

“Me.”

Immediately, he came to a stop.

Closing her eyes, it felt like tar sliding down her oesophagus, that thick blackness she was admitting into her life. “Come to me.”

“I will.”

With that he hung up and, without stalling or even a look in her direction, he sauntered away. Leaving her to silence. To doom. To one thought.

How do I tell him now?

She stared into nothing.

Oliver.

Ssh, ssh, ssh, it’s alright… you’re safe.

Oh, you were shot

It’s nothing

She almost moaned it, his name. Then she was opening the car door, already stepping outside before she could think anything beyond that simple but powerful memory. That illusion-

Oh please do. I’ll enjoy watching him try to stop me

There was the pause, the moment. The cognitive dissonance; where one part of her decides one way, one route; to go to Oliver and find safety there, however brief, and the other battles against it; to not tell him. For what can any man do against a monster like Slade?

The former was dominant.

She focused on the tarmac in a daze. With her fingers clutching her phone, her hand started to violently shake as she pressed it against her thigh. She wanted to tell him: she wanted to so much she was close to ripping off the car door. But… what would she say?

So Oliver, about Slade Wilson. He’s visiting me. It isn’t a fun visit. But if I don’t let him then he’s going to go after your sister. And do the same to her. And you really don’t want to know what I mean by ‘the same’… Did I mention that he won’t stop? That, because he’s Mirakuru enhanced, we don’t currently have an effective method of preventing him from doing whatever he wants to short of dropping him in a volcano…

It was cruel. It would be cruel, to tell him at all-
No! Tell him, Felicity.

But he won’t be able to do anything. No one will be able to do anything.

Because, honestly?

Gone were the days where Felicity could consider John and Oliver to be as close to superhuman as humanly possible. They weren’t, not at all. Not after Mirakuru. She had all the faith in heaven and on earth in Oliver, but she wasn’t stupid. There was genuinely zero difference between Oliver knowing she was playing host to Slade and Oliver not knowing... save two.

The first, a surplus burden. Borne on shoulders carrying many more regrets. Holding so much unrequited guilt already. Holding weight that could crush him if she added to the strain. He shouldn’t be the one this all falls to- for he was always the one people went to for help. But who helped him?

She didn’t know if she could add to that. He knees were buckling at the thought of it.

The second was knowing that Oliver really would show up at her place after midnight... and he’d get crap kicked out of him. I’m talking weeks of medical leave. At best.

She wasn’t worried whether he’d be angry at her. Or sad. She could take it; she’d always been able to. That was the point. And she wasn’t worried about how much it might hurt him; not being told... what truly worried her was the extent of his threshold. How much could he take before he couldn’t take anymore?

He’d survived five years of god only knows what, only to return and loose his best friend. To have secrets and lies tear his family apart. To be shown, roughly, every error of his ways and be forced to confront them. To have his past come back to haunt him, over and over again.

Swallowing, Felicity slid down and back into the driver’s seat. “I don’t know what to do.”

She really didn’t.

All she did know was that she didn’t have it in her.

Not to tell Oliver.

The simple notion of how he’d react – the expression on his face when, if, she did – made everything in her revolt. Where part of her believed it was worth it, like it had been when she’d told him about his mother’s secret, that telling him would help in some way however minute, the rest of her... really didn’t.

This wasn’t just a secret that would hurt him. It was a secret that would kill him. Slowly, ever so slowly, it would tear at his soul. And she’d have to watch knowing she’d done that to him. When Slade visits her... Oliver’s sister... Laurel... he’d have to stand there and bear it.

Since they didn’t have a cure. Or any known method of stopping a juggernaut.

“I.” Blinking away horrified tears, Felicity shuddered. “I can’t do it.” I don’t know how. Not without making it better.

I have to make it better first; I have to find a way to fix this first.

Then... she’d tell Oliver.
An hour later found her at the 24 hour dinner close to her house, nursing what felt like her 20th cup of coffee and trying to learn how to breathe without pauses, without trembling. When her phone buzzed, her hand shook, knowing somehow who it was from.

**You’re very brave.**

*She stared at the words; her expression twisting from confusion to stone.*

What did that even mean?

**Another mind screw; courtesy of Slade…**

Fucker.

...

..

.

In many ways, it had been the worst visit.

In many ways… but not all.

It was the only time he’d resorted to the threat of rape.

Almost rape. She didn’t need the reminder; he hadn’t managed to rape her. But he’d undressed her, he touched her, had seen her naked and vulnerable on the bed like that and he’d not seen her as a person worthy of mercy for no reason other than that he was obviously long gone in the head…

It was nothing.

It was. Nothing. It’s nothing-

-Oliver, you’re hurt.

**It’s nothing.**

And she’d repeat it to herself as many times as she had to. She had repeated it, daily. She had to function without exposing herself, without letting people know.

Her team. *Team Arrow*.

And if she had her way, they never would.

After a moment of staring at the tarmac, Felicity forced herself to get inside her car… and drive.

---

A word about that first week?
He’d been determined to shock her.

On the third night for instance, expecting him to scare the ever loving shit out of her again; she’d been surprised when Slade had appeared on her doorstep, 1am, dressed in an expensive suit and coat, only to tell her they were going to the harbour.

Beyond confused, she’d tried to talk, because what? But he’d responded by simply grabbing her and pulling her out the doorway.

By her hair.

He’d made his point and she’d had a sore scalp for two days after that.

Once they’d arrived he’d stopped touching her; his hands releasing her ponytail and her elbow, and it should have been a good thing, that he’d let her go. But he’d only shoved her towards his subjects. His helpers, his men.

It wasn’t exactly what she’d have called the better option.

And by men she focused on one man in particular: a man named Frank.

A man just as vile as Slade himself, except his character leaned more towards repulsive.

In comparison to her diminutive but toned frame, he was huge. Like Oliver. He’d held onto her; holding her back as Slade beat a man to death, right in front of her. It had been deliberate. Slade had made her watch him kill a man in one of the slowest – it took a long time – and most painful ways.

For her? It was shock torture. Psychological warfare.

Whoever it was, had been, he’d been killed for resorting to blackmail on Slade. The thought had made hysterical laughter bubble up from her throat before subsequently making her retch.

Blackmail Slade. Right. Smart.

When she says ‘beat to death’, she literally means that Slade had beat a man until his heart failed him and his face resembled pudding. I liked pudding before all this…making her hear every punch and kick and break and scream, shout, moan and cry until all the noise just stopped.

Frank had held zero qualms about any of it.

Holding her head in place the whole time... he’d just been sniffing her hair.

Ugh, God. She would shower forever after, had showered for over an hour after they’d dropped her off home. But she’d still felt him there. Still felt his breath on her neck, his acrid scent on her clothes; sweat, smoke and too pungent aftershave. He’d gripped her arms so hard they bruised, with his beefy man hands, as she’d leant over to throw up. She threw up because Slade had dragged the corpse over to feed it to three starving dogs. He actually kept dogs, at the back of his building in the harbour. And they hate him as much as I do.

Still, even though she looked away for most of it, she knew they’d peeled the muscle off the dead man’s bones.

Felicity Smoak had never been terribly good at sustaining hatred. Even with Slade, she’d found it easier to find a place of indifference with him. And anger. It helped with the fear. Until week two, anyway... But that’s neither here nor there.
The level of quiet that hit her as she opened the side door to the Foundry made her stop, squinting at the low level of light she glimpsed inside instead of the usual flare of luminescent bulbs.

She stepped in, her hand braced against the open door.

“Hello?”

No answer.

Really? Morning. Weekend. New coffee machine. No QC, no Isabel. What’s not to be here for?

Frowning, she moved inwards and the door locked automatically behind her. Heels tapping, she made her way past damp pipes - the odd one issuing puffs of steam - before entering the open area surrounded by glass cases.

Empty.

She looked left. Looked right. Blinked half a dozen times. Leaned on one leg. Brow puckered in thought... Still, there wasn’t a single sign that anyone had even been there this morning. Except for the dim light.

Didn’t we have a plan? I was very aware of a plan being made last night...

She checked her watch: 09:17am.

It wasn’t early… in the past; she’d walked in before 7am to find Oliver in the middle of a set of pull-ups from the overhead rafters and John gulping down black coffee. More recently she’d walk past Sara cleaning the bar upstairs. Once in a blue moon, she’d find Roy practicing his slowly progressing archery skills.

So why isn’t anybody...?

Chewing on the inside of her mouth, she leaned on a leg in thought.

It wasn’t necessarily odd that they weren’t there. Maybe she’d just need to wait for them, if only for a little while. In the meantime she’d-

-Wait.

She remembered.

Oh. Of course.

A noisy exhale left her nose, now I feel like the idiot with no life, which was, unfortunately, very true. A smile on her lips - there was nothing glad about it, if anything there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that it looked sad - and an eye roll at herself, she closed her eyes. Fingers reaching to the bridge of her nose, she rubbed at the building pressure there. Headache incoming.

She should have remembered. But she’d been so out of it; too busy concentrating on keeping her
mouth shut, on helping the team, on taking the appropriate level of pain meds that wouldn’t make her drop in the middle of a QC board meeting…

The day before last, Sara had announced that she and her sister were attending a high brow function; basically a party where people, richer than necessity commands them to be, evaluated where their money would be needed the most as the wine, the chardonnay and the champagne freely flowed.

Therefore, their father would be pranced around them since - even though he’d been demoted - he was one of the most decorated police detectives in the SCPD. *And he’ll love every minute.*

Imagining his scowl made her wince in sympathy for his daughters.

But it was an all-day function with events planned to last - the idle rich are hard to entertain after all and any excuse to drink before noon was an excuse well played - so she figured Oliver was already searching for an exit because if Sara was going, then so would he.

*In his tux*... suddenly, she wished she’d been here to see him off, even knowing how irritated he’d be at having to attend another glorified party.

Yes, he was kind like that.

But for some odd reason, she’d thought that... he would choose not to go.

At that, she eye-rolled herself again; *give him a break.*

He needed one. Badly.

Maybe a few vodka shots and a whiskey will be his road to that break.

Not that Felicity had harassed, harangued or needled him lately, if ever. She wanted him to enjoy himself, wanted him to have pleasant memories before the world decided to restore the balance by offering him the dregs only to watch him battle them for its own caprice.

It was just that… no one had texted her. No one had told her that there was no point coming to the Foundry today because everyone was taking a load off.

And, if she was feeling more *herself,* this wouldn’t have been any kind of issue.

Pathetic is my middle name.

Honestly… as depressing as it seemed, she’d actually been looking forward to a day of research in the Foundry, in doing something easy and familiar. The alternative - being at home, alone and waiting for the next day, the next night, *his* next visit - was in no way attractive.

*Leave it,* she told herself, finally walking to her work station, *her* place in her home. And this *was* her home, her space.

*Her* place just as it was Oliver’s.

She could think that… right? He’d told her she could, so it wasn’t crossing a line, was it?

*Then again, Oliver may more or less lives here too now and Sara more or less sleeps here with him so... maybe not.*

She bit down on her lip.
I don't have any place do I?

It shuddered through her and her eyes briefly shut tight, hands fist- ing, lips pressed together, brow crinkling...

What's wrong with me? Why now? A couple of hours by herself and everything, every worrying thought and excruciating memory invaded her mind. I'm stronger than this.

It's fine. She re-asserted, placing her bag on her desk. This is fine. I'll just do my thing and they'll do their thing when they return. She brushed her long pieces of fringe behind her ear, only for some pieces on the other side of her face to fall forwards. Let them have a day off; they need it, really. And I'll be here when they're ready to take on the world again.

And they did. Need it, that is. Just as much as Oliver did.

Especially after Helena Bertinelli.

Major disaster. His ex-girlfriend’s return had fired up old grievances and even older bitterness, namely with Sara… and Dig.

The latter was unexpected, though it shouldn’t have been. Can’t really blame the man.

John had never been a fan of Helena: more like her number 1 critic from the first day and with good reason. She’d been determined to travel down the homicidal highway, taking no prisoners, even when Oliver had tried to teach her his ways. In every sense of the word - and other senses - he’d been her Obi Wan.

But Obi Wan had failed with Anakin, just as Oliver failed with Helena.

Yet, like Anakin - or should I say Vader - Helena was starting to show signs of change, signs of an inner goodness.

As she lives a harsh sentence in prison. Yeesh.

For John, however, she’d already made too much of a mess. In many ways Felicity agreed with his assessment.

But the look on Oliver’s face when he’d realised that every member on their field unit may not want to follow - or may even attempt to utterly ignore - his orders pertaining to his good natured aim of persuading Helena to cease and desist, even when the very idea of convincing the crossbow toting whack-job to put down said weapon seemed an insanity in and of itself, made her keep silent.

Like a lost puppy.

He’d needed someone on his side.

She could have spoken up, she could have said something in the way of how he’d let his man-parts dictate almost every single one of his actions with the opposite sex the previous year and the fall out was the Huntress. Which wasn’t exactly accurate. She could have also told the team to back off, making not so veiled threats to accost their mobiles with spam.

Instead, she’d simply touched his arm and fed him any information he required without a word about it from her.

Because...
With Helena, he’d been lonely. *Lonely in a way none of us could possibly understand.* It wasn’t her place – or her business – to judge how he tried to close that hole inside himself.

It was a matter of respect. Respect that went both ways.

Because she’d blinked when he’d bought her coffee shortly after. And a warm muffin. A hand on her shoulder. And when she’d looked at him with a puzzled frown and a head tilt, he’d smiled. An actual smile, one she hadn’t seen in a while.

Wasn’t much of a stretch to see that he’d noticed.

The muffin was huge - as if he’d specifically requested the barista to bake him their largest of their large cupcake perfections - bran, toffee and banana flavoured and a Massimo spiced vanilla latté with a triple shot. *Yep.* He’d definitely noticed.

He’d also noticed how she’d wolfed it down.

He was noticing a lot of things recently.

Still, Sara had made the situation worse when she’d attempted an actual coup d'état; fighting Helena hand to hand in the middle of the supreme court of justice, hadn’t exactly gone down well. With anyone.

And she’d been awarded for it by being shoved out of an upper storey window. *Helena sure wasn’t lacking in the aggressive department, probably stemming from childhood issues with daddy. A man who’d her fiancé murdered; talk about major emotionally trauma.* Again, it was something Felicity couldn’t and wouldn’t pass a verdict on. Luckily Oliver had been there for a quick save, but, it hadn’t mended fences. Sometimes violence only begets violence.

Even if Laurel had been involved.

And speaking from past experience, when Laurel was involved, *everyone* was involved. *Dig’s words, not mine.*

When Sara had discovered that Oliver had once dated the hellacious Helena, her first reaction had been incredulity. This had quickly led into teasing territory which sounded - and felt - too close to the edge of mockery for Felicity’s tastes. A light-hearted jest, true, but it had hit where she’d intended it to.

Having had zero defence for it, Oliver hadn’t said a word.

This hadn’t settled well with Felicity because he was trying, *really hard damn it,* to make up for the mistakes he’d made in the past.

Even more uncharacteristic of the lovely leather clad Lance sister, this had then led to an oddly sharp disposition to her manner for the rest of that day. And the day after. Like she was frustrated with Oliver. And dejected. And angry. And sad.

Of course, this had led to another argument between the two. *There’s a depressing pool going to see who wins the most points.* It wasn’t their first that week.

The pair had been so strained. And she didn’t understand why. When you’re with someone, when you love them, what is there to be constantly hurt about? *He’s right there. She’s right there…why argue?*
Whatever was happening, their relationship was very much taking a few thousand hits.

*There’s something I’m missing.* There had to be, because for the last few days both Oliver and Sara had barely shared a compassionate glance, or a caring word. And it held an air of regret, which was even more confusing.

*They’re both so stubborn.*

Says **the** most obstinate one.

Still... she was definitely missing something.

“What I’m **missing** is more coffee,” two cups just weren’t enough anymore, “maybe a blueberry muffin. Or three.” She mumbled, hovering over her monitors as her CPU’s loaded up. Mentally planning a core sweep of what her - now 18 - transmitters had captured in the last 48 hours, she leaned on one leg as the toes of her other foot scratched an itch on her calf.

Gazing into nothing, she whispered. “Wonder how he’s doing.” *Oliver’s never been apt at handling long winded galas so-*

“How **who’s** doing?”

She yelped - more like an **Oo-uh** - utterly freaked, the man is a ninja, and jumping out of her skin; it was definitely the first time she’d screamed in weeks for such an inoffensive reason.

That **reason** standing right behind her... in a pair of pants.

*Only* a pair of pants. Low hanging jeans, actually. *I’m being tested today, I must be.*

Heart pounding, she fought **not** to stare at certain places on his body, blinking a little spastically all the while. **Focus!** Closing her eyes she pressed a hand to her chest and groused. “**Oliver.**”

A release of air – a little breathy – told her he probably thought she was being hilarious, in his own Oliver Queen way. That was, with him being close to incapable of all out laughter and generally viewed everything she did as a little odd. Endearingly odd, but odd nonetheless.

It made her want to smile.

But instead, her eyes flew back open and she sent a light glare his way. The corners of his mouth twitched. His eyes **alight**.

**Hmph.**

She could give him that. Easily.

Straightening - *I am a totally and completely unshakable EA* - she cleared her throat; attempting blasé and failing since her voice was a little **too** high. “Stop looking so pleased with yourself.” And she squeaked somewhere in the middle of that sentence.

Well… he’d scared the crap out of her. *Even Slade isn’t that quiet-*

Not now.

*Why do I have to ruin this?*

...Maybe because it had overrun its course.
Not noticing how she’d paled - or her slight head shake, like, go away ugly thought- Oliver looked down to his hands, which she’d just realised were holding a towel. Um, kay. He shook it, brought it to his neck and started rubbing at the back where his hairline met his spine.

_Oooh_… he was still wet.

Still... wet.

_Buh... uh?_

Biceps and triceps rippled before her.

Luckily, she was desensitized enough to the machinations of her partner in crime because if she hadn’t been, she might have actually pawed at him. Just a little. But enough to ruin any and all of her credibility.

_Seriously, it might be worth it. Taking that dive. Exploring the impossible._

Alas, she’d used the word impossible for a reason. And even if it _were_ possible... she was covered in _marks_.

Taints.

Reminders.

No. It wasn’t meant for her, that vision.

Back to the very much _now_, she still found it nearly impossible to function, but only for several seconds, which was an improvement to the trance she used to fall into. Even with his glistening chest and his darker, wetter hair. _Hmm_. Tweaked out. Not with sweat, with water. Shower water. He’d been in the shower. When she thought she was alone, Oliver had been naked in the bathroom just around the corner from her computers.

The knowledge dipped in a gay little swim downstairs.

She swallowed. _I should be more than used to this by now._

Here’s the gist of it: it’s been about fifty years since she’s had sex, she’s in love with the man in front of her and, after weeks of abuse, she isn’t really all that sure just what type of physical play she could be up to any time soon.

And yet, it’s all she’s thinking about. _Women think of sex just as much as men do: we’re just not as obvious about it._

And the more bad stuff a girl goes through, the more she dreams of affection - in several shapes and forms - even as she pushes it away.

Wiping himself down - how such an unsexy act could be remotely erotic, she didn’t know-her eyes furtively followed his progression as he brought the towel up to swiftly scrub across his skull and when he pulled it off, his short hair stuck out every which way but where it was supposed to.

It was a hot look, a ‘honey, I woke up and you weren’t there; come back to bed’ look.

For some reason, she didn’t do any of the things that she’d normally do; ignore him for one. Blush and make an innocent remark, one filled with accidental innuendo for another. Didn’t mentally wash it all away either because she didn’t want to imagine what he and Sara might have been up to just
hours before; she’d stepped beyond that now.

Instead, she laughed.

A release of surprised laughter that came out without her telling it to; because it was cute how his hair was all poofed out like that, because it was the last thing she’d expected to see right then - from someone so naturally perfect, aesthetically speaking - because it filled her chest with something tight but still something good and right, something that had been sorely missing…

Because it felt nice, like a routine, like he did this with her all the time even though he never had before.

A taste of something sweet.

And maybe she needed to feel that, to feel part of something that wasn’t bad.

So she let herself smile - a small one but it lit up her face in a way she hadn’t in what felt like years - because he was wonderful to watch as he moved, truly a pleasure to witness, like when his arms flexed as he threw the towel somewhere to the side.

Her laughter ringing through the Foundry made him glance to her, finding her leaning back against the desk with one foot crossing the other.

Eyes flickering over her face, his own gentled. An almost smile.

A hey.

Sauntering - wasn’t he ever capable of just walking - back over in that effortless way that only men can - and it gets so much worse in his green leather - the look didn’t leave him. This was also super nice to see, like he was happy to see her, if not difficult to handle.

Then he checked her out, which was definitely difficult to handle.

And by check out I don’t’ mean ‘he checked me out, checked me out’.

She meant he did a thorough once over, which made her deeply uncomfortable because… what was he looking for? And what if he noticed something?

But this was something Oliver did now. Frequently. Purposefully.

Sometimes, she’d arrive at the Foundry and it was the first thing he’d make sure to do. Deep down, she understood: something was off about her, something he’d caught and he didn’t know what it was and was unsure of what to do about it; it isn’t like I’m being Captain Obvious. So, since it might be a sensitive area, he’d refrained from out-rightly asking her.

He was a gentleman like that.

Instead, he placed an increasing amount of effort into focusing on her immediately, whenever he saw her. Didn’t matter who was there, or where there was.

And each time she’d hold still as he analysed her, as if doing so hid any differences in her from him.

She wasn’t sure how successful she was.

But he never said a word. Anything he may or may not have seen, he’d kept firmly to himself. And she had no idea what to think about that. So she didn’t. Think, that is. It was easier that way.
He stopped two feet in front of her.

Her arms wrapped around herself; a shield as she held still.

With a deep breath his chest expanded and **wow**, could she not even **try** to look away from that. “What are you doing here?”

She tried for a sentence but ended up with a sound. “Uh?”

“**What are you doing here?**” The reiteration, though not unkind, was identical.

Mouthing open in an ‘O’ shape, she blinked too. “**What am I doing here?**”

He blinked, once, followed by an eyebrow raise as his stare talked all sorts of words to her.

“**What am I…?**” It took her that long for it to hit her. “**Oh! Right, sorry. Brain’s a little,**” she rapped said brain with her knuckles sounding just as nutty as she felt, “**fragile today.**”

Nodding - **like I’m this much of an airhead all the time** - he simply waited for more.

She didn’t **have** much more. “**Business as usual.**” She lamely offered up… but he still waited. For what she didn’t know.

Then…

His head tilted slightly sideways.

Seeing that, her throat clogged.

It was so stupid but...

So many times - as if he’d watched him, copying his idiosyncrasies - Slade had tilted his head. Each time it had felt like a mockery of everything she stood for. But this was...

*Please don’t see.*

This was the danger in keeping a secret so malevolent, so cruel in nature, from someone she vowed never to lie to. It made her feel as delicate as she’d just pretended she was. Shaky too, like, if he touched her she’d fall. Or break. Or reveal something she didn’t want him to see.

Worse…

There was an unsettlingly **deep** fondness in his features.

Normally – weeks ago – this would have been a beautiful thing to be on the receiving end of. Now? Every single time she saw it - and she saw it more frequently now than ever before - she was reminded of the fact that Slade Wilson was not Oliver.

That Oliver wasn’t the one in her company late at night.

That she hadn’t told him. That she was keeping things from him, things that might make him hate her.

That **everything** in the expression on his face - she spoke fluent Oliver Queen so she would know - told her that he thought she was being **thoughtful**. Being there, right then, to do anything she could to help him: that she hadn’t entered the Lair because she **wanted** to. He thought she didn’t want him to
be by himself in this.

And it was... sort of... completely accurate.

“Felicity,” he shook his head, smiling gently, God. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He was grateful.

Don’t be, already. She didn’t understand.

And the fondness was hurting her.

Weeks of malice - and it was abuse, screw the proposition (her so-called deal with Slade had always been more a choice-less nightmare than a simple yes or no) - and the slightest piece of warmth would be another thing to throw her out of whack.

If he touched her right now…

“Actually, I didn’t think you’d be here.” It blurted out of her; an attempt to wipe the too-warm a look off his face.

It didn’t work. Not even a teensy bit.


Like a lullaby.

She sucked in her lower lip, an anxious tick.

His eyes flickered down to it… then they came back up, face gentling further. But an echo of something like unease brought a new tone to his expression and she wasn’t sure what that meant.

Yet he didn’t stop smiling.

Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

To be down here. Alone. With him. On a Sunday, when her guard was waaaay down to the floor. And with him so... amiable.

Still, she found herself replying to the question hidden in that simple sound, because he and I are masters at saying so much with so little. “The fundraiser.” She stated, watching as comprehension dawned. “I thought you’d be there with Sara. Or for Laurel.”

Expression light, his brow crinkled and he looked like she’d just said something unbelievably bizarre. “No.”

Stumped, she searched for words. “Oh.” And found none.

He shrugged and the play of musculature there was as intriguing as his biceps. “Wasn’t interested.” He exhaled. “Sara asked me to go and Laurel said that my presence as the Queen Heir might actually help but,” with an awkward head jerk, his face cinched a little, “it’s not exactly-”

“You’re scene?”

Like it was more air in the lungs than actual sound, his reply was whisper thin. “No. Not my scene.” Head shaking, he looked away to somewhere only he could see. “They know that.”
Yet, they’d still asked.
And he’d said no anyway.
To Sara. To Laurel.
That was… different.
She stared at him.
Something’s going on with him...

“What?” His question was so innocently asked; she had zero choice but to believe that he had no clue that what he’d just said would have been considered blasphemy – by him – not too long ago.

She cleared her throat. “Dig? Roy?” She asked.

“Dig’s taking a day to see Lyla.” Again? Ooh, things are getting serious between them. Or more serious, I should say more serious since they were married and all that. “And Roy,” he inhaled through his teeth, uh oh, “is with Thea.”

Not that he disapproved or anything but, Roy + Mirakuru +over-aggressive tendencies = equalled a very worried big brother.

“He’s been doing better.” She offered, trying to bring him back; to there. In the Foundry. Instead of that little corner of his mind where he believed that everything in his life could and would go wrong. “The yoga seems to have,” scrambling for a word she came up worrying absent, “done… something.” She winced.

Good job.

Since she thought she’d blown it, his response surprised her. “It’s definitely helped; I can tell when he’s training.” On the tail-end of a sigh, he looked her in the eye. “It was a good idea.”

Her smile turned rueful. “John thought it was crazy.”

“So did Sara.”

True. But again, she’d seen how Oliver reacted whenever Roy’s more emotional tendencies started to rear their ugly heads and had decided that any suggestion was worth a try.

He didn’t want to abandon him. And neither do I.

What she hadn’t betted on was Roy actually appreciating her yoga wisdom – she’d been practicing yoga and, on the side, Muay Tai kickboxing loosely for a few years now – and, even more strangely, Oliver frequenting their sessions... and sometimes joining in with them.

Shirtless.

Unhelpful. Completely unhelpful.

Still... it made for memorable sessions.

“It was a good choice.”

His mutter made her frown at him. “It was the right choice.”
He just looked at her.

“Oliver,” treading carefully, “I can’t presume to know the things you’ve seen but I don’t think taking away the few things Roy holds dear in this world is the answer.” And of the very few things Roy held dear, Thea was at the top. “If there’s something we’ve seen,” but can’t necessarily prove-yet, “it’s that Mirakuru exacerbates aggressive emotions already present in the host.” Slade Wilson was a tried and tested subject of hers. “I’m not a fan of chance, but since I don’t have much of a choice, I’d say that it has an effect on the hypothalamus: the area of the brain responsible for fight or flight? Maybe there was a flaw in the design. Maybe, instead of creating a calmer soldier, the Mirakuru directly interferes with the limbic system.” Like a cellular mortal combat. When he just looked at her, she pushed up from where she’d leant on her desk and took a step closer. “Bottom line. Asking Roy to break up with Thea? It’ll make all these weeks of progress mean nothing.” Felicity pictured Roy’s efforts the past few weeks. “He’s trying so hard, Oliver.” Like you are, but in a different way.

He nodded, as if still trying to convince himself - well, it was Thea so Felicity couldn’t blame him for being afraid of what might be - and it was almost contrite. “I know.”

But, since he was moving it so much, the top of his head kept rudely taking her attention.

Oh no, don’t say it-

“Can you just... ah...”

Head angling down slightly, he searched her face. “What?”

“Your hair.” She winced, biting down on her lip. “It’s distracting.”

You said it.

Totally flummoxed his eyes side-lined, flickering left to right. “Distracting?”

She understood. Totally. Since when did she care about his hair?

Well... since forever? I just never brought it up before. Is this what gradual sleep deprivation does to me? Not a fan of myself right now...

But she still spoke. “It’s tweaked.”

“And this is a problem?” He looked just as perplexed about this scenario as she. Ugh, and I’m the one who’d asked him.

Reaching up - her hand moving without any thought whatsoever - she yanked it back down before it could touch his hair. Stop it! “Could you just,” her nervous laugh sounded more like a gasp of shame, “run your hands through it?” She was so close to begging.

It just... he looked edible.

Damp. Shirtless. Fluffed hair. Oliver.

Staring at her, he blinked several times. “Run my hands through it.”

“Yes.” Before I do it for you. “Please.”

“...Okay.” The word was stressed, like, what the hell are you talking about? His brow creasing, he actually brought a hand up. “Like this?” Flattening it on his head, he wafted it haphazardly through the strands.
Now the top of his head looked like a porcupine.

She pressed her lips together. _Damn. Cute._

She should be questioning why he was actually doing what she was asking - _I should be telling him to put a shirt on too but, oops, I forgot_ - and she should already be upgrading her system. But instead-

“Nu uh.”

He sighed, probably more than slightly exasperated. And confused. “You do it.”

“Erm…” Blinking stupidly, she pointed to herself. “Me?” Because, _yes sir._

He shrugged. “You’re the one with the…”

He trailed off because her hand was already reaching up again. Her palm touched the top of his head, fingers ploughing through and _ooh._

Yes. Distracting. Wonderful. _Soft_; she just _knew_ it would be soft.

Keeping a practical mind-set, she focused on shifting his devil may care ‘do’ into an ‘Oliver’.

It was quick work, but she immediately noticed how he automatically bent his head and his knees so that she could reach the back of his skull. How he fell quiet and let her finish.

_Aw._

Though, his suddenly bunching musculature - emphasised by how he’d put his hands in his pockets and by how his shoulders curved as he leaned closer - wasn’t cute. Not at all.

Still… his eyes closed.

Just for that, she made sure each pass of her fingers included a brief press - tiny massages on his scalp of which she was a master of - between the folds. She shook her head at how easily the strands twisted and curved beneath her hand. “You’re hair’s ridiculous.” She breathed.

When it finally dawned on her, what she was doing, she froze. It was a brief thing, lasting barely 2 seconds. But she noticed. _He_ noticed.

Contact.

She’d focused on decreasing it between them for fear of being discovered by him, because touch was their assurance. _And there I go, just handing him an excuse to pass the dotted line._

But it was so difficult to be anything other than this with him. He made it easy to care about him.

With soft blinks as his eyes opened as he waited for her hands to drop and they absently graced the slope of his neck as they did, her fingers accidentally touching the outline of his ear before falling altogether.

She also did _not_ expect his quiet release of breath, or the way he took her in when he fully looked at her again.

Affection. As if he never took it for granted whenever he received it. As if it had been - or still was - long since absent from his life.
But his response was dry. “Is it okay now?”


His lashes flickered. “Hm.” Oddly enough he tensed; his lips tightened and he nodded to himself for whatever reason before asking, “Want to go for coffee?”

Her mouth opened and…and nothing.

“I heard you say you wanted a blueberry muffin.” Stepping closer once more, he was a mere foot in front of her now and the warmth naturally coming from his skin almost made her sigh. Like this, it was impossible to miss the way his eyes travelled the length of her body. “Or three. How about… Big Belly Burger?”

She was pretty sure her face suffered a genuine *twinge*, because how had him looking at her body make him change his mind from coffee at Catharsis to an unhealthy breakfast at Triple B?

She shook herself. “It’s,” and gave her watch a brief glance, “nearing 10:00am.”

Again, he shrugged. “So?”

“That isn’t too early for you?” *For huge beef burgers?*

He made a noncommittal sound. “I didn’t eat much of anything yesterday.” Yep, from what she’d seen, it was at least honest. “And neither did you.” He added. Quietly.

Cautiously.

She didn’t know he’d been watching that closely.

Though she felt her inner warning sirens blare, the mere idea of hot food and shakes crushed any and all her qualms. Plus...

Dinner with Oliver.

It would be just them two. Something they hadn’t done in a couple of months. Something she missed and something she treasured. And yet...

She tilted her skull. “Who are you and what have you done with Oliver Queen?”

She felt the overwhelming need to burst out laughing at the way his eyes went huge.

“How?”

“A full fat, pre-noon serving of deep fried unhealthy things coming from the man who can, has and always will put Arnold Schwarzenegger to shame and who had, prior to this, lectured *me* on *my* food choices. Dim Sum for one not included.”

Deliberately fluttering her lashes – once, twice, three times, four – she watched as he got the tease.

And... he smiled.

*Hi there.*

Like a ray of pure sunlight.
A rough sound escaped him, like he’d swallowed a pinecone. “Sounds like a douche.”

This time she did laugh; a surprised snort really.

He shook his head in a *I can’t believe you said that or that I said what I said or that we’re talking like this and it’s been a super long time since I did this with another human being* kind of way. “Doesn’t a salad come with most orders?” He teased.

Breathing out through her nose, she nodded with a dozy kind of smile. “Yeah.”

“So,” his hands still in his pockets, he shrugged once more. “Greasy burgers and fries?”

“Oh,”

“Sound good?”

“Yes. Very good.”

“Good.”

Gesturing towards his chest she cleared her throat, *because I’m completely copasetic.* “You’ll have to put on a shirt though.”

Arching a brow, she caught the quirk of his lips. “You want me to cover up?” Still, he moved away towards his small cupboard of spare clothes.

“If you can manage it.”

She’d replied without thinking, watching the way he shook his head… but then she backtracked as he shucked on a Henley. *Did he just say…*

**“You want me to cover up?”**

As if he’d deliberately kept his shirt off?

Because he knew she liked how he looked without it on? Because… he secretly enjoyed how she tried *not* to ogle every muscle on his superhuman physique?

Or maybe, he was simply in the mood to tease.

Thinking as he came back to her - his keys jangling in one a hand as the other stuffed his wallet down the back pocket of those superbly tight jeans of his - she figured she was reading way too much into this because she was tired, hungry and too emotional to ask for the hug she desperately needed. Plus, it was Sunday. Sunday didn’t require a person to be as spot on as a Saturday did.

His feet were in his boots faster than her thoughts allowed her to process.

“You ready?” He asked from where he was sat, his heel on top of the seat with him as bent over to tie his laces.

She pulled her bag back onto her shoulder. “Yep.”

They were walking towards the side door when Oliver suddenly grasped her bicep.

Heart hammering, *what did he see,* she surreptitiously checked her wrists; her blouse hadn’t rolled up far enough. *So, what is it?* She turned her head to look at him. She needn’t have worried.
His voice was quiet, eyes flickering briefly to her and shoulders but the check was perfunctory, before he looked back to the door. “No coat?” He input the code and it punched through, opening them to a cool breeze.

Relief hit her as he moved her to walk ahead of him - his hand still holding her bicep – and she lifted her other arm in point. “Long sleeves.”

A flicker of a frown made her wonder…

But then they were walking down the alley towards… towards his bike. His Ducati. He chose a key, notching it between his fingers like he would an arrow.

Mouth open, she looked from him, to the bike and back again.

“Felicity?”

Brows high to the sky, she yelped. “We’re going on your bike?”

Taking his helmet in one hand, he nodded and gestured towards her mini. “It’ll be easier than taking your, ah, car.”

Yes, he’d made it abundantly clear how he felt about the limited space in her car long ago.

“I’ve never been on a motorbike before.” She blurted out, wanting to smite herself down; why am I ruining this? It’s his bike and he wants me on it. It’s an end of discussion type stipulation.

Speaking low - and why his tone was husky this very fine morning, she questioned not a bit - he passed her the helmet. “I know.”

Again, her head went from him, to his bike and back again. “What if I do something wrong?”

What if I get us pulled over? Or worse, what if I freak out in between oncoming traffic? What if she nicked it? Or, what if she tipped too far sideways?

“You won’t.”

He sounded so sure.

“How do you know?”

For a moment, he just looked at her.

“Two things.” Abruptly, he took the helmet from her frozen hands and placed it on the chain beside the bike. “First,” he straightened, “I’ve seen you drive and you have nothing to worry about.”

True; she could drive anything.

“Second… you’re with me.” The muscles in his face and shoulders were so relaxed and she realised it was because he’d spoken truth. A veritable fact. She had nothing to worry about because she was with him and he would keep her safe. And it loosened him, that honesty.

He liked that certainty. And he liked it more that she knew that she would always be safe with him.

Taking a deep breath, she began to smile but it was hesitant. “I won’t deny that I’ve been wondering what it’s like to be on one of those.”
Desperately wishing she knew what it was like to be Sara. To be on the back of the bike of her partner and revel as the wind blew her hair about face, as his body controlled the bike from between her thighs. A level of intimacy she hadn’t dared hope to share with him, ever. Yet, here they were.

And it was this buried dream that made her ask before they set about doing just that. “Are you sure?”

“Very.”

“Okay. Then no helmet.” She raised a hand before he could object. “Trust me Oliver; you do not want me wearing that unless you like mild concussions to the back of the head whilst driving.”

He moved his head in a way that told her he clearly thought she was being a little overdramatic.

“Besides.” Again, she spoke before he could and wanted to comment on the way his lips pressed together. “This way you can show me just how good you really are.”

There was a moment’s silence as both parties examined the many, many hidden messages in that sentence.

Locked in a stare, the muscles in Oliver’s throat twitched, tensing. Clearing said throat, Oliver arched a brow.

Why do I do this to myself? “I don’t know how I keep getting myself into these word dramas.” A hand came up to rub her forehead as then sun hit her eyes and oh, the sun made him look so…

She groaned at him. “Is it too late to take it back?”

His lips twitched.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean, how good you are with balance.” Then she blinked, eyes flying back to his carefully calm face. “On your bike.” She stressed, purely platonic Oliver. “How good you are on your bike.”

Lips still pressed together, he nodded super slowly. “Mm hm.”

Frack.

But he grinned and it was such a little boy grin, something she hadn’t expected to see - not ever - that her eyes narrowed at him good naturedly.

“I’m glad you find my verbal incontinence so amusing Mr Queen.”

“Come on.”

He looked so light and at ease.

Following him to the bike, he sat astride it and held out a hand to her. No second guessing, no thinking ‘what if this and that’. She gripped his palm and it was almost automatic how she slid onto the Ducati - like she’d done it with him before and would do so again - slipping in behind him and using his shoulders for balance as she settled herself. Her hands slid briefly down his back before falling into her lap-

“-Hold onto me tight.”

Her gaze flew up to his face at the memory those words brought to the surface. From her position and the slight tilt of his head in her direction…
Hair not too short, it didn’t move in the simple breeze and scruff covered jaw line was the most obvious feature to look at but, she went to the one eye she could partially see instead.

She swore his eyes were dancing.

Brushing her fringe behind her ear, she moved her arms around him, until her hands were lightly - barely - pressed to each side of his ribcage.

He wasn’t wearing a coat; it was a brutal reminder of who he was and is and wow. So she was basically trying not to feel him up. Being this close wasn’t something either of them was used-

“Tighter.” He repeated.

Oh. Okay. Never mind.

Kicking his bike into gear, she did as asked. She held on tight, her legs tightening automatically around his contracting thighs, her front pressed beautifully to his back, her fingers interlocking against his sternum.

Abs. So many abs…

She felt him take a deep breath, moving with him, before he revved into gear and shiver of excitement curling into her gut as he pulled out of the Lot.

Then all thoughts fled her mind as they flew down the road.

And for a moment… she was free.
I hope you enjoy this guys; I was surprised by what the characters forced me to write but pleased nonetheless...
A moment of peace before it all goes to hell.

_I didn’t expect this._

For it to feel like everything she’d never realised she’d wanted before.

The wind in her face, the unmitigated sense of freedom, the sensation - however unrealistic - of invulnerability; that they were immortal on the road and nothing could ever stop or catch up to them - and the closeness within a cocoon of expected safety, like it was guaranteed.

A cocoon called Oliver.

_But I don’t need to be safe._

It was true; she didn’t. Being safe meant living a life of tedious normalcy and even then the illusion of ‘safe’ _couldn’t_ be 100% guaranteed. Accidents happen. Injuries occur. Safe was an _‘if’_ component in her life; not a given.
...So how was he doing this? How was he making her feel this?

Feel... safe. When she had every reason in the world not to feel safe.

All this... Just by taking a ride. By turning the world to silence with the rumble of his Ducati. Colouring it gold from grey.

Oliver.

He did that; he gave that to her, that wide open space at his back. As if he were saying ‘I'm here; you're not alone’.

And he did it without trying. He did it not knowing. Not realising how much she needed it, because she hadn’t realised it either.

She’d been fine until... this. Until they were there; on his bike and driving. The strands of her hair a caress on her face, his body a blanket of assurance, his gesture for lunch a means of keeping her near even as her secret kept her far from him...

Trying to save her, again. And he. Did. Not. Know.

He didn’t know he could do that.

How that could be, was beyond her. Hadn’t any woman told him – shown him – the power of his kindness, his heart?

And all this was sitting right between her thighs; his back to her front.

It wasn’t even about how it physically felt - it felt amazing by the way - or how he looked in his jeans from behind.

It was how every single inch of him seemed to fit every single inch of her.

How it hit her, that revelation - rudely, achingly - that she’d been missing something; a piece of herself that wasn’t herself, but belonged to her regardless. Something that she would never have. And how she knew that, when this ride was over, she’d feel the loss acutely.

Yes. Being close... it was damming. Just as it was freeing.

Just as she knew she’d choose to live in this moment anyway, knowing the return would hurt. Like with Physics, momentum is a bitch. One perfect moment in time...

With the man she loved. A man who didn’t know she loved him and probably never would. But he still gave her this regardless. For free. It made her want to hold on tight and never let go.

Not that she ever could...

Just enjoy this.

It was a slow arch, how she leaned away from his body; completely at ease in a way she’d forgotten to feel. Her hands and fingers were planted at his sides and she tilted her head back to the lukewarm sun. And she closed her eyes.

He revved up the bike.

Breathe.
She did. Deep breaths, feeling the thrumming roll beneath her.

Feeling how his body moved with the vehicle, feeling how his hand would sometimes leave the bars to land on her knee; a signal that he was about to turn. Feeling how his chest would contract and subtract under her hands as the bike pushed and pulled at them. Seeing that sliver edge of a smile she barely caught from him when the loose strands of her hair tickled the back of his neck.

It was a deeply masculine sensation.

She understood now; why he’d go back out on his bike after a long night of hunting criminals, why he’d take the time before meeting with family or with friends, to ride through the city. Why sometimes, without any reason whatsoever, he’d take the Ducati for a spin in the early hours of the morning…

She wondered what it would feel like; taking that ride at 3 or 4 in the morning…

Invigorating. Relieving. Liberating-

Lonely.

The thought was intrusive. Almost painful.

As calming as a joyride could be, there must have been at least one moment, somewhere, where he’d considered leaving the city. Just… escaping. On his bike. By himself. Like dust in the wind.

Simply because he thought there was no one in the city who needed him more than he needed them.

_I need him._ The way she needed him, was needy to the tenth degree. She wouldn’t even know where to start. So she’d never tell him. What she would do, is make him see he was needed and loved so much by those around him.

In the meantime, she’d just let herself have this. This one moment. Have the feel of him pressed against her, even as loose as it was.

_“You’re with me.”_

She was. Always.

And because she was with him, she knew she was safe. That she could simply… let go.

And let him take care of her as he drove.

Like coming home from a long, _long_, day at a job that tried to break her into little pieces; here he was, patching her up. Without realising what this meant to her.

Oliver was a special kind of blind.

It had been beyond her how a ride on the back of a motorcycle could both soothe and excite, but it could. It did. And now she knew it, she wanted more. Wanted it again to take her away, to make her dream, even when she _shouldn’t_.

But, _oh_, how she did…
“I’ll get us a table.”

Oliver nodded at her, heading for the waitress at the counter.

His fingers left hers as they moved away from each other and it hit her then, that they’d been holding hands since he’d tugged her off the bike. And she hadn’t noticed the problem with that. Now, however, it swam to the forefront of her brain and wouldn’t leave.

It was just that… they didn’t usually hold hands or-

I hate my brain. It was her one gift; what made her stand apart but, today I hate my brain.

Because the moment it was gone - his hand - she missed it. That innocent touch.

For I am beyond help. Eyes rolling, yep; growing beyond the boundaries of pathetic too; she wandered down the aisle, immediately choosing a booth towards the bottom end and away from the windows; shying away from exposure.

Checking her sleeves - they weren’t just long; they almost stuck to her wrists because tight - she slid into the booth, glancing at the laminated pictorial menu and grimacing when she didn’t see anything light for the stomach.

Am I even hungry? Her lips twisted in thought. Do I have an appetite? You kind of needed one for BBB. She wondered how much she could actually stomach. A club salad? Doubt I can eat what I normally do…

Which was… a lot.

I stress eat. Or I used to.

Ice cream didn’t quite cut it anymore.

She was contemplating the pros and cons of a chicken wrap with refillable soda, when she remembered about the other guy- Oliver? He still hadn’t joined her. What, is he flirting with the waitress? Not that he would whilst here with another woman, friend or no, because he’d consider it the height of rudeness.

Tapping her fingers against the table, sod it, she half stood and leaned slightly forwards since the counter was just outside her scope of vision…

Oliver was indeed talking to the waitress. But he wasn’t flirting. He was paying.

Already?

She blinked. Once. Then several times. He ordered for me?

Um... okay.

Oliver never did that.

Yes, he’d pay - in fact he always paid when it came to Big Belly and whenever she tried to pull out her purse, either he or Dig wouldn’t stand for it; so she substituted with morning coffees for three -
but he’d never presume to outright order for her. Even if he did know exactly what she wanted or liked, he always left room for a change of mind.

Eyes tapering slightly, she watched Oliver finally make his way over and on route he snatched up a carrier of requisite condiments from a nearby stall, placing it to the side of their table when he arrived.

With a small smile gracing his lips, Oliver slowed way the hell down as he reached her and her eyes followed, going from the ketchup and the mustard to him whilst he sat.

He got comfortable - the seats were quite roomy but she wasn’t a vigilante extraordinaire three times as big as she was so she didn’t judge - and looked out at the rest of the lightly filled restaurant, therefore ignoring her expectant expression and the question-mark mixed in with it.

He made no move to look at the menu either.

*Okay,* feeling a little tense and *a lot* mentally strained - *long night remember* - she spoke, “Oliver?”

Eyebrows lifting, he blinked innocently in her direction.

…She really should have chosen a seat at the front.

They may have been away from the window but with the sun just overhead, light shone gently on his back and it wasn’t hindering, wasn’t blinding. Broad shouldered, he blocked any unwanted rays, but it threw Oliver’s already stunning features into overdrive. Illuminating his already overwhelming presence, tinting the tips of his dirty blonde hair a golden summer and emphasising the deeper blue of his irises and the natural peach colour of his skin…

It took everything she had not to figuratively drift away.

*Focus Felicity.* And she did, on his expression; finding he at least had the decency right then to look a tad awkward. His open gaze was a smoke screen; there was something going on behind his eyes.

Searching them, she asked. “What is it?”

Looking briefly to the left, a pucker showed up at the bridge of his nose. He looked *down,* a clear *deflection* coming a *mile* away.

So she headed it off. “Nuh uh. Don’t think I didn’t see you.” Her finger flicked towards the till. “You ordered for me. And I’m guessing you ordered a lot.”

It wasn’t a problem and her tone told him so, but the why of it was a mystery. As was the way he was behaving.

With both forearms resting flat, his thumb rubbed at his palm. His stare went there, to his hands and whatever memories they made him revisit. “I just wanted to do something for you.”

It was almost *mumbled.* Mumbled. *Oliver and mumbled… nope.* Mr Badass Vigilante, the elusive *Arrow,* the man with four sets of abs… and he sounded like a little boy.

And… the admittance. *I just wanted to do something for you.* What could she do with that?

It was enough to have her lean forwards. “Hey.” Her tone was tender, almost a hum, because this wasn’t a big deal, but…

This also wasn’t chivalry.
Chivalry wasn’t Oliver.

That isn’t to say he didn’t have manners; he had them in abundance. At his core, he was a gentleman. But he also seemed to instinctively understand that tiny line a lot of women erected between manners and being so overly gallant it was seen as sexism.

Ordering for a date was, sure, cheesy, but for some it also bordered on controlling and he’d known enough volatile, strong minded women who didn’t care for it to try. So what was he doing?

Or am I just in a different category?

And where did this hesitancy come from? He was never hesitant; not with her. Not ever. It was like an actual rule between them; always honest, always sincere, no hiding.

A deep exhale left him and on the end of that breath, he stated, “You didn’t eat yesterday.”

The sheer something on his face made her soften towards him. “I think we already established that.”

His thumb stopped worrying his hand and he looked up at her with eyes that were oddly clear. Eyes that were quiet- how eyes could be quiet, only Oliver seemed to know. “We spent half the day at Queen Consolidated, two hours at Verdant and the rest of the night in the Foundry.” His tone and manner were also quiet. Serious too and it disconcerted her. “We ordered Italian from Russo’s.” They did, at 7pm the night before. “You were working the monitors till late but we left you some.”

“I know, I ate-”

He cut in. “You didn’t eat it.”

“Oliver, I-”

“I know you didn’t because I checked the trash after you threw it out.”

Eyebrows arching, she looked at him. He’d looked through my trash?

“I didn’t see you eat at all yesterday.”

Why was he taking this so seriously?

There were two threads to his words: searching through what she’d thrown away implied he’d been watching her quite thoroughly and, more worryingly, he’d noticed just how severe her decrease in appetite actually was.

But how could she have an appetite with Slade Wilson in her life?

Felicity wasn’t a large woman. And contrary to popular belief, IT girl or not she did work out. Sitting on a chair for several hours makes a girl paranoid about her hipline, so she took the time to run. She also loved her food and took great pleasure in appreciating every single morsel.

So, throwing away expensive and ridiculously fabulous tasting food? It wasn’t like her, making it noticeable. Even if she thought she’d been stealthy, pretending to eat a piece here, some spaghetti there… she’d failed.

His stare was too intense, probing.

“Oliver, this isn’t something you need to worry about.” Backpedalling at how this only served to make his expression all the more attentive, she tried for persuasive reasoning. “Yesterday, I wasn’t
feeling like myself. I didn’t want to worry anybody about it since it wasn’t a big deal.”

“It was a big deal.” It was gentle but firm and it silenced her. “You not eating is a big deal.” Again, there was something there... something dark that puzzled her. As if he wasn’t just speaking about the day before. “Whatever the reason - you obviously don’t want to share it - I wanted to make sure you ate something substantial. With me.”

The words where I can make sure you finish could have fit at the end there perfectly.

It should have been annoying. It should have raised her hackles that he’d try to control the situation, it should have made her feel anything but relieved.

Brows joining, she shook her head, throw him off. But she wasn’t on her A-game. “That’s kind of you but-”

“You’ve lost weight.” He countered, cutting to the meat of his unease, his lips tightening. Frack; it really is obvious. “Weight you didn’t need to lose.” Pinned to the chair by the depth in his eyes and in his voice, she could only wonder at just how closely he’d been watching her. “I need you to eat something more than a salad.”

Lips pressed together, his hands splayed out on the table. His head dipped and he exhaled. This was probably more unsettling for him than her; since when had he ever had to worry about her like this?

Dig’s vendetta. Roy’s aggression. Sara’s opposing belief system. Moira’s lies. Thea’s innocence and his efforts in keeping her that way. QC’s success… A couple of months ago, he’d mentioned his concern for Laurel and her behaviour both pre and post the revelation of her pill and alcohol addiction.

And now he’s worrying about me. It just showed how much he cared that he’d pushed past the privacy line and actually said something.

But she’d never, ever wanted him to worry about her.

A slow, languid ease settled deep inside her chest and she knew her face echoed every bit of the affection she had for him. “Why do you look like you’re waiting for a firing squad?”

Hitting the mark, immediately the tension in his shoulders lifted. “I didn’t want to push you.”

He looked so relieved.

Somewhat repentant, she said, “Showing concern for a friend isn’t exactly something that’ll throw you to the wolves Oliver.”

“You’ve been… a little… distant lately. Personally.” Like he thought he was treading on thin ice, his words were measured. Slow to come. Timid. Oliver. “I wasn’t sure you’d be… open to talking about it.”

Look what I’ve done.

In taking a step back - purely for the purpose of self-preservation - not only had she managed to increase his worry, she’d made him think he had to be careful with her.

I am the last person he needs to be careful with.

It wasn’t even half a lie.
But she’d also made him feel, like maybe… she was pushing him away, just him. In a very real way, she had been.

Closing her eyes, she felt done in. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like you had to step on eggshells.”

“I’ve never walked on eggshells with you.” That warmth in his voice made his already super masculine tenor so much more so and she opened her eyes to find his own reflecting his words. “You wouldn’t let me if I tried.”

Very true.

Lounging back in her seat - suddenly very comfortable - she smiled at him.

And his responding smile was like a drop of rain. Seemingly small and harmless, but the moment it fully spread across his mouth she felt it ripple everywhere.

She’d say it was strange that her very small smile made him look at her that way but… he hadn’t had much look with the fairer sex lately.

After three foundation shaking arguments this week, his confidence had taken a hit. Two of them were major catastrophes. The first had been unavoidable and with Sara during Helena’s return to Starling; she and Dig had left in a hurry during that one. The second, also unavoidable, with Roy about keeping a leash on his temper. Luckily, they’d since found a compromise. But he’d also butted heads with Laurel. Not the near-to shouting match he’d gotten into with Sara, but something much more personal that had made the light in his features dim and Laurel’s almost severe countenance soften.

Then there was his mother… who he wasn’t speaking to. But no matter how much he couldn’t look at her without anger being his go-to emotion, he still loved her, which made it all the worse.

Thea was probably the only person he’d had even an ounce of luck with recently. But he knew the cost of the secrets he was keeping from her. Borrowed time. The first secret, that he was the Arrow, was one he could live with retaining. The second was a secret that weighed on his soul.

Ergo, his reticence with Moira Queen.

And his very fast hook-up with Sara Lance, though Felicity had already considered the psychological ramifications of passive aggressive tendencies taking root in overtly aggressive men leading to sex almost as retribution…

And it was past time she stopped thinking about that. “So,” she finally breathed, “what did you order me?”

The smile didn’t leave him. “Wait and see.”

A Few Minutes Later…

Her finger stroked at the froth alongside her cup of cappuccino goodness that Oliver had asked to
have served to them before their meal. “So how long had you been awake before I got to the Foundry this morning?”

Oliver took a healthy drought of his own foam-covered coffee. “About an hour…” Catching her arched brow, he sighed. “I’ve been awake since four.”

“What?” As he replied - a soft yeah - she put her finger to her mouth, licking the milk and chocolate off. “Oh. That’s a mountain load of suck.”

He hummed an agreement but obviously caught the hidden something in her tone. “What is it?”

In a brief flash, her eyes went to his before hustling back to her coffee. “Just…” She shook her head, feeling foolish. “It doesn’t matter.”

He frowned. “You can tell me.”

Ugh, you started it, might as well finish. “It’s just… I was going to come down earlier but…” she hadn’t known he’d be awake. And she absolutely hadn’t wanted to intrude on what could have been a very personal moment between him and Sara.

He placed his cup on the table. “You were awake at 4?”

“God, yes.” And no, it wasn’t a happy groan.

“Felicity.” A statement, a question, a demand, unease and affection, all rolled into one word, one name. And his gaze spoke volumes; a novel of contradicting sentiments and concerns forcing his brow to tip and the muscles of his face contract. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

Oh, that was a laden question.

Deep, deep, breaths - her fingers tapping against her cup - she considered how to answer because it had been a slip of the tongue, completely accidental. But didn’t psychologists say that there are no accidents?

She felt it rising, that black pit inside her. It couldn’t touch him; she wouldn’t let it.

“It’s something I’m used to.” Getting used to. “Like my mind doesn’t want to switch off?” Said as a question, she realised this was, at least, partly true. “As if there’s too much stuff in there and it’s clamoured and I haven’t done a deep clean in a while or something.”

It didn’t wipe his frown away. “What did you do when you were at MIT?” When she was surrounded by computers and things that would keep her mind awake at night.

And because it was such a surprising question, her reply was blunt, quick and not even remotely thought about.

“Sex.”

He blinked.

Uh… blushing crimson, her brain stumbled to a halt; server crashing, smoke rising.

She had a rule - one rule - but the rule had obviously run away for cover because said rule stated that Oliver Queen plus sex - talking about it or otherwise - was a no-go because, duh! I’m Felicity Smoak and I can’t keep my mouth shut.
She couldn’t even babble her way out of it!

In a fast move, his lips pressed together and she watched – humiliation, my old-new friend, curling her insides - as he tried to gnaw down a grin. Again, he failed. Utterly.

He opened his mouth and, when no words came, closed it. Opened it again. Shook his head and only deep concentration prevented him from breaking.

Finally he coughed out, “Sex?”

The blush flared into a flat out red blaze.

Groaning, she brought a hand up to cover her eyes.

A hiccupped inhale told her all she pretty much needed to know about where his mind was at. “Sex.” He repeated and by his tone... yep; he was having way too much fun.

She tried - she really did - not to smile. She just knew he was smirking at her. Me and my big mouth. Rueful, her smile became huge without her telling it to and it actually hurt to hold back.

Still, she should have learned this lesson thoroughly by now. “If my mouth runs away with me one more time…” She moaned.

“You wouldn’t be you without at least one sexual reference on a Sunday morning.”

“Oliver.”

On the edge of a bark but still very hushed, the breathiest of laughs burst out of him - like he was trying to keep it together, keep it as quiet as possible but didn’t know quite how to do that because it was unfamiliar - and the beautiful way it sounded made her pull her hand away from her tomato red face, to see.

It… he, looked wonderful.

Biting down on her lip, she watched him try to control himself. Probably realising he had zero practice controlling laughter - since when did he ever all-out laugh - his eyes flickered to hers. His cheek twitched and his jaw line trembled in effort.

Lips pursed now - she was still smiling - she retorted, “Thank you,” and he choked on a breath because her neck had actually gone mottled, “thank you very much.”

Shoulders shaking, he lifted a hand - a ‘please stop making me laugh’ sign - and her mortification was cut in half.

So what if she’d had a healthy sex life in college - past tense noted - he had no room to talk. But if it made him laugh like that, then fine. I’ll grin and bear it.

Literally.

This literal manifestation made her bring her half empty mug back towards her face, covering that grin as both hands cupped it. She watched Oliver chew on the inside of his mouth, clearing his throat again and basically using a considerable amount of effort to stay so very chill.

Chin lifting, he met her pointed - coy - stare over her glasses. His smirk was practically shining out of his eyes as leant over the table on his forearms.
“So… sex?” His words were an intoned rumble from somewhere in his chest.

A purr.

For some reason she felt it on her hips, as though he’d pawed there with his fingers.

Just for effect, she fluttered her lashes - feeling ridiculous and a little naughty - and muttered. “Lots of it. Second year.”

Perfectly at ease - sex didn’t faze him, though she thought talking to her about it in such a casual way absolutely would - he gently blinked at her. “Did it work?”

Ruminating, she briefly glanced to the side. “Depended on the guy.”

Where they actually having this conversation?

“Where there a lot of guys?”

She took it exactly as he’d wanted her to: a curious question from a very good friend. “In college? Just two.” And a pathetic one-time since she’d moved to Starling. She took a sip and swallowed. He didn’t move away. “Cooper, a boyfriend I had for roughly a year and… Chad.” Wait for it…

His following blink was so hard she swore she heard his eyelid close then open. “Chad?”

Don’t grin. “Chad.”

Two blinks this time; his face the epitome of deadpan. “You slept with a guy called Chad?”

“Chad the 3rd actually, but yes.” A secret smile was aimed at her coffee. She knew Oliver could see it and was probably wondering why it was there. His reaction was all the more hilarious because it had been her reaction when Mr Fantastic told her his name after their first hard and fast tumble. “I did.”

“Chad the 3rd?”

She frowned at him. “Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

“Did Chad help you sleep?” His expression said ‘for putting up with such a stupid name, he’d have better helped’.

She almost snorted. “Very much so. At least, during exam season. It didn’t last long.” About three weeks.

Mouth in an ‘oh’ shape, his eyes fell to the table. “So he was…” searching for a word, he glanced back at her, “good?”

She gave a little ruminating shrug. “During.”

That shut him up for a moment. And because she instinctively knew that Oliver Queen would be a phenomenal partner in bed, she knew that he understood it to mean that Chad was good at reaching orgasm, but not good at extending foreplay. Or going at it slowly. Fast, always fast. Screwing, not love making.

Pity.

Her lips pressed together. Was it too much to ask to find someone that wants to do both?
Tapered brow soft in thought, he was still looking at her. Eyes a little - a lot – pleasantly taken by the whole conversation. Then he totally surprised her.

“Which did you…”

Guessing what he was trying to ask, she blinked. “Which did I find the most…capable?”

It didn’t hit either of them that talking about the details of her former sex life might be a little unusual for the two of them.

They’d discussed many things over the past 18 months. Sex and romance - though they weren’t necessarily mutually exclusive - had occasionally bumped notice but they’d never done this, this…banter. With brutal honesty attached. And she could only guess that he talked to Dig about it; the way only men could.

But she liked this; the comforting quality only a trusted friend could provide, a person who wouldn’t judge her words and vice versa to be something lacking. The expression on his face made it all the more enticing. An expression that spoke of how awkward it should be talking to her about this yet finding that it wasn’t, which probably made it deeply surreal to him.

He hadn’t expected this either, but he was enjoying it regardless.

And it showed when he exhaled. “Yes.”

“Honestly?” Because, did he really want to know this? By the earnest way he looked as he slid as close as he could over the table without impeding on her personal space, an arm circling his coffee, he really did. “Chad. But only just. He was a little older than me but we were more of a mutually beneficial relationship, so there were no issues when the time came to stop.”

She had to admit, this was a little weird to explain to him.

Once she would have never considered sex without strings, but she’d been in that stressed out phase of completing her finals for her Master’s and trying not to think of the fiasco involving the man she thought she’d graduate with before he’d ended up on the opposite side of life. As in death.

She’d been lonely. And alone, which were two very different things. “Cooper was… good,” her eyes flickered to him shyly and his smile grew, “great even, but to sleep? Really sleep and not wake up?” In those early dawn hours were that extra hour meant the world and your brain wouldn’t shut up to let you take it? “Coop knew about love making,” she murmured, seeing the area around Oliver’s eyes soften, “but I don’t know.” She sighed, “Sometimes you just need to get fucked-”

Cutting off the word too late, like a spasm, she blew the remaining air in her lungs in a whistle through her teeth. Like string, self-conscious shame weaved into her rib cage.

Acting like she was all that, and oh she really wasn’t, Felicity - stretching her mouth because it was suddenly horrifically dry and laminating her lack of vernacular control - puttered her hands across the table and nudging the salt and pepper shakers to avoid his stare.

But that was impossible.

Unnecessarily pushing her glasses up her nose - internally dying - she caught sight of his fist tight on the table and peeked at him sideways…

And promptly burst out laughing.
He looked like he’d been mentally shot out of a canon.

Like shock had locked him in place, his mouth was open and his pupils were blown wide.

Hands quickly coming up so quickly over her face it was like a slap, oh my God, she stared right back, feeling so light. Not thinking about dark thoughts and darker memories, not hearing words in a voice that followed her home.

No longer flushed like before, she was breathless - and very much beaming - because she was delighted and diverted, even as she was horrified at herself by his reaction.

Something seemed to snap back in place and he rapidly blinked as this indescribable sound left him. Like he’d been kicked in the crotch whilst inhaling helium. He was frozen, his brain probably stuck on ‘PROCESSING’.

Then out of nowhere, his blank expression broke into a thousand little pieces and this helpless, gasping chuckle left him. “I… that was the last thing I expected you to say.” Incredulous eyes swept over her.

She was still laughing, even with her hands over her face. “I-I’m sorry.”

Face tinged pink, the Arrow looked away and his smile - revealing teeth - was magnificent when he shook his head, breathing deep. “Felicity Smoak.”

Throaty. His voice was throaty; his tone touching seduction. It was almost overwhelming, hearing her name said like that.

His mouth opened again… but it was several seconds before he mouthed, “Fucked,” as if he was trying out the feel of it in his mouth.

It hit her stomach at 100 miles per hour.

His tongue swept over his bottom lip.

That is so not fair.

And a shiver brushed over her when he looked her way again. “I know,” oh husky was definitely the new sexy, “exactly what you mean.”

That sometimes you just need to get fucked.

Don’t be embarrassed, his seemed to tell her as they held her there with him; both feeling that mutual - basic - flash of appreciative agreement. An understanding that you can be any kind of person, decent, nefarious, rich, or poor and still have the same wants, the same needs, the same drives…

And once, maybe weeks prior or maybe four years ago, she and Oliver had needed to get fucked.

So… they had.

Just in differing ways.

But oddly, it was one of the nicest things she’d ever been told. Even if it wasn’t said with words, his gaze told her that, in this at least, he got her.

Felicity was a woman and, if he hadn’t seen it before – she was very sure he had – he definitely saw it now. Saw it and liked it. Saw it and found something there they had in common.
Their stare lasted roughly ten seconds longer than the one second it maybe should have. Then, with the residual burn of the mortification flowing over her she closed her eyes, still smiling and shaking her head before bowing down until her forehead touched the table.

Her whine was more a laugh than a cry.

How could he do this to her, with her? So easily making her forget the horrors lurking, waiting out there for her. It was a gift. In Big Belly, over burgers and Shakes. She’d treasure this memory. Take it with her into the dark.

…She felt something lightly touch the back of her head; it felt like the tip of his nose.

Like he’d bowed his head to hers, nudging.

What?

“Your order will be here in a minute!”

The waitress.

Both moving back and sitting straight again in her seat she heard Oliver mutter, “we should do this more often,” as the waitress cleared away their now-empty cups.

She couldn’t help but agree.

Because there was no painful silence, no feelings of ‘I shouldn’t have said that’, or ‘how I am going to look at him now’, having had their conversation veer in a completely unexpected direction.

He looked happy.

And that was all she’d ever wanted for him.

She’d been right; he’d ordered a lot.

Not that she cared.

She moaned blissfully and muttered, “I take it back.” It was a little muffled as her mouth combated against onion rings and crispy curly fries.

“Take what back?” Ahead of her in their conjugal race to asphyxiate themselves via good food, he spoke around thick beef patties, salad and a brioche, burger-bap.

She swallowed, taking precious seconds that weren’t spent eating this ambrosia to say, “The teeny-tiny lecture I’d thought up for when our plates came. Something about wasting money or food…” Half absentminded, half ‘I don’t care anymore’; she left her sentence in the wind to bite down on her half-pound beef burger.

Glorious.
“Yeah.” He intoned, wolfing down a further third of his burger before reaching for his shake- he’d ordered them both shakes too.

To be precise he’d ordered two large portions of curly fries, wedges and onion rings and two Big Belly Supers. Basically; double, half pound beef burgers with salad and relish, bacon (for him) and cheese (for her) with extra pickles. Plus two large vanilla milkshakes. Heaven.

He took a long draft before, “So tell me…”

With a full mouth she could only blink up at him, a brow quirking over her glasses.

Eyes searching her face, he seemed to deliberate something. “You could have come to the Foundry.”

Mouth still muffled, her head tilted in question.

“This morning.” His stare dashed from the wedges he was devouring to her face and back again. Casual-like. “You said that you’d been awake for hours,” he munched through on his conquest of the wedges, “before you came to the Foundry.” He popped in one final particularly golden-brown wedge and exhaled down his nose as he chewed then swallowed; taking a moment to just look at her.

“You could have come in sooner.” He stated.

Frowning slightly, Felicity swallowed; licking the trace amounts of batter from her lips. “At 3am?” It was meant as a joke but the way his eyes suddenly flashed she wanted to take it back immediately.

“You were awake at 3am?” He stared at her.

She shrugged, responding by cavalierly biting down on her burger again, attempting another smile.

But he was utterly serious. “If you’re awake at 3am, I want you down there.”

Ignoring the sudden swift - and very heated - images his tone alone invoked, Felicity indicated her head slightly but it warred with a slight unease’s so it made it look like she was shaking off a fly. “I didn’t want to intrude on you and Sara.”

Which was a perfectly decent response. The right response, surely.

The way his jaw suddenly tightened, the way his brows broke in the middle, made her think confusingly otherwise.

“Felicity,” he started. Then stopped, looking about him and taking a breath. He looked so baffled by her words. “Me and Sara… we aren’t together anymore.”

It hit her like an axe to the skull, “what?” She breathed.

“We broke it off days ago.”

“Days ago…” she felt stuck in time - in the traffic of her mind - as her eyes slowly widened.

He nodded. “During… Helena.”

One word. A name. It was all she required.

Tuesday.
He’d seemed the same the next day, the same Oliver who been prowling around for the past month. The only difference? He’d gone back into QC. There had been no indication that he’d split up from a beloved girlfriend, no... nothing.

But, still…

“Oliver, I... I’m so sorry.”

An honest flash of pain echoed like a scream across his eyes and it made her chest constrict. “It’s fine.”

*It’s fine.*

“No. It’s not.”

Looking like he was going through it in his head, Oliver started to say. “It isn’t...” but then he stopped when he saw her expression, “Felicity?”

She felt like crying. She hadn’t cried in weeks, not for emotional reasons.

And he could see it. All of it.

And by the way he suddenly stopped trying to say words altogether, by the way those striking blue eyes changed, mellowing into the cool blue of a babbling brook and by the way his uneven brow was telling of the increasing concern he was feeling at her over-reaction, told her he didn’t get it one bit.

Of course he wouldn’t. Who would?

He didn’t know that everything keeping her together all these weeks had been intrinsically linked to his happiness. If he was doing well, if he was content, then she could push through the fury, the misery, the pain and humiliation.

But... she’d missed something. Sure, she’d caught the tail end of his and Sara’s arguments, she’d seen the problems in their relationship arising in their eyes whenever they looked at each other... but she thought they could fight through that *together*. In the field, they were like poetry in motion, so how did that *not* extend to their relationship?

Worst still... she hadn’t noticed. He’d been unhappy - saddened - and she’d missed it, so wrapped up in her own world. So far gone that when she thought she was seeing him, she was only seeing through him.

*Oh god.*

Almost dazed, she watched through a fog as he pushed his plate aside to lean over the table, closer to her. The tips of hesitant fingers touched her forearm. Above her wrist.

“Hey…”

Said so gently, it *hurt*.

Against her wishes, her eyes grew wet - *no* - and his expression faltered before crumbling into... *Crap-a-doodle.*

He looked stunned.
“Felicity.” Tenderness turned his touch a different heat altogether and it melted into her from where his hands were brushing her arms. “I don’t,” he shook his head, licking his lips. “What is it?”

He didn’t know what the problem was.

Pressing her lips together, her nostrils sucked in the deepest breath she could manage - *get a grip* - and blinked away the sudden, brief, moment of maddening weakness. Then she sniffed - more a *sniffle* than a sniff - so the attempt fell on its face.

He couldn’t possibly look *more* alarmed. “Please.”

*God.* “No, it’s nothing.” She’d tried for firm and received whisper-thin. “I just…”

Brows lifting, the comforting stroke of his palms became a grip on her biceps. “You just…?”

“I just want you to be happy.” It came out like a wobbly sigh; like a breath she’d been holding in.

They’d broken up. He and Sara.

Mouth slightly open, he watched her. As if he was speechless. Just taking in her face. There was something happening behind his eyes, something different and maybe something sincere. Something sad just as it was warm.

It told a whole other story when his hand slipped up, stopping and starting along the way - with tentative fingers touching her throat - before his palm was against her cheek; barley touching her but there nonetheless.

Her breath caught; it forced her to meet his gaze again...

But he just looked back at her.

Looked at the way it showed how her eyes fluttered closed at his touch without her telling them too. At how she internally curled in on herself when they did. At the crease of her brow and the way her hands fisted and flexed. At the empathetic compassion coming out from every part of her.

At the words, *I’m sorry*, resonating in her gaze when she opened her eyes once more.

At those very real feelings; that she was expressing genuine grief for him, that she wanted him to be happy and she was worried that he wasn’t even close.

In an oddly sensual flutter of lashes, his gaze dropped to her lips then further down to her throat as she swallowed, to her hands that were gripping the end of her sleeves, and back up again to her eyes.

Whatever he was thinking - it was the first time she couldn’t read him - it made his eyes... darken.

Blinking away more moisture - no tears, *thank God* - she forced a smile, determined to express how 100% fine she was and how she would be more than willing to listen to any post-breakup rants he may or may not need to vent…

But then his other hand joined its twin against her face, done so carefully, she could barely feel anything but warmth and the slight coarseness of his palms. For a moment he seemed suspended between possibilities.

Then he rose up from his seat.

*Um...*
It was swift. So unexpected that she didn’t move a muscle as he bent over the table…and pressed his lips against her forehead.

Her breath caught as her eyes shut tight. And her hands shook when he stayed there a while; the scruff at his jaw tickling her skin, making goose bumps rise.

_Tell him._

_No, don’t tell him anything!_

Her jaw clenched, crushing her lips together. Better not to make a sound.

So when the side of her face was suddenly manoeuvred and placed up against the plains of a solid chest she froze; her eyes flying open to find…

_Oh no… no, no, no…_

He’d left his seat to sidelong her own; a knee holding him steady against the cushion beside her thigh, his body aloft so that he still towered over her. So that he could gently bring her face to his chest – his heart – and hold her there as his hands made short work of her hair, so that he could wrap his arms around her neck and head.

A cocoon of safety and assurance, an act of-

_No. It was too much; I can’t do this right now._ Her hand reached up to tug on his arm because it made her too vulnerable, too-

“Thank you.”

She stopped still; her thoughts ceasing.

So close to his chest, the words were a rough rumble. A thumb pressed under her ear, stroked the skin there and his fingers nestled under her messy bun. His other arm brought her body round in a curve against his obscenely wide pectoral area.

The undercurrent of gratitude in all of it floored her.

The hand she’d intended to push him away with, settled just above the waistline of his jeans. So unsure, it came out more a statement of anxiety than a question. “Oliver?”

“Ssh, ssh, ssh.” He started rocking, side to side; a gentle sway if his hips.

_Jesus._

It pushed her chest into his abdomen, her glasses digging into the side of her face but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You want more for me.” It was hushed and since his body covered her from prying eyes, she figured it was for her ears alone. “Thank you for that.”

“It’s okay.” Her reply was immediate and somewhat shy because this really wasn’t necessary. “You don’t need to-”

“Why not?” On the edge of ‘not’ he lowered himself on the shin of the leg he’d used to prop himself up. Her chin slid north until her head bumped his chin, aided by his strong fingers and tender care. This way his arms could wrap around her back and shoulders. “I’ve hugged Thea for less.”
The way he said it…

“Thea’s your sister.” She pointed out, acutely ignoring how comfortable he was, how his broad shoulders meant that the whole of her was covered, how her side now leant against his rib cage and how her hand now lay tentatively on his pectoral – velvet over steel, wow.

He made a noncommittal sound. “I’ve hugged Laurel?”

A breathless laugh escaped her. “Was that a question?”

“Well… yeah.” She could hear the smile in his voice, “I’m trying to make a point.”

“Your point being… that you’ve hugged Laurel?”

“My point being that I’ve held plenty of people, men and women, for far less than this.”

Something soothing and warm poured itself slowly into her chest. “…Okay.”

“I’ve held Sara.” Held not hugged. Why was that… nicer? “I held her when we broke up. Laurel recently hugged me for no reason other than that she could.”

“I’m not sure I’m getting this point you’re trying to make.”

“I’ve held them.” Letting his weight rest comfortably against the back-rest, he murmured. “But I’ve never held you.”

Her mouth closed with rapid blinks.

He wasn’t doing this out of thanks. He was doing it because he knew something was wrong and he had no idea how to help her. So... hug. He’d instinctively known - because he’s Oliver - that she might need the security.

Technically, her legs were between his so if she so much as moved an inch to her left she’d be – also technically – sat in his lap.

She cleared her throat. “You don’t need to hug me just because you haven’t, you know.”

“Maybe I want to.” He stated, almost directly in her ear and she felt his warm breath caress her spine.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” She heard herself reply, because she definitely hadn’t planned on saying it.

There was a moment - it seemed to span the breadth of time - where he just stopped. His thumb stopped stroking her neck and his hold on her loosened.

She made to push up and away-

Sure fingers grasped her glasses, smoothly removing them from her face but before she could raise her head and ask why, those slack arms tightened around her until all she could see was the grey of his Henley.

Then he whispered words she thought he’d never utter.

“Maybe you should let me.”

Let herself like it. Let herself take comfort from him instead of the other way around. Let herself fall into him and pretend, just for a while, that she didn’t have to leave.
Mentally she tried to object but her heart…

The damage was done.

*Will this make it worse?*

This she wondered as she did exactly what he wanted her to do and settled against him. A very small movement that, the moment he felt it, had him shifting his hips to manoeuvre her onto his thigh with her knees between them. *When he finds out, will this make him hate me? For not saying a word…*

A deep breath pushed him into her.

It had been a long time since someone had held her like this. So… she’d take the moment for what it was, *is*, and worry about the rest later.

…The *rest* came afterwards, when Oliver was thanking the staff and using the restroom. Outside in the breeze – she’d needed five minutes away from his soft eyes after *that* to compose herself – her phone vibrated in her pocket. When she swiped the screen, she stopped dead.

**That was sweet**

It was as if the whole world fell away, in the *worst* possible way.

Slade.

*I enjoyed the show*

He’d been watching her, watching them? Following her?

*What?*

Suddenly exposed – fear making her heartbeat rocket – she searched the area, panicking.

**Look all you want; you won’t find me**

He was right; there was nowhere he could hide and she *still* couldn’t see him.

But she *would* stop him. Soon. Very soon.

Fingers flexing into fists, she took a deep breath, thinking she should just shove the phone in her bag-

**Did you enjoy it?**

She frowned at the screen, feeling more and more agitated with each text, more nervous.

**Having him all to yourself**

*Oliver.*

She wanted so much for him to return right now… she wanted so much for him to stay inside BBB, to not be visible to Slade in any way. She wanted him to make it better. She wanted him never to know.

**Did it make you feel special?**

It hit where he intended it to: her heart, but she didn’t let it show. To any passer-by she was simply
checking her mobile.

What is it about him, I wonder, that makes women fall all over themselves? That makes a good girl, you, sacrifice pieces of yourself?

To me

For him

Knowing he’d never understand - and she’d never answered any of his texts before - she simply turned off her phone and bagged it.

She promised to herself she’d by a new one at the end of all this.

The problem though, was the realisation that Slade wouldn’t need her replies, not if he watched her, not if he was deliberately close to her when he did. Another game.

It was just as disturbing as it was terrifying and impossible to shake. But she had to, because Oliver was walking to the glass doors... so she deep breathed and smiled weakly as the man in question dangled his keys in promise.

Maybe the ride back would help her...

It didn’t help.

For obvious reasons, she couldn’t get to the foundry fast enough and almost started fidgeting on the back of the Ducati. Thankfully, they arrived without her losing complete control of herself.

Though Oliver... he noticed. She caught him frowning at the speed of her gait as she led the way towards the side door.

The moment they were inside, she paused at the top of the stairs, taking in a deep breath. She was as unexposed as she was ever going to be.

Too late, she felt him behind her. He hadn’t moved past her to go down the stairs.

“You okay?”

There was a four foot difference between them

It seemed they’d fallen back into step: to touches, no hand holding. No ‘so close that I have to lean backwards’ kind of physical proximity. Nothing lingering.

Exhaling through her nose, she spoke. “I’m fine.”

She moved towards the stairs.

“Felicity-”
Maybe it was because she was feeling off-centre - maybe it was his voice- but the moment her foot touched the first stair, a wave of inequity hit her. Her leg buckled beneath her, refusing to take her weight. Surprised, she yelped when she tipped forwards, confusion making her movements clumsy when she reached for the banister too late-

A strong arm wrapping itself around her waist stopped her fall. Just under her breasts, it tightened. Its twin shot behind her to steady her against the railing, effectively trapping between it and… him. All of him, every single inch.

...Oh.

Wow.

His breaths were warm against her ear. “You’re not okay.” Unlike before, he didn’t sound the same. He sounded… she didn’t know. She’d never heard him sound like that before. All low and brusque but not cold. “What is it?”

*There was no choice to make*

That’s the *closest* to what he sounded like.

It did nothing to help her focus. “Oliver, really it-”

“For over a year you’ve been coming down here in two inch heels. You’ve never dropped like that.” Half her back, her left shoulder and her hip were crushed against him. Since neither of them were wearing a coat, her softness against his hardness was obvious.

There was so much she wanted from him right then… saying no wasn’t one of them.

She tried to control the situation- *and* herself. “I was just a bit light headed. It’s okay.” Her words were barely audible. “*I’m* okay.”

He was silent for a second.

“You’re starting to scare me.”

It hit her lungs, her heart plummeting like a stone down a well.

And she could feel his eyes on her face. She turned her head to meet them – she’d never backed down from him before – but her fallen heart gave a great sputter on finding him so close, surging back up into her chest to thump wildly.

It was the lighting that made his eyes look like that, it had to be.

“Don’t be.” Though soft, her words were an order. “Trust me, Oliver.”

“I did, but that was before you almost fell down the stairs.”

*That* hurt. And it shouldn’t have, not a bit. What right did she have?

But he wasn’t letting go, wasn’t stepping back when he normally would have. *Should* have. Oliver was the master at giving people space, since when did he constrict a girl?

But… *damn*, he felt good. Comforting. Even as he took her in, seeing every bit of her internal struggle, she didn’t care.
So this was what a morning alone with Oliver was like.

She was tired, so it took all her energy to stand up straight and try to break him off; both physically and conversationally. “I’m just tired.”

His sigh was lengthy…

“Do you want me to take you home?” He eventually offered, still in a low toned rumble.

Unable to repeat the same lies - *I’m fine* - she simply shook her head. “I’d rather get something productive done.” *I’d rather be here than at home, knowing he might be close, watching my every movement.*

Moments stretched into seconds and close to a half minute went by before a second sigh tickled her throat and his lashes lowered.

Quietly, so quietly, he said:

“Okay.”

Then, without warning, he bent low and scooped her up in both his arms.

*What is he doing?!*

“Oliver!”

“Felicity.” He descended with her to the basement floor, making it feel as easy as carrying a single bag of flour.

Secretly thanking God for the pants she wore, just as she was annoyed that she couldn’t feel his palms on her thighs, she gasped. Hands pushing against his shoulder, she felt her face heat. *This is ridiculous. “This is unnecessary.” She hadn’t wanted him to see her so weak.*

“I think it’s very necessary.”

She groaned. “You’re infuriating.”

The muscles in his neck tightened, his lips pressed together and his eyes shined.

Gaping at his audacity, she poked his shoulder. “It isn’t funny Oliver.”

She thought she’d seen his most beautiful smile in Big Belly and had already been mesmerised. But it didn’t prepare her, not for *this.* As though knowing it was just them two gave him permission, his normally suppressed smile broke out into a beaming grin - almost a smirk of genuine delight - and she wondered what could possibly make him so happy about being referred to as infuriating.

That is, when she could spare a part of her consciousness that wasn’t paying strict attention to how his eyes softened and crinkled with pleasure, how his perfect stubble made his mouth all the more enticing when it stretched and how she could count his teeth with how close she was.

It kept her silent.

And she hadn’t even realised they’d reached the floor, until he abruptly stopped; his smile falling so swiftly she immediately missed it and wanted it back.

*Staring deep into the Foundry – I should probably ask him to put me down –* he took a minute before
looking back at her.

“You’ll tell me, won’t you?” A slight furrow started at the bridge of his nose, telling her he was uneasy. “Eventually?”

She blinked at him.

Taking in every inch of her face, he spoke so quietly it was husky. “You’ll tell me what’s going on with you?”

He said it like, ‘you will, right?’

As if he needed to know. As if he were worried that she never would.

She looked at him without speaking. She did this for so long that something began to creep into his gaze.

Dissatisfaction.

Then frustration.

Followed by worry, to its extreme.

And the smallest amount of shock.

That he feared, maybe she… that she wouldn’t confide in him after all. That he couldn’t make it better, because she wouldn’t let him.

She swallowed, whispering, “Yes,” before that horrible sick sensation could take hold.

A deep sigh of relief from him moved her body, his eyes clearing. His tiny smile, reticent, made it hard for her to smile back. But she managed it.

She also managed to lightly tease him. “You can put me down now.”

He nodded, lowering her carefully until her toes touched the floor. Straightening, his hand hovered. “Dizzy?”

“Nope.” Stepping back she made a casual show of moving over to her computers. “The heroic-lift seemed to do the trick.”

Confusion rippled over his face… then he got it. He quirked a brow. “Funny.”

She shrugged. You started it.

Shooting her a look, he unzipped his jacket and moved over towards his bow.

After a few minutes the familiar thwack, thwack sound of arrows pinning tennis balls into walls, set the pace for her survey.

Already eliminating two trails – she’d set up Trojans to secure entryways into specific unsuspecting systems in a bid to discover Slade’s financial backer – she was miles away when Oliver’s voice broke through her focus.

“You corner like a racer.”
Brought out of her reverie, it took her a moment to process. “What?” Twisting in her chair, she found him midway through removing his Henley.

*It’s either the best or suckiest timing ever.*

“On the bike.” He said over his shoulder as he approached his - and Dig’s - workout bench, placing his shirt there. “It was like you already knew how to move.”

Floundering, she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Ah, I just did what felt right.” Was *it wrong?*

“Exactly; you’re a natural.” He started a series of stretches that allowed thorough inspection of his obscenely cut abdominals.

*Gulp.*

Still, her cheerfully surprised smile probably made her look a little demented, given that she hadn’t had much to smile for recently. *What, it’s always nice to be told something like that from someone like…* he walked past her, towards the mats to begin on a set of press-ups… *like him.* Mercy.

Removing temptation - and the need to shamelessly stare whether he liked it or not - she turned away, digging into her files when his voice tugged her back once more.

“You should see it at night.”

Titling her head back at him, she caught him mid-push ups. “How can you do that less than an hour after eating what we ate?”

“Practice.” He hopped back to his feet. “And this is light exercise.” Light? *Forty press-ups is light?*

Then again, she’d seen his version of hard exercise and… yep, he was probably right. “See what at night?”

“Starling.” Reaching for his escrima sticks, he circled them over his head and she watched them twist so swiftly in his hands they became a blur. “At night, I sometimes I go to the edge of the city. On my bike.” Taking slow, deep breaths, his arms dropped low. “There’s this… hill. I don’t think it has a name but it’s linked by a stretch of road between Starling and Gotham. You can see Mercer Island from there.”

The quiet ache in his voice - he probably couldn’t hear it himself - made everything between her navel and throat convulse.

His eyes flickered to her and away again, searching the shadows of the Foundry. “From the top you can see most of the city and at night… it’s beautiful.” Again, his eyes came back to hers.

For a few seconds they just looked at each other.

She smiled and he was too far away to notice it tremble. “Is that an invitation?”

Looking utterly solemn for some reason, Oliver didn’t smile back. The edges of his face suddenly tensed, his brow lined and he didn’t say a word until she was close to breaking the silence by babbling like a nervous wreck.

Then-

“Yes.”
Immediately nodding after speaking, he pressed his lips together.

He’d floored her. Twice in one day. Yes, there was something very different about him… was it just because they were alone? Was it because he was lonely after breaking up with Sara? Was it because he was worried about her?

And was she just thinking way too much about this?

He’d reached out a hand. For company. Companionship. A friend.

She found herself speaking, just as quietly as he. “I’d like that.”

The tight blink was her only indication that he was at all affected. And maybe he also ducked his head, almost hiding the very slight happiness that washed over him, which was good because, well, she had no clue how to handle that.

Sighing, she brought her fingers to her temple to rub over an eyebrow. “This isn’t getting us anywhere, is it?”

It was almost two hours later.

Oliver had finished off a set – a really long set – of vigorous yet oddly light calisthenics (no weights and no salmon ladder, phooey) while she simply sat there with her food baby, watching - she’d given up pretending not to in favour of an all out stare - as he towel-dried the barest traces of sweat before making his way over to her.

She made the significant note that he made no move to slip his Henley back on.

He’d spent the last twenty minutes pacing behind her, occasionally leaning with a hand on the back of her chair to look at her screens.

They’d decided to - while her searches ran - carefully check through the data recorded on transmitters 5 to 11.

To say Slade had been quiet recently was a stretch. It was too quiet; as if it was a deliberate attempt at keeping Oliver strained, at adding to his tension. Or making him let down his guard.

She heard him grunt, “No.” Though she appreciated his candour, it wasn’t what either of them wanted to hear right then. “But it was worth a shot.”

“I thought,” Gesturing towards the monitors, she shook her head, “that maybe we’d find something by now, but it’s like…” A thought hit her.

It’s like he knows where they are.

Her cameras.

She hadn’t considered it before, that maybe Slade had followed them that morning after his first visit to her. But considering his texts… now it made more sense. What she ignored was that it wasn’t
Oliver who Slade was following, because I can’t even think about the ramifications of what that could mean.

Fingers flying across her keyboard, she felt Oliver move in behind her. “What is it?”

“What if he saw?” Filtering, she subliminally circled around until the very first few minutes of footage from each camera were shown in segmented blocks on each monitor. “What if Slade saw us install the cameras?” For some reason they’d never thought to check the initial minutes of footage before, convinced there’d be nothing to see. For a genius I can be such a noob.

“He couldn’t have.” Though it was defence, his tone clearly thought she was onto something. And whatever that something was he did not like it. “We’d have seen him.” He added, now at her side, his eyes on the screens.

“Would we?” Successful in keeping her voice from wobbling though it was oddly high, she side-eyed him, watching the muscles at his jaw tighten.

Bringing a hand forwards, he leaned on her desk, eyeing the various camera shots without prompt.

I’m sorry.

Because… it really was her fault.

Oliver stilled so suddenly it startled her.

“There.”

His tone was dark; a far cry from his earlier light banter. In a jerk of movement, he pointed a finger at an outlook, his eyes refusing to blink.

There, on camera three, she watched herself close the jacket on the plastic camera - they begin transmitting on auto the moment of installation - and sweep her hair away from her face.

Far behind her, in the dark crevice between two buildings and a broken lamppost stood a shadow that she could just distinguish the features of. Slade Wilson. So dark were his they were actually visible on the camera, even from so far away. And they never left her form.

Shivering, she couldn’t look away. Oh my god. She hadn’t noticed, hadn’t even suspected. Even then…

…He’d followed her.

He’d watched her install each camera.

And had let her think she’d one-upped him.

This changed everything.

She’d thought what he was doing - visiting her- had been all it was about, had been about hurting Oliver. She wasn’t so foolish to believe he had any goodness left inside him. She knew he was psychotic. She’d also known he was sadistic; taking pleasure in Oliver’s hurt, knowing how much it would torture him to find out someone he cared about had been brutalised in his stead.

I’m such an idiot.

She thought her part to play had been the role of a tool. Something to be used, a device, an
instrument of his will. And she’d thought he’d been - so far - unsuccessful.

A really big idiot.

Knowing what she knew now, the things that had occurred in the past few weeks, her memories took on a whole new light.

She was part of his obsession.

Still very much a toy in a way, because she figured that he enjoyed having something of Oliver’s all to himself, which explained why he was fine with her saying nothing to the man in question. Actually, he’d fought for it…

…

..

.

“…Does it hurt?”

As if it weren’t obvious.

Face close to hers, he blatantly watched her body continue to jolt and jerk; however many volts of electricity tended to do that to mere mortals. She was very surprised she hadn’t passed out but she supposed it might be difficult to do so standing upright with her arms chained to the ceiling.

As if ruminating on everything she was doing, his gaze travelled over her. “How much does it hurt… Miss Smoak?”

A rasping breath made her cough. “This isn’t-” she cleared her throat, taking another burning breath. “You said you wouldn’t do this.”

One pitiless eye bored a hole through both of hers.

“One lied.”

Swallowing because, Oh God that had been far more painful than she’d thought it would be, she tried to rack up some of that courage she’d thrown at him as he’d dragged her into (what she was assumed was) a Factory… but if anything, it felt like bravado. Empty.

Still… She was telling him. Telling Oliver. And Slade knew it.

Not only had she discovered that he had plans to show her the truths of pain and bravery, not only had she found that he had men watching Laurel Lance’s every step, not only had she discovered that he had the intent to destroy QC…

He’d killed a teenager.

A teenager taken off the streets; 17, maybe 18 years old… a drug addict. And Slade had injected him with Mirakuru. Without hesitation and without remorse when the child hadn’t been able to fight it. He’d died crying blood from his eyes, his nose and his ears. And she’d been unable to do anything except watch, held down by Frank, who she’d never forgive. Not ever.

So she just waited, glaring daggers at the machine of a man before her. He met her stare, expressionless. Emotionless.
She would not bow or break or beg-

A smile so sharp and wide broke fast across his jaw. It was terrifying.

“I’ll tell you what.” He started, leaning closer. Toes against the floor -shoeless and her heels couldn’t reach since she was tied so high - she edged away from him, swaying on the spot. It hurt her shoulders. “Tell Oliver. Do it the moment I let you go.”

Something slid its way into her stomach… eyes on his, her lip began to tremble at the exhilarated promise she witnessed in his. She’d seen that look before. There was something he wasn’t saying and it was telling her she was screwed.

She managed to croak out, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple. Tell Oliver. Get it all out; feel better.” Derision; it was all she heard. Smooth, like the rasp of sword against sheath, he continued with a deliberate step in her direction. “I’ll just kill his kid.”

The words rang out about them like a whisper echoed amongst dozens of people.

Until… silence.

It was impossible but it stopped her; stopped her thoughts, stopped her moving back, stopped her breathing, her hearing… the world stumbled to a standstill. A confusing domain where nothing made sense.

His… child?

Seeing as how she had his complete attention, she couldn’t see any room in his expression for lies.

Voice wobbling, she couldn’t control it - even with the way his smile twisted into something resembling the most disturbing sort of triumph - his words were creating a path in her mind too horrifying for her to follow, even as it forced her to. She could only say-

“Oliver?” A question, because…

No.

He didn’t have children. He didn’t. Have. Children.

He couldn’t. He’d have said something and if he hadn’t, she’d have discovered it anyway. He wasn’t Ollie Queen anymore; if there’d been an illegitimate child there was no way he wouldn’t want access to-

“I can see you don’t believe me.” The irony with it was that he wasn’t even looking at her. It was as if he could smell it; her disbelief, her growing dread that he spoke the truth. “It’s alright. I’ll give you the means, the time, to discover it yourself. Once you know what to look for, the child will be easy for you to find.”

Open mouthed, no words came out. Oliver… has a child. But he’d never… stunned, terrified - please let it be a joke, because the ramifications could be catastrophic - she could only watch Slade as he strolled around her, forcing her to twist on her manacles. He still held the electric node, crudely covered with a soaked sponge and attached to a thick rubber lead. A bucket of water sat on the wet floor.
As if he’d thought, hoped, she wouldn’t be so short-sighted, he sighed. “It shouldn’t surprise you. But it might help you to learn that it was a secret belonging to his mother. Oliver doesn’t know about the boy.”

The boy. He has a son.

And Slade knows about him, about where he is...

Fear made her fingers twitch, like they were already searching for her laptop.

“It was a tryst of his.” He explained to the air. “Before the island. Oliver was a slave to his passions before he met me.”

Arrogant. Speedily, her mind was already considering ways to protect him. To talk to Moira about him; her second and most cruel secret; keeping Oliver away from his son.

“Moira Queen was thorough. But she didn’t take into account how closely someone might look into a casual fling.” A casual fling. Who was the woman? It couldn’t be... Laurel? “She covered it up, but it was all surface.” No; if it was Laurel’s, Moira wouldn’t have covered it up. She’d have coveted it instead.

Looking down at the torture device in his grip, his words were almost hypnotic. “When I studied the kind of life Oliver lives now, the kind of people he spends time with, I made sure to cross-reference my findings with the life he lived before the Queen’s Gambit was so sorrowfully blown to hell. To my credit,” of course, “I discovered he was exactly the type of person I’d thought him to be.”

His eyes hit her once more and the callousness there made her recoil.

“Billionaire Playboy indeed.” A short laugh so raw - so coarse that she stiffened - escaped him. “Tied to a relationship for over a year, he still found it in himself to sleep with the closest available attractive brunette he could find.” She twitched at the acuity of his tone with each descriptive. “He’s quite a catch, your guy.”

He wasn’t her guy. But words were useless against this man.

“So tell him.” It was like a conclusion and, in a very real way, it was. A conclusion to her freedom. An end to the illusion of the control she thought she’d had. “Tell him about our nightly rendezvous.” Revulsion made her want to gag: rendezvous. Like... they were going on dates. “Once you’ve found out the truth for yourself, tell him about his son.”

For a moment she envisioned Oliver as Godzilla, seeing a huge lizard-like foot come tearing down through the roof to squash Slade underfoot. Alas, the reality was quite the opposite.

As high as she was – on the tips of her toes – he still towered over her.

“But do either,” he promised, low and so threateningly she had to bite down on her lip to keep a whimper in, “and I will kill little William. He’ll die wondering what he ever did to deserve it.”

William.

Oliver’s son was called William.

Why was that so much more important to her than... than anything else?

Her pain, her fear? It meant nothing. Nothing in the face of a child. Oliver’s child.
Of course, more than three weeks later - when the stress starts to truly show - she’ll wonder at her decisions, though she’ll never regret making this one. Not this one.

And the next day after this night she’ll find out the truth; that Moira Queen paid a young woman - one Samantha Clayton - to keep mum about her pregnancy and leave Staring. To never tell Oliver. Felicity would see pictures and find that she loved another woman’s child, just because he was Oliver’s son. Oliver had created a life.

It wouldn’t change the way she looked at him. Though she thought it might, she would find that it doesn’t. In fact, it would only make her see more.

Finally, her trembles ceased. “You’d kill a child?” She asked, because she had to know. Had to see.

He looked severely unimpressed. “Don’t pretend that men, that soldiers - like your friend John Diggle - haven’t had to take the lives of the very young, of the innocent.” On innocent his tone was scathing. “It happens. And orders are orders.” A scowl, something that made his nose wrinkle in what would have been an attractive way if he didn’t terrify and disgust her, emphasised the depth of his brow. “Death is collateral. I didn’t think you were this naive.”

“Naivety has nothing to do with it.” Even to her, she sounded remote; her tone the razor edge of a knife. “There should be no place, no instance in this world where the death of a child is a necessity. For whatever reason.” Licking her suddenly dry lips, she declared, “I would never kill a child.”

For a moment, the darkness of the warehouse held no candle to the darkness in his face. To the twisted agony in his features. To the scream in his gaze.

On the tail end of n exhale, he muttered. “I would.”

And he was damned for it. He knew it, but he no longer cared.

“So what will it be?” Obviously bored with her discussion now, he stepped into her personal space. Once more, he trailed a path down her half-naked torso, down the exposed path of her stomach and chest, save for a bra, to her leggings. Clinical exploration. “More of the same, Miss Smoak? Or will you run and tell?”

Allow him to continue. Or. Leave, tell Oliver, and be responsible for the death of his boy; a child he knew nothing of.

She didn’t need to reply; the answer was on her face.

He didn’t smile.

He exhaled.

“You can take it.”

Her shocked scream rang through the night when he pressed the soaked sponge to her stomach, the fizzling sound of electricity coursing through the conductor and into her. For several seconds he held it there, following her body as it naturally bucked and jolted away from the source of the pain. Then he released her.

Head falling forwards, her hair covered her face.

“Moira Queen’s subsidiary bank account: March 2007, a $1000, 000 transfer ID2245461.”
He waited five seconds.

Then, just when she thought he might stop for the night, he pressed the sponge against her once more.

...

.

She’d never considered why he’d fought her so hard. She’d never thought of it that way at all.

It was his game and he’d completely changed the rules. He did so more than once; making sure that, in the end, she was left with no choice.

Now she knew he’d been following her.

So yes, this was all her fault.

“He was watching us.” It was hard, Oliver’s voice. Self-recriminating. “The whole time.”

Eyes closing, feeling herself pale, she pressed down on her lip.

She had no idea what to do.

“Weeks of searching,” It was so low, so rough and she couldn’t do anything to make it better, “for nothing.”

She swallowed. “Oliver-”

Abruptly turning, he gripped the edge of the square metal stand holding their mass-spectrometer and before she could blink, hurled it away so hard the glass shattered against a wall. It made her jump and swallow. The sound rang throughout the Foundry.

And he didn’t stop moving, didn’t stop his sluggish walk – as if every step were a burden. Away.

It was slow, very slow and he only made it to the next work bench where she was a little afraid he’d throw that too. But he didn’t. Instead - and it was suddenly so painful to watch - with his back to her, he raised both his hands, dragged them over his neck and his head until they ended up on his face...where they stayed.

For one second.

Three.

Ten.

More.

Her pounding heart constricted painful, pulling her stomach along for the ride.

She’d just sunk him again.

He’d said that to her. That morning, the first morning she’d lied to him…

“You were the one with the idea to survey a corner of the Glades based on information you obtained
on a hunch. And it’s something. It’s something that might actually allow me to… to sleep. Something to focus on.”

She’d destroyed it; the little hope that he’d had.

*Why did I say anything? I should have just checked it myself. Later. Alone…*

But… then it would be a lie. Another one. And she now knew that once you start, it’s so easy to continue. And she couldn’t allow herself to travel down that path; hers was already dark enough.

A deep exhale left him, lifting up his shoulders; as if the weight of the world rested there.

Right now, he probably feels like it does.

She felt miserable.

*I hate this.*

He never turned back to her.

“Oliver, it’s-”

She never got to finish her attempt at a new hope, because before a further word was spoken he suddenly reached for the locker, near his arrows. He pulled out his jeans and a shirt. And started to undress.

In front of her.

Another ‘never before’; the day had been full of them.

With fast, almost ripping motions he yanked at the zip on the jacket and tugged at the button above his fly. Jerking around so fast the room spun, she faced her monitor, at least giving him some semblance of privacy. But it was impossible to ignore his increasing agitation, as if she could feel it rising from across the room.

Turned away from him as she was, she didn’t notice that he’d stormed out until she heard the beep of the side entrance, where he opened the door and stepped out…

*Frack! “Oliver!”*

Scrambling up from her seat, she ran for the door, bursting through before it could close.

“Oliver!” Skidding to a halt next to his bike where he was already seated, he revved the vehicle so she had to shout. “Where are you going?! We can-”

“I need to check something!” The words were barely out of his mouth before he was tearing down the alley to the road.

She watched him leave, wondering what on earth he needed to do that couldn’t wait until later.

…Then again, why *not* leave in the daytime? He was the one who’d made that first stipulation. Always at night. But why hide in the dark when he could be a hero in the light?
It wasn’t like before.

Hands gripping the handle, he sped up...

He wasn’t in a place to feel it again, no matter how much he’d been swept up by it earlier; as if he’d been found after being lost, falling in with its tide.

She wasn’t on the bike with him. So it was impossible.

No gentle peace here.

No soft hands making short work of any frustration, any tension that had built in his shoulders in the previous days and weeks. Just by touching him, by holding on, by trusting him. That simple trust.

There’d been moments when he’d barely felt her hands at his waist, as she’d leant back against the breeze, feeling her thighs tensing around his hips - and the bottom of his spine - to hold her up.

Knowing that he’d keep her there, that he wouldn’t let her fall.

It told the world everything they were.

And afterwards, in Big Bell Burger. Their talk. He hadn’t felt like that in… years.

Like a man. Just a man.

Eating food… with the most beautiful woman he’d ever met. And talking. Dancing with words. Laughing… flirting.

Flirting.

They’d flirted.

Maybe harmlessly… but it didn’t feel so harmless at the time.

She’d drowned out his shadows. Then added new ones.

His muscle memory had always been sharp, even before the island, so he didn’t really need to see the path before him to know where he was going. Which was good, because his sight wasn’t on the road.

It was at BBB. Holding her. And wondering why he never had before - he quickly discovered why - especially since it revealed so much. Focus on other things.

Like the fact that she’d lost weight. She looked tired. Stressed. Not herself.

Weeks ago he’d worried that he’d been overworking her but when he’d offered her vacation time, her vehement refusal had forced him to back down. And then she’d started eating less - he knew she was sleeping less - and changing the way she dressed with an emphasis on showing the least amount of skin. From a woman who made short skirts an art form, this was a glaring transformation.

There was something wrong with his girl.

“I just want you to be happy.”
It was too much; her reaction too emotional, too visceral. Like she was all bottled up: a storm in a glass container.

For a brief moment, he’d wanted to smash it. That shield. See what she hid. It cut him to the bone.

But instead… he’d been overwhelmed, hadn’t been able to do a thing other than hold onto her. And pray to God she didn’t leave him behind.

Now?

He felt...

It was just…a badness.

Coursing through him like a wave of sick dark. A thick void.

**Slade.**

The nightmare. Infecting him. He’d been watching them, him. And now he couldn’t focus on anything but that feeling. That... and anger. *Fear.*

He was almost choking on it.

Eventually he parked his Ducati, side-stepping off to move closer to the place Felicity had stood at almost six weeks ago; those first minutes of footage on camera 12.

She’d worn a dress then; pale blue. A bleak reminder of how she hadn’t worn a dress in almost a full month.

Stepping closer to the post, his head titled, remembering that he saw her fingers against the black case, her hands arranging the few wires.

*Hands* that were constantly half covered by long shirts.... and longer lies.

A whip of frustration lanced through him again.

He stepped away from the post.

*Tell me. Why wouldn’t she? I could help her.* It was all he wanted. To fix her troubles, to make her feel safe.

Worse, whatever she was hiding he got the impression that she was ashamed of it. That it was deeply affecting her.

And she. Wouldn’t. Tell. Him.

She could have told him the absolute worst thing, she could have said that she’d turned to the world’s oldest profession - not that she ever would - could have said she disposed of bodies, could have admitted to terrorism and none it wouldn’t have mattered. *Didn’t she know that?*

A sharp pain told him that he’d squeezed his fingers into his palms tightly enough to damage skin.

Lifting said hand, rubbing his index finger and thumb together, he stared at it like it would guide his way.

*She won’t tell me.*
Quickly turning, he jogged his way over to where he’d seen Slade standing. A run down, side street - just like a dozen other abandoned streets in the Glades - held no clues...

Except... a note.

Slowly, his lips retracted over his teeth. Neck muscles flexing. Tight jawed. Livid. Eyes narrowing. How had he missed this?

...Because he hadn’t been paying attention.

Spray painted - large and vulgar - on the brick wall was a single sentence:

**Took you long enough, kid.**

Unmoving, he stared at it.

He’d thought that... *I was wrong.*

Since Slade’s threat, he’d grown careless. Let his guard down.

Though he’d hated the waiting, Oliver had also been relieved. Slade hadn’t hurt his family, his friends, the people he loved. He hadn’t done all the things he’d had nightmares about since the one-eyed man’s arrival.

And he’d been waiting for some grand gesture. Not this, this... *game.*

A game Oliver had lost before he’d even begun, because Slade had been following his every move, his team’s every step... all of it.

He spent the next hour searching the site of each camera... his findings were confusing.

Disturbing.

Because... *he couldn’t be...* it was a coincidence, it had to be. *It had to be.* If it wasn’t... because Slade had left a few more signs, but *where* he’d left them told Oliver a story that too horrifying to think about. It couldn’t be-

The vibration of his mobile made him frown, until he remembered he hadn’t taken his comm. link with him.

Pulling form the inside pocket of his jacket, he answered. “Felicity?”

“You need to get back here.”

The worry in her tone set him on edge. “What is it?”

“*Sara’s here. She’s hurt.*** There was a pause where he could almost see Felicity take a deep breath and close her eyes. “*She said Slade had her.*”

The illusion of peace, shattered in an instant.

*He’s starting.*
I'm so very sorry for the lack of an update (or responses to reviews) for any of my stories. VERY briefly, I wasn't sleeping for months on end and almost passed out. My doctor ordered me to take a break and I was glad of it because when I looked back over what I'd tried to write when I was so out of sorts it was... humiliating. Ugh! Anyway, I've started to get better but my updates will slow for a while longer. I have WWID and BC to progress with to and haven't. Yikes. But the requests for an update to IP was far greater so I did this first. It's extra long - so long -to make up for the time taken. Like is aid, I'm still getting better...

BUT I REALLY FREAKING HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS!!!
Oh- and I changed Sandra Hawke to Samantha Clayton in the previous chapter.

(Picture by the Amaze-balls Candykizzes24)

It should have been me.

It was automatic, that response. Almost programmed. The thought that it should have been her and not Sara... Could have been. Has been. Was. Will be again.

It was all she could think about.

Because Sara lay prone on their table…
The bang of the side door was her only warning before Sara made her entrance; flying into the Foundry like a bat out of hell, bumping into a holder of arrows and knocking them to the floor.

Sara’s shallow breaths echoed loudly in the silence after the clatter; it was a still moment where Felicity could only stare as the sharp eyes of an assassin eventually focused on her.

Springtime blues open and closed. Opened again. “Felicity.” It was more a slur than a word. “W-where...”

Where’s Oliver?

Shock made said IT girl blink dumbly - already half stood from her swivel chair - as she took her friend in. Sara’s beautiful Italian dress - her gala gear and the silver of it should have clashed with her close-to alabaster skin but somehow didn’t - and French shoes (courtesy of Oliver Queen), hair like rippling satin that cascaded down a back Felicity was sure was covered by little to no material and half clipped to her skull so that strands could drift across her-

Felicity froze; her stomach clenching, eyes fixed on the...on the blood. Oh sweetie... on Sara’s face. What happened?

The vague awareness in Sara’s glazed over eyes had alarm bells ringing before Felicity saw the faint traces of grime on her face and arms. Before she saw the sway of Sara’s form when she tried for another step, seeing an arm reach out towards her, before witnessing the stumble-

“Oh my God.” Jumping up, Felicity dived across the training area when Sara began to drop. Literally. “Sara!”

Catching her just in time - clutching the other woman against her - the momentum pulled her down too as panic played havoc with her senses; the floor was tilting. A seismic flux? What was happening?

It was only when she had her cradled in her arms where she sat on the floor that she realised Sara wasn’t moving. “Sara? Sara, come on!” Holding her tighter - as if it would keep her there - Felicity tugged - once, twice, three times - praying the jerk of the movement would snap Sara back into action. I am open to a Kung Fu death grip, if it means this isn’t anywhere near as bad as I think it is. But the way the warrior woman’s eyes barley lifted and the way she mumbled, by how each breath was a shallow attempt for air, she wasn’t getting anywhere. “Open your eyes!”

Don’t do this to me.

Skin covered in sweat, damp strands of hair were stuck to the dried blood on the side of Sara’s beautifully freckled face. It was surreal; the unbeatable Sara Lance... beaten.

No. Pressing her palm against one worryingly heated cheek, Felicity tried again. “Sara?” She shook her, her hand nudging her face. You need to wake up before Oliver gets here...

She wouldn’t be able to stop him if he decided to confront Sara’s attacker. Especially since she had an inkling about where Sara had been.
Something seemed to bring Sara back; taking a deep, hissing breath, she forced her eyes back open.

“Hey! Hey, hi,” thank goodness, “you scared me.” With a wobbly smile, she tried to keep Sara there with her. “What happened?” Facts. I need all the facts.

It came out as a rasp. “...Slade.”

Stilling, Felicity’s eyes briefly closed. Son of a bitch.

Lashes fluttering - as if the smallest action cost 100 times as much effort as it normally would - Sara tried for a deeper breath. “He... he took...” her throat convulsed, “Ollie, h-he...” She exhaled then winced as a small moan escaped her...

Then her eyes fluttered shut.

They didn’t re-open.

Her body went completely lax.

Cold entered Felicity’s breastbone. “S-Sara?”

Nothing.

No. No, no, no, no...With rough hands and unsteady fingers Felicity checked her nasal passages, checked her pulse, examined the state of Sara’s pupils... all the while the room tilted and she forced herself not to panic, not to focus on the stress, not to have another attack. Not now. Not now.

Think about Sara.

And there was no way she was going to let Oliver find her hiding - crouching - in the shower area of the bathroom.

The silence was deafening.

She was alone once more. Alone in her thoughts. Alone in her plight. Alone in her knowledge...

Sara still wasn’t moving.

Fear. It erupted inside her like a volcano. In a way it hadn’t for weeks.

“Sara!”

1001 possibilities. None of them good.

...

...

.

Looking down at her now - as she had been doing for over an hour -seeing features almost too young and too beautiful to belong to an assassin - Felicity lifted a hand, brushing the hair from Sara’s recently cleaned forehead.

What did he do to you pretty bird?

She needed to make sense out of this. To be useful, to do something right.
Other than the scrape to her forehead - and knuckles - Sara was… fine. Mind-bogglingly fine. Physically. *And I checked to make sure;* checked for Slade’s usual brand of torture… and hadn’t found a trace.


Biting her nails, her furrowed brow etched deeper lines. *Has Slade grown a heart in the past 12 hours? I don’t understand.* Slade and restraint were two opposing, far-off-reaching shores. So what was going on? *There should have been something.* Anything to explain but…there was nothing.

Save one thing.

The fact that Sara had yet to wake - *God, please wake* - that she’d perspired a more than healthy amount of sweat, that she’d fallen unconscious in the first place - *I’ve seen her take a beating; a scratch to the head shouldn’t have put her down so easily* - told Felicity that Slade had given her the good stuff.

But…what?

Stumped, she chewed the inside of her cheek; a nervous habit she’d paid a lot of time to recently. A simple sedative? Felicity mentally walked through more options (what else could she do?).

*Hallucinogenic?*

Rejected – *scratch that.* It wasn’t exactly Slade’s style to administer a psychotropic compound to an enemy and then let them loose - yes, he *had* let Sara go. There was no escaping that fact; as badass as Sara was and is, she couldn’t get passed Slade Wilson. Not unless he *wanted* her to. And though out of the norm, Sara’s behaviour hadn’t been erratic per se. Scared and confused, absolutely. Bipolar and unrestrained? *Nu-uh.* Plus… Slade would want to watch.

*He liked to do that, to watch.* She suppressed a shudder.

So… nerve stimulant?

Sighing, her eyes flickered back down to her friend because, *nope.* Sara didn’t seem to be in any pain; there was no increase in EEG signals either stipulating that she might be. Save from the headache she’d suffer once she woke, Sara should be just fine. *Came scarily close to the line though.*

Also, she hadn’t fallen unconscious from torture. A blessing Felicity didn’t understand. *Why kidnap her and not hurt her?* Not that she’d wanted her friend to hurt, but he definitely had his reasons, however unjustified. None of this made sense.

Itching to make it all better, Felicity smoothed over Sara’s wound; it hadn’t needed stitches aside from a butterfly.

A puff of air made her flyaway fringe flap into her glasses. *I’m surprised I got her on the table.* It had been painstaking lifting an unconscious Sara Lance - *my upper body strength’s pretty neat for a shut-in but I’m no vigilante* - yet somehow Felicity had managed to budge, push and pull her onto the medical top - huffing, puffing and praying to God and all his supposed angels - before giving her the full check over.

There were no marks. No blemishes caused by electrical interference, no injection points, no signs of noise or image subjection - her eyes weren’t blood shot, her face wasn’t pale - she hadn’t been beaten and there was no evidence, not even a little, of Waterboarding.
Again... nothing.

With shaking hands, she’d assessed for damage, fearing the worst and thanking God for not finding it. The relief literally made her stagger back, close her eyes and shake. Had made her slump and breathe around the coarse lump in her throat and the fist in her chest... before reaching for the medical kit.

But then, why? Why had Slade taken Sara? Where had he taken her? And why hadn’t they been alerted sooner?

Aside from Sara actually being hurt at all, that was the most troubling aspect. At the very least she’d expected Detective Lance to be on her like white on rice but...zilch.

The second she’d ascertained that all Sara needed was sleep and - after setting up an IV and near-to scrubbing her down - time to reject whatever drug was in her system, she’d called Oliver.

The memory made her wince. He’d taken it... not well exactly, but, something. Like he’d expected it.

“Oliver? Did you get that?”

He gave a terse, "got it," before hanging up.

Gone from the Foundry for several hours, she was sure he hadn’t realised how much time had passed and he definitely didn’t know that after over an hour of anxious waiting - lots of Oliver get back here’s - she’d started monitoring his progress on the cameras. It’s where she’d guessed he’d gone. But she couldn’t help her confusion when she actually saw him there… what was he looking for?

Watching him wasn’t a hardship, oh contraire. I’m judging myself for it; he’s very ‘come hither’. But, the few times he’d come close to the screen, his expression had been… she couldn’t pin it to an adjective. She’d felt it on her skin, in her chest - how he could do that on a camera far away from her she didn’t know - his controlled aggression, his solemnity. A disquiet - an apprehension seldom found on his handsome face - added weight to the way he held himself; to the rigid set of his jaw, the narrowed scope of his eyes, the heavy set of his brow.

It made her feel like she should be out there with him, offering support in the way of informal babbling and a few verbal screw-ups to cement how utterly messed up their lives currently are.

But now it didn’t matter quite so much. Not with Sara unconscious. Not with how Slade had broken his own rule.

Contrary to popular belief - of everyone who’d ever entered the Foundry - it wasn’t that cold in the basement of an abandoned factory. It could be. It should be. Especially in the light of a new year. But not now. Not today. Not with her long sleeves and plain weather resistant - tight - pants. So attractive. Even so, she was shivering.

This can’t be happening.

It couldn’t be; seeing Sara like this made her situation all the more real. As if, before the dawn each day, she’d turned her memories into a living a nightmare instead of reality they were, only to have them shoved back in her face and made inescapable. And I’m so grateful for that.

But now all she could feel was how her chest was too tight, was how every inch of her felt pressurised like the world was closing in on her skin. Surrounding her. And there was nowhere to go, no place to run... she couldn't run.
Ugh, why did I finish those cheese-fries? Hours ago, it feels longer than that. It was impossible to
keep still; her fingers dug into her hair - something to grasp onto – as she paced the floor and each tap
of her shoes echoed the lonely thumps behind her ribcage.

Try as she might, Slade wouldn’t answer her calls or texts. And she’d never tried before. Had never
wanted to. It made her feel distinctly unclean. Yes, it was just a phone call, but still; it did. But this…
it wasn’t about her anymore. It never had been. It was still about Oliver and Sara. Still about Slade
making Oliver hurt through the people he loved most.

She needed to remember that.

So, it was very necessary. She could call him. It was worth it. Worth hearing the voice that played in
a constant, sickening loop during the few hours of sleep she managed to grasp. But he hadn’t
responded. Nothing ventured, nothing gained my ass.

They’d made a deal. As horrific and near one-sided as it was, it was still a deal.

She didn’t understand any of this. Worse still, she couldn’t predict what would happen next. There
was no control here; he’d taken what little she’d ever thought she’d had with him and had proven
just how utterly stupid - how gullible - she really was.

I’m a dope. To have believed him when he said he wouldn’t. Or maybe she’d just hoped.
Desperately.

I thought I was past wising on a star.

It was supposed to save him. To keep them safe. All of them.

He’d wanted her silence, right? It was the conclusion she’d come to; Slade had realised somewhere
along the way that he didn’t want her to tell Oliver after all. That he was having too much fun for her
to disrupt it. That he knew; the longer this lasted, the more hurt Oliver would be at the end of it. And
it had turned out that after the first few weeks, he hadn’t needed to threaten Thea or Laurel (not that
he stopped); he had all the leverage required in a young boy. So what was going on? It didn’t make
sense to her to do something now.

But when had he ever tried to make sense? And just when she thought she understood something
about him-

You’re a pathetic little girl with no power.

Right, I forgot about that.

It had stayed with her because, in a way, he’d been spot on. ‘Been’ being the operative word. And
though diminutive in size, she was far from being a child. And if she hadn’t been before all this -
newsflash: she had - he’d made sure she became world wary.

It wasn’t that he’d taken her innocence; it wasn’t his to take, she wouldn’t let it be. It wasn’t in his
power.

So, excluding sleep, he hadn’t really taken anything from her at all. Suck on that.

In life, pieces of a person’s so-called-innocence were naturally lost to all forms of environmental and
emotional stimuli: to urges, to change, to heartbreak, to new beginnings… yet there was a certain
truth that came with pain. A bleak one. And physical pain could be just as influential as emotional.
Don’t I know it. A different kind of maturity built up once you endured the type of dread and
demonstrative humiliation she’d experienced the past 6 weeks.

Over and over he’d told her in various ways - most of which were wordless - that she was weak; that she meant very little in a big world even as he - worryingly - paid more attention to her than anyone else.

After which he’d made sure she’d had no choice at all. William.

_Nothing_ made sense with him. A _trait._


It was something to go on: to never fall for his repetitive behaviours or what should or shouldn’t be. Go with the least possible of possibilities or don’t attempt to anticipate that he’d choose a particular path and maybe she’d get lucky.

But she’d always known that it was how he saw this, saw _her._ Originally, it hadn’t mattered to her. Let him think nothing of her. It would help later, right?

Yet, why had _nothing_ gone the way she thought it would?

And that type of truth, that _knowing_…

His hands on her, counting the marks he’d left behind - as if he revelled in the knowledge that he was the only one who got to see them - as well as knowing she’d never be rid of that sensation. The way he’d stare at her every reaction; how he’d deliberately leave her in states of suspended agony, exhaustion or awkward physical awareness. How he’d smile at her goose bumps on her skin and credit himself for their rise.

How he’d prowl around her like a predator.

The pain. The waiting (that was the worst part). The feeling - however much she’d tried to brush it off - of it going unnoticed by the ones she loved.

It touched the soul. How could it not?

_Maudlin._ _Stop with the ‘depression’._ Suddenly bone weary, Felicity came to a halt. _I don’t need this: I do need is to know his next step. I need coffee. And my computer._ Better to focus on what she _could_ do.

She wasn’t Sara, wasn’t Laurel. Or _any_ of the women who Slade viewed as strong. Who _Oliver_ viewed as strong. And that was fine and dandy.

Even if her fighting skills were basic - _though I tip my proverbial hat off to Dig for drilling disarming techniques into me for the past few months_ - and even if her idea of field work was sitting behind a desk opening real life doors via a close to hand terminal, she figured that, maybe, that wasn’t so bad. Maybe it was _her_ repertoire that was required here, more so than the ability to dodge literal bullets and verbal attacks.

Because what good was physicality against a psychotic superhuman?

However, it meant she had to focus on the one thing currently scaring her more than another visit from her ‘dear stalker’.

Retaliation.
Could that be what this actually is? Retaliation from Slade, for seeing her that morning. Watching her eat burgers at BBB with the man he wants to emotionally eviscerate. Catching her smiling with Oliver, laughing with him. Being held by him.

‘That was sweet. I enjoyed the show’.

What did that even mean?

‘What is it about him, I wonder, that makes women fall all over themselves? That makes a good girl, you, sacrifice pieces of yourself? To me. For him’.

It was alarmingly intimate.

‘...a good girl’. Why was he putting her on a pedestal? Why was he including her at all?

There it was again; the why of it. She’d heard that silent question, his ‘why’. Why do this for him? Why take such punishment, my dear?

But that was a sentimental response.

The prevalent core of vengeance is - in general - a legacy of pain borne from love. Sentiment.

Yet, he’d designed punishments, credited himself Oliver’s judge and jury; a tactical response from a man who couldn’t control any of his emotions but could focus them with laser precision.

Following them, texting her, wondering why and how she could spend time with his enemy… emotion. Had he been annoyed? Was he frustrated or just confused enough to outrightly ask her? As if she could teach him why. No one has the capability to teach that man why.

Had he felt… betrayed?

Meaning that this, Sara, was punishment for that betrayal?

There were other possibilities…

What if he’d just gotten bored?

Originally, he had essentially, gotten off on it. On how hard she tried to not be swayed by his efforts.

But what if she’d read him wrong? It was very possible that the same thing driving him could be the same thing that made him finally grow tired of her. With her deliberate drop in reaction. With her lack of action in making the world aware of Slade’s latest crime. Was that even possible for a man who enjoyed cat and mouse, as much as Slade Wilson?

Or… What if he’d stagnated? Instead of ennui; what if their nightly rendezvous weren’t enough anymore? What if he needed more?

Reflexively swallowing, she shook her head… because remembering the night before, she couldn’t see how. His haste to see her writhe… to see her react, to see how she reacted. To observe. For some reason that was important. But what if he received nothing but a repetitive cycle of ‘the same’.

Some psychotics climb; each insane act more high octane than the last, to achieve their high. Their choice of ‘sport’ could change to reflect that need.

And time is the psychopath’s greatest enemy.
What if he wanted something from her? Wanted her to do something and she hadn’t. So, frustrated, he’d pushed a different way.

As if it had nothing to do with power and everything to do with choice.


Hers.

She hadn’t confided in him, in Oliver. Hadn’t made him face that dark space between night and day.

Slade’s flippant suggestion - tell him or don’t; it’s your choice - had originally made her think how little he thought of it. Just a game.

Then along came William and it tipped everything sideways. It had felt like a lie, his whimsical suggestion.

But what if there was an endgame?

Yep, that’s terrifying. Slade... had he ever been satisfied with just this? Was there an actual plan beyond this basic, first layer assault? Was she so naive to think there wouldn’t be more?

Maybe he’d been waiting for it, for the moment she crumbled into Oliver. For the moment all hell broke loose. Only it never came. She hadn’t let it.

What if this had nothing to do with Oliver or Sara and everything to do with Felicity choosing Oliver? For choosing his peace in her version of surrender.

The reality of her thoughts only hit her in the silence, resulting in her biting on her own cheek as her hands dragged over her face.

Conceit.

“I’m unbelievable.” The mumble puffed into her fingers before her hands fell once more, sliding slowly down her neck to grant herself one second’s worth of the fake feeling - a ghost - of comfort and tender care, easing the sting of her own vanity. Of the touch of another’s hands, steady and real against her throat. Holding her tall.

How conceited. Eyes kept closed, a surge of self-reproach hit her because of course it isn’t about me. On the edge of an unsteady breath, the trace of a smile surfaced; one that wasn’t remotely cheerful.

She’d never been a part of Oliver’s history.

Of his loves. His family. His hopes and dreams. His pains. Of who and how he used to be and what he used to want. She didn’t know any of it.

Remember?

Her hands flattened what had to be the most dysfunctional knot of hair; I’m just a pawn. A tool. To be used and cast aside. Well maybe now Slade was making that call.

She figured she’d been originally chosen because she was the weakest link in an iron chain. Strong metal consisting of John Diggle - ex-military - of Oliver Queen - vigilante, assassin, Bratva member and survivor - of Sara and Laurel lance - twin hearts that held Oliver’s and could dish out as much as they were served - and Roy Harper - the street punk that never went down in a fight.
Out of all his choices, she understood why he chose her. She’d choose her too.

How could she fight back when she’d never really fought before in her life?

It wasn’t to exploit her; it was simply to use her to inflict damage.

Not telling Oliver had been her very small act of defiance, her way of being a renegade. For once, the one with secrets. For once, the one who took the burden for sins they didn’t commit.

For once... doing it in Oliver’s stead.

She figured she’d come to understand him more in the past 6 weeks, than she’d done in over a year working by his side. And her findings were... inconclusive. How does he even deal with that kind of guilt; day in day out? That knowing.

Taking on punishments for atrocities was one way to a cure, for sure. But it wasn’t the right way. Any cure found would become stale. Corroded. Ineffective. Bitter. It would inevitably fail.

But this world, his world – beyond saving lives and putting bad men and women in jail – would never be relevant to Felicity.

In the end, Oliver’s past was his own. And it was Sara’s. It was Laurel’s. And Thea’s. Moira’s. Heck; dead women – Shado – had more tether to him than she.

Ergo, why Sara lay on the table, because of her connection to Oliver. A history that half belonged to Laurel and it may still; matters of the heart were rarely simple. It was why Slade considered the lawyer to still be Oliver’s one and only, which meant Oliver had talked to him about her on the island. It was why he had men watching her, ready to strike at a word from Felicity to Oliver.

Another limit; another mind screw for her to swallow.

But almost two months ago, Sara - not Laurel - was the one Oliver had sought comfort in, the one he’d chosen.

Anything Felicity did now was to ensure that Oliver didn’t lose that, didn’t lose them. And he won’t. That was absolute. She’d pay any price.

Blowing air through her nostrils - head tipped back, hands still around her neck because it was oddly soothing - she thought, I really would.

No matter how lovely their morning had been, no matter how close she’d carry the memory of it into the future; he didn’t know. And not just because he wasn’t interested in her. He could never know.

Yet, part of her was still dreaming. Hoping. Wondering. I keep falling for my own traps. It was as exhausting as it was humiliating.

Self-derision had her slumping. Yep, there was no way that hurting Sara had anything at all to do with Slade seeing her that morning with Oliver. Come on.

It was simple: Felicity had probably outlived her ‘function’.

But no matter how hard she tried, it wouldn’t die; that whisper. The possibility. No matter how hard she tried to destroy it. It wouldn’t leave her, because if it was true...

If it was true, it would make everything so much worse.
Because - I’m alone and I can flip out if I wish to - if it were even remotely close to fact, then Felicity Smoak was so very screwed. Oh God, am I screwed. It meant a different kind of message; a level of twisted she hadn’t thought he’d reached.

But only if.

Didn’t mean she wasn’t beyond pissed off; the moment he went after Sara it meant all deals were off. But still; so screwed. Up the Khyber without a paddle.

Never give a psycho the means to extend his mission. Yes, Slade’s vengeance was absolutely personal, but for it to include others, people I care about?

So... this would be the moment she tells Oliver, right?

Except, what if she says something and Slade still decides that William’s life is forfeit?

She didn’t know.

She didn’t know what he’d do next. Anything’s possible with him now. And until it was confirmed - that he wouldn’t hurt Oliver’s son or Thea - she still couldn’t tell a soul.

It’s what made her so without a plan.

And covered in filth.

That’s how it made her feel. Dragged down to a place she - once - couldn’t reach but could now only claw at, desperate to surface from; into black filth. Alone.

I don’t want anyone else to fall with me.

She pictured Oliver, being told her secrets and being even more restrained – constrained – standoffish and perpetually nihilistic, like Sara, than he already was. No. Never.

He needed to have hope.

That hope could never be her.

Hand covering her mouth, she moaned into it. I feel sick; need liposuction.

It was too much; she needed movement, something, some purpose. Otherwise she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t stop thinking. I’d take clipping Sara’s toenails over this. Narrowing her eyes, as if in concentration she’d be able to maintain control of her stomach, they flickered everywhere; focus on the facts. Sara. In the Foundry. With the bruised hands. Cluedo will never stop being a fad.

Sara.

Oh… I could do that.

In the gloom of the Foundry it was almost peaceful, the repetitive act of dabbing cotton balls covered in antiseptic over Sara’s knuckles; they were split and bruised, as though she’d beat Slade around the head with her fists (a girl can dream). It was something Sara would absolutely do because, well, she’s Sara. She fights. Even when her odds are slim to none.

But the site stabbed into Felicity’s gut. He hurt her. He’d hurt Sara.

Sara who, not seven years ago, had been too young for any of this. She’d been a normal teenager, or
as normal as a girl can be at the whim of her hormones, which is to say not very. And innocent. Not the type of innocence dictated by physical or spiritual symbols; the ‘my body - my temple - shall not be touched or penetrated’ kind of vilification that fanatical sexists and fear mongers have often designed around religions. The type of innocence that lives in every girl who’s trying to find her place in the world, by every teenager before they’re subjected to the cruel realities that can make adolescence feel like a joke, a lie.

Sara... she’d just been trying.

She’d tried to win ‘Ollie’s’ affection too early in her life. On failing, she’d taken to it a different way. Seduction. She’d tried to make her father proud before realising that the pedestal she was on was one of her own making. She’d hurt her sister - she’d deliberately tried to; because her sister had hurt her first. Now new fences were being built between them, new paths and old trusts forged anew.

She’d tried to survive on a boat filled with hostile men and then an island filled with hostile men. Slade and Oliver had been the two to befriend her. Then Slade betrayed her, exacerbating a distrust in the intentions of the male sex that had started when she’d been dragged on the Amazo, in her underwear, by the hands of men who’d wanted more. And had no qualms in showing it.

Like Slade had just now.

How dare he.

The anger... it took her by surprise.

In all her time with the man, Felicity’s anger had been based deep in the root of another man’s pain. She’d been so focused on Oliver and those she loved, her anger felt secondary.

This was different; it hissed through her, burning hot and tight. “I’ll get him.” The mutter didn’t carry, it was spoken so softly down to the strawberry blonde woman under her hands, “it doesn’t matter how long it takes. I’ll make sure you’re all safe.”

And that was all well and good, saying it, but... doing? Very different thing. Didn’t mean she wouldn’t. Still, Felicity was so very relieved that Oliver hadn’t been there to witness the last 30 minutes.

I mean, what could I have said?

How could she have explained?

How could she have made him feel better about how - as she’d risen from holding Sara on the floor - she’d reeled sideways as the world tilted on itself? What was there to say about how she’d started to wheeze - a dry rattle that signalled the beginning of a panic attack, making her sound like she smoked 50 a day - or how her heart pounded so hard it made her wince, how each beat had bile rising in her throat and sweat gathering on her forehead, like right now, because... No.

She couldn’t put him through that. There were so many areas in his life right now under siege; she couldn’t possibly add a last straw. It would break her as surely as it would crush him.

That was why it-it was supposed to be me. So the worst wouldn’t happen. Just me. No one else... no else was supposed to be touched by Slade, to be taken or hurt or anything by him.

So here, now, with Sara... it inevitably made these past weeks she’d paid for with time, tears, sweat, blood and sleep utterly meaningless.
Futile.

Worth nothing.

Nothing.

The pain of that ripped through her - a shadow of it became sound, leaving her throat to coat the air - and her eyes shut tight. It wasn’t for nothing. It wasn’t for nothing. But it didn’t matter how hard she held herself right then; the feeling of her insides dropping to the floor, of her heart turning into a hollow, breakable thing that began to crack - as if intending to fall with the rest of her organs - of the white noise returning like a band of pressure at the back of her skull.

Of the strain against her spine; like fingers of despair digging deep.

Nothing.

He was always there… like a shadow in her mind, behind her eyes. Blocking out the sun.

This dark, corrosive, infectious, insidious, hateful creature...

His words, his taunts; they continued to cut into her. As she slept alone, in the day when she worked at QC; it didn’t matter. They revisited her and each recollection was as sharp as the event itself.

It would pour then too, the blackness. Just when she thought she could breathe and function without remembering. You can’t escape that dark. Heavy and slow - like lava that burned cold - it crawls into the safe places; the crevices of the mind.

Manifest nightmares; Slade doesn’t need to be with me for me to feel him. For their sessions to be constant.

For every inch she gained, he’d take a mile. And the miles were piling; beginning to wear her down.

The push and pull and force and press… The constant pounding of his malice against her will.

Was all of that, everything… meaningless?

The black pit opened wide.

It had her sinking insides swiftly rising, writhing up from her stomach and to her chest, before hitting her throat and then she was dashing away to the basement’s bathroom. A toilet and sink was added to the shower area when flying upstairs and magically appearing through a secret side entrance started gaining too much attention.

This isn’t anguish.

Breathing erratically - loudly - the door closed and she stumbled to the toilet - the seat was up, men- to throw up the close-to digested contents of her amazing brunch.

No, this wasn’t anguish. She’d been there, done that.

This was failure. I failed.

Her knees smacked against cool stone.

It was her resignation to the painful truth. That she hadn’t bought them time, that she couldn’t stop Slade tonight, that she couldn’t help Oliver in all the ways he wished and needed, that for all her
claims she… she wasn’t enough.

She wasn’t *good* enough.

The proposal had been a device, used simply as a piece of rope to strangle herself with.

Heart, soul and ribcage aching as she heaved once more, it occurred to her that, while she still didn’t want to tell Oliver - still *couldn’t* tell Oliver - she also wouldn’t, *not ever*, regret why she originally said yes.

Thea.

*Yes.* Oliver’s Thea. Oliver’s sanity. His friends and loved ones… *safe.* Yes.

But even as she thought it was worth it, part of her felt like she hadn’t done a thing.

Hands clamped on the rim, Felicity took as deep a shaky an inhale as her sore insides would allow. The drag of air sounded stressed at best and felt worse, as if her throat had reduced its circumference.

She didn’t cry.

She’d cried before over toilet bowls. Once, a last glass of wine she knew she shouldn’t have drunk had her sobbing in a mess of noodles and alcohol for reprieve from the vomiting. Or her college days, when 3am was the new 11pm and she’d drank a shot of something blue on top of the whiskey she’d pilfered and… *there goes all pride.*

But, in the here and now, when she had the most reason to do so, her eyes were dry and scratchy. *Dehydration?*  
...Realisation?

Drained, she lifted a hand and pulled on the flush before shifting back. Before regrouping. Breathing.

Baseline: it *had* kept them safe. At least, for a while. She’d take that. She had to.

“Right,” she whispered, groaning as she rose to her feet and moved to the sink.

*New plan.* Another deep breath in through her nose, a longer exhale... then she washed her hands. *Clean up.* *Check the notification that pinged before...everything.* Tasting the sharp tang in her mouth, she rinsed too. *Call Caitlin for an update. Call Detective Lance.*

Straightening, she caught her reflection in the mirror and balked.

*Is that me? I actually look like that?*

Tainted.

She took in the ghost behind her eyes.

*If... when Oliver finds out, I wonder if he’ll see me differently.*

In a decidedly not good way.

Her heart seized; it was taking punishment today.

Lips pressed together, she sniffed up air but it resembled more a sniffle than an attempt at composure:
her face in the mirror looked haunted.

*Come what may-

“-Felicity?!”

Composure gone, readiness erased... yep; she wasn’t prepared for squat.

*Oh no.* Neck clenching - *nu uh* - she listened as rapid footsteps approached the door. It had her chest constricting so tightly her heart literally missed a beat.

How did he do that, make everything better?

Make everything *worse*?

Just by being near.

*Why did he have to come back* now? When she was a mess. And barely coping. *Now is not the time for a miniature freak-out.*

And he just *had* to say her name, in *that* way. As if, for a moment, she was his number one priority.

*You’re safe.* It was all too easy to remember.

*Stop it.* Torn, her eyes in the mirror held her still.

“Felicity?”

*Closer.* Eyes squeezing shut - feeling irritatingly fragile and bleak - Felicity bowed her head, her shoulders bunching. “I’m here.”

She didn’t sound even close to normal. *Drat.*

“Hey.” He paused... the silence stretched for a moment until another step had him halted before the door. “Can I come in?” Low toned, his words were quiet. Hushed. “Please?”

And cautious. He sounded *cautious?*

It made her frown. “Oliver, I get that this isn’t the ladies room but privacy is sort of an issue here.”

She wanted him to come in.

She wanted him to stay right where he was.

“Felicity,” he didn’t sound impatient; he didn’t even sound exasperated and there was something about that - the quiet way he continued to speak - that put her on edge, “I heard you washing your hands.”

*Frack.*

She bit her lip... *I got nothing.*

A soft sound - a whirl of air - told her he’d sighed. “If you won’t let me in, will you at least come out?”

And he’d sound very agreeable, if there wasn’t something smouldering beneath the surface of his calm. It was odd because for the first time, she didn’t know what it was. Hearing him over the com
every night made it so that she could translate even the slightest alteration in his cadence, made it so that she could prepare for whichever variation of Arrow - grumpy Arrow or guilt Arrow - that may walk back into the Foundry...

But his voice was unreadable.

It was unsettling. Right now, unsettling was unwelcome.

*Give a little.* “I’ll come out.”

Then again seeing Sara, who he’d had to walk past to reach the bathroom, had probably unnerved him-

“I’ll wait.” So, *so* quiet. *So* low. “...Thank you.”

She blinked, hearing him back away from the door until she couldn’t hear him at all.

*How... odd?*

Alarm bells started ringing. Tiny ones.

Even still, it was slow, her progression to the door. Facing the music wasn’t exactly on the list of her current top ten happy thoughts. But his voice kept echoing in her head...

Unseeing and unthinking of anything else or even of where the hand towel went - she was sure she hung it up but her aim was spectacularly questionable seeing as how she wasn’t even looking when she did it - Felicity reached for the handle and pushed it open.

If he’d said it as reassurance, it wasn’t necessary. But she didn’t think that was it.

The attentiveness - the gratitude - laced in his tone didn’t cover the fact that he’d sounded *different*. As if he was being careful.

As if - she decided on seeing him standing in front of Sara’s form with his index finger and thumb brushing against each other - he needed something from her... but was afraid to ask for it.

Because he wouldn’t like the result. Or her answer.

*I am really grasping at straws. But...*

As two people who’d established a rapport based on mutual trust, admiration and honesty; that possibility was unnerving.

Fully stepping around a pillar, her eyes flickered everywhere. Not for escape; for a foothold. “I’m here.” Like he didn’t know. The man could hear a pin drop in a room full of booted up servers.

“Sorry about that.” *Why am I apologising for using the bathroom?*

He didn’t immediately look at her, deciding to stare some more at his ex-girlfriend. *Maybe she’s not as EX as he thought...*

Then his head lifted. *Then* he looked at her. His arms were folded - tightly - across his chest...

It took a moment, just one. Moments were miraculous; gone in the flicker of an eye, but every one of them as important as the last.

And the shift - in him - was subtle. But the impact was *maximum.*
He hadn’t taken her in at first, not really. Too absorbed in the events of the day to truly see her. And for that she was glad – *not that I’m pleased about the stress*. She’s his cheerful advocate for all things stress free but... yeah. She’s good with him *not* seeing a thing.

Except...

It only takes a moment.

*One.*

And Oliver... he sees a lot. Always has.

Mouth opening to speak - she’ll never know what he was going to say to her - it took the space of said moment (approx. 2 seconds) for his eyes to alter from simply looking at her, to *seeing* her.

It made her stop walking towards him. It also made her wish that she’d stayed in the bathroom. Maybe with the door locked. A deadbolt.

Slowly, he side stepped the table. *Uh oh. This frown* rippled into place, more a furrow than a glower, and somehow, it quelled the severity she’d seen in his face before he’d looked her way. His arms dropped their hold on each other and the bridge of his nose began to crease in worry - *it is not cute. It isn’t.*

Unblinking, his presence held such weight that she didn’t have a hope of looking away.

*This sucks.*

If there was a word to perfectly fit how she appeared just then, ‘bad’ would definitely be that word. She looked bad. Gross and tired and just. Plain. Bad. *All bad.* And it was clearly obvious to her badass vigilante. Undeniably, because she hadn’t looked so awful when he’d left her hours earlier.

She was still sure she could gloss over it. Give some excuse that wasn’t as lame as her brain told her it was.

But something else told her – something deep down in the pit of her stomach – that it wouldn’t be enough.

She could tell - if the way Oliver stood was any indication - that he wouldn’t believe a word of any nonsense she might throw his way.

Yes, he saw *too* much.

Absently, she felt a thimble-full of guilt go *plop* into her stomach; it felt like their dream-like sojourn to Big Belly hadn’t happened at all. *All that effort from him, wasted on me.*

But now wasn’t the time to wax forlorn. *Maybe he'll let it go;* if she brushed it aside, making it clear - *no means no* - and proving that, against Sara’s current dilemma, it meant very little and could be looked into later.

Maybe then he’d let her walk past him, towards Sara. The priority.

But it was that *something* again, there, in his expression that was telling her there wasn’t a chance in hell. Not this time. She couldn’t take another step or do any of the number of ‘things’ that existed on her list of ways to avoid Oliver Queen... he’d see right through her thin composure.

*I’m just feeling a little sick,* she could say that. *Tell him Big Belly didn’t go down right this time,*
however unlikely that may be. She could even say that Sara’s sudden appearance caused her to throw up—*and sound like the weakest of weak links to ever exist.* But it was something. *Say—*

He took a step forward, his body and face dimly lit as he crossed paths with one of the few low lights in the Foundry. And something about him had her lips staying firmly shut; the roof of her mouth dry.

*Dark.* His eyes were *dark,* if eyes could be dark. If a *face* could be dark and his was. As if darkness - true dark, as in night and shadow - was etched and sown into each crevice, into each rise and fall.

It was vivid enough; even though the lighting, particularly where he stood, was horrendous.

When he did speak, his mouth barely moved. “Are you okay?”

Was *she* okay?

This was getting weirder by the second. She wasn’t the one on the table - *we need to get an actual gurney in here stat* - and nothing had happened to *her.*

Like it was automatic, her head shook, her forehead pinched. “I’m fine. I just—”

“You look pale.”

Her lips pressed together. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing Felicity.”

Each word felt like a physical sensation, his voice was *that* low.

“Well,” she shrugged; it was a tired thing, “maybe you’re looking too hard.” *Okay, that was pathetic.*

If his expression was anything to go by, he thought so too.

*Ahem.* Fingers interlocking, she just looked at him. *Waiting.* *I will not engage in this.*

Eyes flickering down to her hands - *crap* - Oliver took a deliberate second to convey to her that he recognised that her bullshit metre was set on an all-time lame-o high.

Biting down on her lip, she *still* said nothing.

He sighed. “Can we not,” his hand waved between them, “do this?”

“I’m not really doing anything...” the look he shot her shut her up. “Alright.” She took a deep breath and conceded. “We won’t do this.” But he was just standing there, observing her. “What do you want?”

“The truth.” Then he licked his lips and *there* was a sight to knock her completely out of her senses. “I want you to tell me the truth.”

*This needs to end.* “Oliver; it’s not like you can do anything about it.”

He *flinched.*

She hadn’t thought, not a little, of what her frank sentence might do to him.

“Right.” It was a whisper... raw.

Raw to the bone.
Oh God. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. And he did; he looked hurt. She just didn’t understand how she’d done it. She also had no idea how to rectify it.

She saw his throat work. When he spoke again, the timbre of his voice would stay with her for the rest of the evening. “Do you want me to leave you alone?”

No.

She cleared her throat, “Yes,” and looked down at her colourless nails. “There are more important things right now.” Like Sara. “It can wait.”

For a long - very long - moment he didn’t say anything. Neither did she.

But then she heard him shift, leaning on one leg as if he were taking her in from a different angle.

“Why aren’t you looking at me?”

Every cell in her body froze, standing to attention.

“You’ve never avoided eye contact with me before.” Indeed; her eyes - now wide - were aimed down. “In fact you made it your business to let me know from the first time we met that you’re my equal.” It was like a vow, the way he said those words; quiet yet clear. “That you’re not looking at me right now tells me everything I need to know.”

Of course he’d notice. And he sounded so baffled.

Yet, she couldn’t. She couldn’t look at him. She needed time to compose her - I am so severely screwed - expression.

Her hands came up to her face to drag over her eyes and rub against her temple. “Don’t over think this Oliver: I’m just worried for Sara.” God, could her voice have sounded any smaller? I wouldn’t believe me either.

And he didn’t.

“Look at me.”

“Oliver…” it was a murmur; an ‘I’m tired’ and ‘not now’.

“Felicity.”

She couldn’t ignore that; the world in her name.

‘To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower…’

Sighing through her nose - I am not in the mood for this - her head came up but she didn’t open her eyes until the last second… to find him two steps closer.

“I’m asking again.” It wasn’t that he sounded angry, just serious. And imposing. Concerned. “And ‘it isn’t important’, is not an answer I’ll accept.”

Okay, Mr Queen, there was definitely an ounce of anger in that.

But it was also… as if this was important. To Oliver. Her answer meant something to him.

Looking at her dead in the eyes, he held her there for one second, two seconds… several seconds. It
got to a point where her shot nerves almost forced her mouth open because *this is ridiculous*, the length of time they could look into each other’s eyes without it being odd. It hit her then that they did this a lot. They did this even when other people were in the room- people that would fade away as they concentrated on each other - because… they were friends and friends give 100% of their attention to the other.

Right?

Finally, he huffed a soft breath - as though preparing for another defensive line from her - and hesitated, briefly, before reiterating. “Are you okay?”

Mouth immediately opening to answer - her lips forming a ‘yes’ - she forgot that for words to come, a voice is required and she didn’t have one. Not right then.

He watched her.

*Dig deep,* she found their smile - his smile - and it lasted all of one second before that fled too making her feel foolish.

*This is ridiculous.*

She could see on his face that he knew this - the way his brow bent together in compassionate appeal and the way he stood; not over her, not imposing like how she’d thought he’d been before. The way he *looked* at her… he wasn’t happy. As if he were seeing something for the first time that he was realising had been there for a while and he’d been missing it. He wanted her to talk to him, like he talked to her; especially recently. He wanted her to-

*Oh.*

He wanted her to *believe* in him. The same way he believed in *her.* The way he trusted her - implicitly - in the last few weeks, in ways he hadn’t last year. To show faith in him. To be confident that he could make it all better…

Even though he really couldn’t.

This wasn’t something he could just glue back together, spackle over or hug to make go away. And she was pretty sure a hug from him right now - a real one - would break her. She knew how it felt now, to be held - truly - by Oliver Queen.

It would be too much.

But answering with another ‘I’m fine’ would also get her nowhere.

“No.” Like a whisper on a non-existent wind, she almost didn’t hear herself. But Oliver did and the softest of soft blinks transformed his face from uncompromising, to kind. “I’m not alright.”

Nodding, relieved - as if her words lifted some invisible weight from his shoulders - he took a small step closer, not yet in arms reach. “Yeah.”

“I’m not fine.”

“I know.”

“But I’m not going to tell you why.”

His open expression shuttered. “Felicity-”
“It’s not the time.” She re-stated. “I said I was fine earlier because it can wait.” She stressed, adding as much steel behind each word as she possibly could. “It can wait until later.” Until never.

“I disagree.”

Ugh! Obviously her steel was nothing more than a piece of plastic.

The man was infuriatingly persistent. Sara, you need to wake up, right now. She figured he wouldn’t be half so focused on her if a Lance sister was present, consciously being the operative word.

Eyes closing, anticipating the throbbing headache she was already beginning to feel the first shoots of. “Is it… are you worried?” Maybe it’s because...“About my performance?” Please tell me that isn’t it. “Is that it? Because I need to know-”

“-No.”

The word was spoken with such vehemence that Felicity’s eyes flew open and caught his own.

“No, Felicity…” Shaking his head - as if he just couldn’t believe she’d just said that - he looked so disconcerted. “Your work is beyond reproach.” And his voice was so evocative, deliberately trying to communicate with her that she had absolutely nothing to worry about there.

“Then,” she lifted her hands, “what is it?” Why can’t you let this go?

“I didn’t believe you.” Even though he had reason enough to shout, he was murmuring. “Earlier. But I let it go because I wanted you to trust me. I wanted to wait until you were ready to tell me. But now, with this,” he gestured, without looking, to Sara, “it can’t wait.”

“This,” Felicity pointed at her face, “and this,” she flicked a hand between them, “doesn’t have anything to do with that,” her hand indicated Sara and everything that went with her. “That’s what I meant when I said it could wait.”

He immediately countered with, “For how long?”

Blindsided – huh – she backtracked, looking ever inch as confused as he appeared intense. “I don’t-what?”

“How long is long enough?” He repeated, slowly. “How long until it becomes a matter of concern?”

Her stomach clenched. “It’s not like I’m going to get worse.” And her hurt, her confusion was so clearly laced into her words he couldn’t hope to miss it.

“That’s not what I-” stopping before he could finish, he pulled back and looked at her.

Really looked at her.

Then he said something that made her want to cry herself to sleep in his arms. “How long am I going to let you keep putting yourself last?”

Like he’d taken a hammer and hit the wall she’d erected around Slade’s indecent proposal. She heard other words in there, words unvoiced but said with his eyes on hers, with his flexing fingers; words she couldn’t even begin to believe.

“This is my fault.”
She opened her mouth; a retort already in motion-

He raised a hand. “Please, let me say this.”

Every breath and word from him was a touch too much for her deal with. Otherwise she would have spoken. She would have referenced his insufferable need to blame himself for everything – Guilt Arrow in full swing – but his eyes stopped her. His heart stopped her. He had something he needed to say. And since he so seldom spoke about his thoughts - the way he fumbled through words the few times he’d tried to be open with her in the past, as if grasping onto broken straws - a discourse Felicity figured she took for granted, she let him continue.

“I knew you weren’t alright.” He started again. “But I thought - since you weren’t saying anything - that it was something you could handle and wanted to keep private.” He shook his head and his mouth upturned in the starkest display of self-rebuke she’d ever seen come from him. “After a while I realised there was a real problem. So I started watching you.” He blinked once. Hard. “I mean, checking you out-keeping an eye on-” cutting himself off, his hand came up to rub across his eyes. “That sounded better in my head.”

A startled giggle left her. “Isn’t it usually me who speaks in sentence fragments?”

Hand dropping, his eyes flickered over her face and she got the distinct impression he was fighting with himself. She’d have a clue about that if he didn’t keep stunning her with unexpected reveals.

“I saw things when you didn’t think I was looking. When I was paying attention.” The way he said it was odd; as if he was chastising himself for invading her privacy yet, at the same time, was punishing himself for not looking for her sooner. “Things I’ve been missing. I’m not talking about what we discussed in Big Belly Burger. It’s,” he took a breath, “I saw how much you really do for me, for all of us. Whether it’s in the Foundry or at Queen Consolidated. How much you sacrifice.” His head tilted; an aching sort of affection damn near screaming from his face. “It scared me to think that I’d been taking you for granted.”

Her heart tripped, don’t you dare Oliver Queen. “Oliver, you haven’t-”

“Yes I have.” But he didn’t sound remotely guilty. “I can’t bring myself to fully regret it either. I,” seemingly struggling for a word; as if a mix of reticence, some small shame and want left him mute and grasping at an ineffective descriptive like sand in a sieve, “I’ve never… I don’t remember - not ever- having anyone in my life care so much about,” mouth widening, shortening, he eventually shook his head, “about me. It’s like you’ve been trying to shield me from getting hurt.”

Be it from Isabel Rochev or his mother, OC, or even Roy… the Press. Even, on occasion, verbal-fire from his own teammates…

And he said it as if that was extraordinary. As if it wasn’t him who was always kind, who freely offered his compassion.

Warm eyes smiled across to her, killing her softly.

“But I don’t want that.” It was echoed in this voice - his tone all sorts of tender now. “I don’t want happy. Or safe. Even if it were possible to only live in the light.” His words weren’t punches - callbacks to things she and Diggle had said to him, only altered to fit the situation - they weren’t cuts on her skin. They were caresses. “I don’t want that; not if you’re the cost.” Exhaling, he looked like he’d just grasped something. “Felicity; you’re the one who brings that light. You always have.”

Every word.
Every whisper and cry that had been shrieking to him from behind her eyes, insistent behind her teeth, for weeks. He’d heard them all, even if he hadn’t understood them. He’d *heard* her.

And this response healed as much as it crippled.

*He heard me.*

He *got* it.

Her eyelids fluttered with it…

Still, she shook her head because *-nope; I am not the one responsible for that.* For the growth of another. “I can’t bring light out from where there isn’t any.” Though watery, her smile was genuine. “You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

It was slow… so very slow, how his smile faded until there was nothing left on his face but haunting sincerity.

“Don’t stop.” The undertone - short - was imploring. “Please. Don’t ever lose that faith in me. Don’t go,” he licked is lips, “to somewhere I can’t reach.”

Completely thrown, Felicity almost stuttered at him. “What?”

“But most of all,” he swiftly interjected - as if she hadn’t spoken -as he moved slightly closer to her, “don’t ever,” the line of his brow harsh reflected his tone, “use our relationship to defend yourself against me.”

Relationship? Not friendship? *We aren’t… friends?*

*No. Of course we are, we’re friends.* She needed that.

But that wasn’t what he meant. It hit her then, what he was saying and-

Her mouth formed an ‘O’. As in ‘oh frack me’.

She forgot to breathe out, because… she just had, hadn’t she? To cover up how his words were making her feel, to detract from where the conversation was taking them, she’d used a compliment - however factual it may be - to alter its course. To lead him away, to use how well she thought of him as refuge.

*New. Low.*

“I am the one person you never need to protect yourself from.” It was a promise, even as it rumbled like a threat.

“Even Dig?” The joke wasn’t quite a squeak but it was a close thing.

He ground his teeth, as if he knew – and he did – that she was using crappy humour to once more downplay the severity of the conversation. “Even John.”

She looked away.

*How long has he been holding onto this?* With the kind of person Oliver is, there was no way he’d be so fervent if he hadn’t at least been thinking about it.

*I did this to him. I thought I could keep him from learning the truth and help him at the same time,*
like I always do. But I did it by pushing him away. Even as she kept him near. No one can go through that and not feel the ripples.

“I’m not upset that you lied to me.” Felicity’s eyes flew back to his and saw his jaw tighten; a wave of restraint. “I’m hurt that you didn’t tell me because you didn’t think it was important enough to say.”

She’d made him flinch in the last ten minutes; it was only fair he do the same to her.

Recoiling, she blinked - the muscles in her face contracting - to adjust to the shooting sharpness in her chest.

‘…you didn’t think it was important enough to say.’

Which was the more relevant thread to him? The fact that she didn’t immediately tell him… or the fact that she didn’t consider herself high enough on his list of ‘important people’ to think of telling him before now?

Of course, it wasn’t even like that; this wasn’t something she could tell him about but… she’d never thought of it that way. Had never even considered it.

How many times was she going to fail at this? I can’t win for losing.

He saw it - that step back - the way her brows crinkled together, how her eyes fell from his to someplace low, and the way her body started to curl in on itself.

Saw it. Didn’t like it.

“I can’t think of anything more important.” So he was going for the big guns? Fabulous. She didn’t have any big guns left. “The first thing I do in the morning, when we’re at QC or in Verdant’s main office - the first thing - is look for you.”

Ditto.

Except for one major difference.

She lifted her head to see him.

“I can’t start the day; I can’t do what I need to do, until I know that the people I care about are okay. That you, my Girl Wednesday-”

“It’s still Friday.” She reminded him, as if she were saying ‘please remember this time’.

“Friday,” he conceded before continuing as steadily as an oncoming train, “is safe. That you’re with me,” lifting an arm, he pointed in her direction, “and safe. It is important.”

To me.

He didn’t even need to say it aloud.

Oh Jesus.

‘Pièce de résistance’.

It was the same. The exact same. How he felt was how she felt; only her day couldn’t start without making sure that he didn’t know she wasn’t fine- plus about a gazillion cups of coffee.
God, how was she ever supposed to tell him about Slade when he was like this? The very first thing he was likely to do is walk back over how he missed that she wasn’t fine, for weeks. That she hadn’t been safe in the hours they weren’t together.

It would crucify him.

But he’d survive. He’d push through. She just didn’t want to be the cause of any pain, however momentary that pain may be.

She wrapped her arms around herself. Felicity Smoak was nothing if not stubborn - and so damn determined to keep him far away from this until absolutely necessary - because the truth would do no more than distract him. She swallowed down the warm feelings his words had produced and affected a wall. “I don’t know Oliver, I can think of a few things that are more important.” Pointedly looking from him to Sara and back again, she waited for him to remember.

And she couldn’t have said a more wrong thing at a worst moment.

Her crummy wall met a face full of stone and she belatedly remembered that he was so much better at this than she was.

“Sara?” He bit out.

Bit. Out.

Suddenly her wall was paper thin. “Sara.” She all but mumbled. Mumbled. Who am I?

But yes; Sara. Behind him. Unconscious Sara.

How many times did she have to say it before he focused on the sleeping elephant in the room? Normally it didn’t take the Queen heir so long to give his full and complete attention to a Lance sister... well, actually that wasn’t quite true. Oddly enough.

A couple of days before, Laurel had come into Verdant to sit at the bar - on a rare moment when Sara wasn’t working - alone. Just... waiting. Since Felicity had been downstairs - in ten kinds of pain from being whipped with a cane - she’d seen this on her camera and had slumped.

Not her usual reaction to seeing Gorgeous Laurel but... this normally meant that Laurel wanted another ‘talk’ with Oliver. There was a running bet between her and Diggle - one she figured Oliver knew about - as to what these ‘talks’ actually entailed. And though Felicity was sure they were important, that they were relevant and necessary between the two ‘old friends’ (so many bunny fingers, so little time) she was also nowhere close to having the energy to deal with a determined Laurel Lance.

On a sigh, she’d opened her com-link to Oliver, who’d been on a dry run - daytime training outdoors in the ways of the Vigilante - with Roy to tell him that his ex-girlfriend was polishing off a bad coffee upstairs...


Two Days Ago, the Foundry Basement...
“Oliver, are you busy?”

It took a moment...

“Roy’s just cleaning up.” ‘His mess’ was unsaid at the end of that sentence. “What is it?”

She cleared her throat. “Laurel’s upstairs.”

When she heard him exhale - heavily - she pressed her lips together. “Has she been there a while?”

“She’d just arrived.”

There was a short pause. “And she’s still there?”

“Affirmative.” Felicity double checked her feed. “Sitting at the bar as we speak.”

“Alright.”

“Do you want me to tell her to…?”

“Do I want you to…what?”

She floundered, because that had sounded oddly playful. “Do you, er, want me to… to, erm…” I’m in trouble, she could practically hear his smile, “Oliver, help me.”

“How?”

Yes; definitely humour.

Rolling her eyes - just a little - she smiled, forgetting all about the throbbing at her sides. “Do you want me to tell her you’re not available?”

“No; she’ll just come back later.”

Or sit there and wait all day. Still, ouch. “I could always tell her you’ve left the country.” She offered, immediately wincing because it had sounded a tad… well, bad. “I meant that as a joke.” She really had too.

But he hummed, as if he were actually considering it. “And where have I gone?”

“I hear Bali’s nice this time of year.”

“Bali’s nice all year round.”

“Wouldn’t know.”

“Me either.”

“What, really?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I thought it was the duty of all rich people to go to Bali at least once before they’re 30.”

“Bali was never on my list.” He still sounded pretty chipper for a guy who made brooding an art form. “And I’m not yet 30.”
“True.” She spun back over to her monitors – if he wasn’t talking to Laurel then she didn’t need to watch her anymore. “Does this mean you’re adding it to your list? Btw, I can’t believe you had a list, once; even over the hills and valleys of Lian Yu and ago.”

“Everyone has a list.” He sounded slightly distorted, as if he were moving about in the wind. “And…it’s a possibility.”

Her smile softened. “Good.” That Oliver could hope and dream was all she’d ever-

“How about you?”

“How about me’ what?”

“Bali.”

“Oh, er… I tend not to think about doing things I know I can’t afford, no matter how amazing they might sound.”

“You could come with me.”

It was stated like a question.

She blinked. “To Bali?”

“Yeah.”

Like, why not?

“Are you asking?”

“This is me asking.”

She laughed. “You sure you don’t want to be asking someone less likely to go full on tomato-red in the face of Starling Weekly?” Or get us kicked out of the country, she internally added.

“Pretty sure.”

“…You’re being serious.”

“Yes.”

She stared into nothing.

“You’re asking me to go to Bali with you?”

“Well,” as if he’d just heard himself and didn’t want her to get the wrong idea (though how you could get any other idea about being invited to Bali…), “I’d invite Dig too.”

Nice save. “Okay, do you see Dig wanting to lie on a beach with us instead of Lyla?”

“And I’d invite Lyla.”

Her smile was wistful. “Sounds nice.”

Glad you agree.”

He still sounded so peppy. Like how he always sounded when he was trying to put off something he
didn’t want to do or talk about - aka, a talk with Laurel (which sounds like a bad TV show) - and affected a wall of uncharacteristic, light hearted... well, peppiness.

And what was wrong with that? I say let him have the small moments in-between. Where he could rest. Even play pretend.

“Right, you need to be careful.”

“Why?” He sounded so flustered. “Did I say something odd?”

As if, maybe he’d been a little too mouthy? She liked that idea; as if his words had run away from him. How does the shoe feel on the other foot Mr Queen?

“It is a universal truth that if a guy promises a girl a trip to Bali, then said guy must deliver. It’s in the handbook of all women everywhere.” She added on a whim – still grinning, enjoying herself.

They hadn’t talked like this in... they hadn’t talked like this ever. It was fun.

“Is that the rule?”

“Well,” I’m such a goof, “it is my rule,” she offered lightly.

There was a small, low sound from his end – it had the breathless quality of a charmed chuckle.

Feeling awkward, she shook her head. “I’m just kidding.”

“I’m not. One day. Bali.”

One day.

“Promises, promises Mr Queen.”

“I never make promises I can’t keep-”

Sure he did-

“-Miss Smoak.”

His tone was very passive. Almost without inflection. Absolutely no teasing there. A routine they’d created, of sorts, to play around on the com. Still...

Trouble.

…

..

.

Present Day...


Roy hadn’t given her the chance to reply - mercifully - and it was forgotten with the second reminder of Laurel; she’d called Oliver’s cell. While he was on it.
33 minutes later he and Roy had returned through the side door of the Foundry. Not the upstairs entryway where Laurel would be able to clearly see him. It wasn’t as if he was wearing his leathers or anything. They’d stopped off for bottles of water and good coffee, giving Felicity seconds of each. Then Oliver had finally gone upstairs for a 20 minute conversation he appeared to want to forget the moment it was over.

And a hug. Laurel had hugged him. It had lasted a while.

Having watched on camera - because there is something very wrong with me (either that or pain had become her friend) - Felicity had seen both of them say things in the other’s ear that she hadn’t a hope of deducing. She couldn’t lip read. But she could torture herself further by wondering some more.

Laurel’s hand on his back had stroked. Her lips to his ear had pressed. Neither had pushed the other away. Having his back to the camera, Felicity hadn’t been able to see much of what he’d been doing. But they’d been close through the whole thing; before said talk and after.

Yet… no. Oliver didn’t automatically spring to attention when a Lance sister was near. Still, she knew that the only reason he’d been avoiding both women was because of the ways in which they each made him feel. The emotions were still there.

And looking at him now-

Oh boy... why did I just look at him? Then again, God had obviously created Oliver to be looked at so – hah, an answer. Maybe I should take that trip to Bali. Like, this second. Alone. Everything about him right there before her, was more than enough to yank her back to reality.

It was as if she’d clawed at him.

Violent. He looked violent, but it wasn’t savage or feral. It was intense, sure, but his expression wasn’t marred by aggressive lines, his hands didn’t fist and his teeth weren’t grating together. That emotion wasn’t aimed externally, it wasn’t aimed at her.

His intent, however, was.

“Sara’s unconscious.” He ground the words out.

“Right,” and if she really did squeak this time, well, then she could be forgiven, “then we should be monitoring-”

His tone took a turn for condescending. “There isn’t really much we can do about that until she’s awake.”

“True, but-”

“-And we aren’t finished.”

“Can we please just,” sounding far more desperate than planned; it came out so loud he jolted on the spot. Her own tell; her loud voice. But he has to stop, just. Stop. Asking. “Can we focus on Sara?”

And not me?

It was said so pleadingly, an echo of how she was looking at him, that he didn’t immediately respond. Couldn’t.
That kind of weight… she’d never given him that before. It must have thrown him.

And she knew it wasn’t fair but she needed him to surrender, just this once.

Obviously struggling, he shifted on the spot… and maybe he’d give her the mile she was asking for, masquerading as an inch.

His eyes on her were like a physical touch. They bored holes; like he thought he could telepathically get the answers he wanted… but was failed to do so.

Done battling with her, his hands came up to his face; his fingers touching his forehead - frustrated - as if something had gotten lost in translation and she was the oblivious one.

*Oliver.*

What could she say? How could she tell him when she wasn’t ready to?

It was silent until his hands dropped. It was as if he’d never stopped looking at her.

But then his stare dropped to the floor along with the weight he held in it. And he didn’t do anything – say anything else – for a long while.

*Then* he moved.

He took a step towards her, just one, before stopping. They were in arms reach of each other. But neither tried to push further in. They’d never tried before. They wouldn’t start now.

“Tomorrow.”

Taken aback, she repeated, “Tomorrow?”

His eyes locked to hers. “After the Campaign rally, we’ll go for that ride.” Hushed, his low tone was so much more compelling – so much more dangerous – than he probably realised. Or cared. “I’ll take you out to Monument Point. Just you and me. And we can finally talk. I want you to talk to me.”

That sounded an awful lot like an order. She really did NOT like being told what to do and he knew that.

But it was his voice – only his voice – that stopped her from saying a word.

It *shook.* It was such a small thing too. *Fragile.*

*That’s* how much he cared.

Even stunned as she was, it made part of her wonder one last time.

Sara was *still* right there. In the basement; hurt, unconscious... and Oliver wasn’t with her. Not emotionally, not even physically.

She’d had this image of how he’d be on his return and it wasn’t this. Maybe she’d missed it, his reaction. Maybe he’d gone to Sara when she’d been in the bathroom and had touched her, had held her as he whispered soothing words he’d hope she’d hear as she slumbered.

Searching her eyes, he ducked his head as if to completely catch her attention, “Felicity?”

Yes or no.
The truth or a lie.

If she did this, if she agreed, there’d be no escaping him. He’d make sure. He was noticing so much and she didn’t have anything to hide behind anymore…

Nodding, she swallowed – *Am I just placating him or am I really doing this?* “Tomorrow.”

He nodded too. “Okay.” Then – out of nowhere – he asked. “Do you trust me?”

She blinked at him because, *what?* “You know I do.”

And he *did* know. It was her he was reminding.

He smiled - there in a blink of an eye - short and sweet before severity destroyed it once more. The depth of feeling staring down at her… *Sara’s one lucky woman.* Her insides contracted.

Oliver couldn’t look at her like that. Like she held the answers to every question he’d ever considered. It was too much. And it wasn’t fair. She wasn’t the one who could produce that level of feeling in him; that ache. Nor would she ever be on the receiving end of it.

*There’s no way that’s for me.*

Over a year ago, it had been made clear; Oliver’s tastes were - though obvious for a rich bachelor - exquisite.

This had to be for Sara. *She’s hurt and he’s feeling unbalanced because of it. It makes sense.*

“I need to ask you something.” He spoke again. “And you’re not going to like it.”

Like a wave, her panic returned. *What now?*

If she swallowed right now it would sound so much like those cartoony gulps…loud and ridiculously weak. “Okay?” She was pretty sure her voice had squeaked somewhere.

His next breath sounded strained; as if he really didn’t want to ask this question for fear of the answer - which made her internally freak the hell out - but knew he had no choice.

Opening his mouth, he stayed on the precipice between silence and speech for a few torturous moments before he finally asked, “Have you seen him recently?”

Her eyes flickered left to right because, *huh?* “Him who?”

Like he’d taken a shot of whiskey, it all but rumbled from his throat. “Slade.”

Like she’d been hit with an arrow.

*Have you seen him recently?*

*Had I seen…* what did that mean?

Her head shook even though she didn’t know what she was disagreeing to. “I-I don’t…” *I don’t want to know what you’re about to say.*

“All scoped out the camera sites.” *But oh, look, you’re going to tell me anyway.* As if his mouth was dry, he licked his lips again and searched for a way to explain that, probably, wasn’t in line with the unease that was making his fingers twitch and rub together. “I found messages left for me. Painted on
the walls.”

“Well… that’s a whole new dose of creepy.” Along with some creep-tastic whipped topping.

Messages. Speaking was becoming a problem; there was a tremor in her voice he had to have heard.

Not that it would stop him from shoving her into a spotlight that burned. “I think he might have been following you.”

I think he might have been…

Following…

…You.

Following me.

She knew, of course she did now but… since when? When did it start and how did Oliver know?

Hearing it this way brought her situation right in front of her face, where she didn’t need it to be.

Eyes shut tight, Felicity cleared her throat. “You think he was following me?”

It came out in a rush. “Possibly since we first put up the cameras.”

Her eyes shot back open. Why didn’t I check the fracking cameras?! “But,” she struggled, “you were with me. We both put them up. He could have been watching you.” Wait, “not that I want him to be following you,” her hand cut through the air- take that! “But it doesn’t make sense that it would be me that he follows.” Sure it does. “Out of all of us, I mean.”

He looked unsettled. “The messages were at the sites where the cameras were placed by you.” As if it were taking every ounce of control for him to continue, his words were a guttural mess. “I bet if we watch the footage from all 11 feeds we’ll find him watching you in each.”

It was freaking him out…

Get in line. It felt like a hand had forced itself down her gullet to wrap around her heart and squeeze, even as it pounded.

What if he was right? What if the feed showed very clearly that Slade had chosen to play with one of them from the start? That after their very early morning chat, he’d decided he’d picked a good one and had followed her to the Foundry. Proof. And if Slade had left him messages, taunts - another rope, this time for Oliver to yank on - as if acting out a part in some twisted game, then wouldn’t that mean she’d been right? That Slade had an endgame beyond trying to break her into little pieces?

That she had, indeed, only been transient. It would seem – maybe – that it was over for her now.

But for Oliver-

A vein had begun to stand out on his neck, a throbbing pressure; as though all the blood in his body was pumping hard and fast.

Just like how she was breathing. Too fast.

Calm down.

I can’t.
Breathe-

I'm trying.

Try harder.

Order received and accepted. She inhaled in through her nose, letting it slip out of her mouth. “I haven’t seen him anywhere near me.” She’d say this for Oliver to give him just a few more hours of clarity before it was royally shot it to hell.

“You’re sure?”

She arched a brow at him, really? “Yes Oliver; I’m sure.”

“Promise me.” A layer of worried vexation, made his tone rougher. It had the hairs on the back of her neck standing to attention, making her blink at him and worry. A lot.

Still…

“I promise.”

Knowing full well she couldn’t, shouldn’t.

Did.

“Did you call Diggle?”

She jumped. “Oliver.”

“Sorry.”

It didn’t sound remotely apologetic. A little amused and definitely a tad wearisome.

Now, stood almost directly behind her, near the metal case carrying his arrows - he’d cleaned that up after she’d checked the feeds of all 12 cameras - arms folded, she figured he hadn’t once taken his eyes off of Sara.

Exhaling, she adjusted the medical monitor connected to Sara’s IV. “There’s never really an appropriate time to interrupt a romantic engagement.”

“It isn’t fair, I know, but this is important.”

Nodding, she hummed in agreement, reaching for Sara’s forehead. “I called him right after I called you. I think he was in central city.”

“How’s her temperature?” He mumbled.

“Better.” And it was. Sara had cooled considerably in the last hour. “Her BP’s normal. It’s just a waiting game now.”
“Good.”

He was quiet.

Night had fallen and it was odd to Felicity that her day had started so full of light and life, to end like this. And it had always ended like this. If it wasn’t Slade and his visits, it was a crisis in the Foundry.

Except today she’d wanted it to be different. She’d wanted it to end light too. For once.

A puff of air – her exhale – blew her fringe up, up and away. “What about Roy?”

“Roy’s with Thea.” And the words sounded so different to how Oliver had said them that morning.

She peered at him over her shoulder. Surprisingly, he was already looking at her. “You don’t want me to call him in?”

“No.” The movement of his chest as he breathed in deep, exacerbating the already impressively buff musculature of his arms. And, because she was weak, her eyes flickered there. But only for a second.

“You were right. If being close to Thea gives Roy some control then I’m not going to take that away from him. Not until we know we need his help.”

She stared at him.

Head tilted at her introspection - gulp - the side of his mouth tugged upwards. “What?”

She cleared her throat, looking away. “Um. Nothing.”


‘You were right.’

Golly.

“Felicity.”

Fe-Li-Ci-Ty.

Like each syllable was a word, had its own sound and a name for each. It had the effect of hot honey being slowly poured down her spine. Zing.

Feeling too close to him for comfort - with her back to his front - Felicity rounded the table - run to avoid - and completely failed in placing 100% of her focus on separating the now empty bag of saline solution from the needle-line. “Hm?”

Still not looking at you.

“Would you look at me?” There was a smile in his voice, even as it also asked ‘what’s happening right now?’

Like earlier - when he told her to ‘look at me’ - it thrilled through her.

“Um, no?” Still, slumping slightly - with the kind of smile gracious losers give to the victors - she did look at him. “You should stop telling me I’m right.”

His brows furrowed even as a small smile remained on his ridiculously handsome face. “Why?” As if the notion was ridiculous.
“It’s bad for my ego.” As he came very close to snorting at her, she stretched high - damn 1 & 1/2 inch heels - to unhook the wires. “Too much of a good thing and all that jazz.” Her self-conscious smile wobbled on her face. “Besides,” her eyes found his again, briefly because wow, before flying away, “you’ve already said that to me once today.”

“Didn’t think a surplus of ‘you were right’ was a bad thing.”

“Well, I-”

“They can’t be if they make you blush like that.”

Stunned, she felt the red pulse up her neck. Stunned into silence. Stunned that he’d said it the way he had, that he’d said it at all.

Holy...

She heard him clear his throat.

“Sorry.” He muttered.

Straightening without looking at him, she bit her bottom lip before glancing down; her hands and fingers managing to fiddle around with whatever they could grasp onto. All the while the flush on her face made a home and didn’t budge.

Eventually - on a self-pitying groan - her eyes closed. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?” He sounded annoyingly A-Okay.

The groan became a whine. “Stop staring at my face.” My annoyingly, self-consciously, blushing face!

How was this her day?

An abrupt burst of laughter from him startled her. It was more of a chuckle really, but it was honest. Beautiful. It brought to mind all the things that shouldn’t come to mind with a ‘friend’ and she couldn’t help but peek up at him through her lashes.

The smile on his face was wide, showing teeth and making his eyes light right up in wonderment.

“Is that,” he hesitated, before a shot of something unbelievably close to mischief flared through his eyes. “Being told you’re right, is that a…’his finger itched the side of his face, “a turn on?”

Speechless at his audacity, her mouth fell open.

Pressing down on his lower lip - an act that looked almost obscene on him - did nothing to detract from how much enjoyment he was obviously getting out of this.

It made her think of earlier in Big Belly…

Chin lifting, he met her pointed - coy - stare over her glasses. His smirk was practically shining out of his eyes as leant over the table on his forearms.

“So… sex?” His words were an intoned rumble from somewhere in his chest.

A purr.
She felt it paw down her spine.

Looks like he wanted to continue the new and recent addition to their daily conversations.

He was definitely more centred than before.

She’d spent a half hour combing through the first increments of footage from each of the 12 cameras. Thankfully, Slade hadn’t been spotted on any of the camera’s she’d installed until camera 7 (including 9 and 11). The way he’d simply sidled into the frame felt deliberate. As if he’d calculated where the best angle might be.

But seeing him stood behind Oliver on the second camera he’d installed had set something at ease in her partner. As if visual confirmation that she wasn’t necessarily the one Slade had aimed to pursue had made him relinquish his hold on the fear that made his eyes dim and narrow, that had made him stand close by as she tried to root out why Slade does what he’s done. I’ll be here until next Hanukah.

Glancing at him side-on, she grumbled. “I didn’t realise you’d take so much pleasure out of seeing me turn red.”

His eyes flittered left to right, his body shifting somewhat inelegantly, which was huge because this was Oliver Queen; resident badass, prior serial adulterer and all around man’s man who had been known to be silky smooth - and not just the ‘between the sheets’ fashion - with women… being awkward. “I’m a guy, so-”

With a loud gasp, Sara’s back arched off the table and her eyes flew open.

Moment over.

Eyes shooting to the table, it took a second for the shock to wear off for Felicity to realise that Oliver was already there, supporting Sara’s back but the woman was pushing him away, albeit weakly.

“Felicity…” It wasn’t the slur it had been when she’d arrived earlier but it sounded a little discombobulated. She was probably remembering the last thing she’d seen in ultra fast hi-def. “W-where-” choking on air, Sara started coughing.

“Sara, breathe.” Oliver ordered, looking to Felicity - already there and grasping the plastic cup off the side tray - to ask. “Felicity, water.”

Way ahead of you. “Here Sara,” coaxing her friend, Felicity linked her hand with the one that reached for hers, “drink this.”

Two shallow sips and a long draft later and Sara was breathing and speaking like a person who hadn’t been under for the past couple of hours.

But her first words are terrifying. “He took her.” Strawberry-blondie locks fell across her face as Sara rasped, locking eyes with Felicity who was moving the cup away. “Slade took her.”

Eyes flying to Oliver’s - he’s starting - Felicity saw something like dread and resignation fill them. “Who?”

Sara’s head turned to his. “Laurel.” It was a whisper that filled the basement with an eerie silence that hadn’t been present before. “He took Laurel.”

Felicity stared at her. Oh God. This was it. The endgame. She’d been right; it had nothing at all to do
with her. *He’s taken Laurel.* Had Sara just been in the way? Or another message, like the one’s he’d left for Oliver?

*Oliver…*

It was a slow decline, like a beats-per-minute kind of thing, the way Oliver just changed.

Having seen him angry - having seen him afraid - she knew that whatever level of emotion he was experiencing right then and there, it topped anything he’d shown prior to this very moment.

“He took Laurel.” Repeating the words in an undertone seemed to cement it for him and Felicity could only watch as old and new fears met in the middle.

Sara nodded a she took deeper breaths and with each, she seemed to regain strength to limbs that shook.

Face taught, Oliver almost snarled, “When?”

“It was after we got to the Gala.” Sara answered, “We were waiting for dad to show up and we promised him we’d meet him outside of the side entrance.”

At ‘side entrance’ Felicity was already moving towards her monitors-

“There are no cameras in that alley.” Stumbling to halt, said IT expert glanced back at Sara who was looking at her from where she sat, hunched over. “Or anywhere close to it. It made it the perfect place to wait because dad wanted to arrive late and not get caught on any pictures that might make it into the papers.” A groan slipped out when she swung her legs off the table. “I should have known better.”

To steady her, Oliver’s hand latched around her arm as his other fell on her thigh; comfort and familiarity in equal measure. Their eyes met then stayed locked as she saw Sara breathe a shaky exhale, saw Oliver nod at her in encouragement. Saw them grasp hands.

Unexpectedly, Felicity felt like an impostor. A voyeur to what she would never have. Holding Oliver’s hand… After having been his focus for half a day, it was embarrassingly painful for it to be otherwise. Even though this was their usual dance, suddenly it hurt. And she hated herself for allowing it, for not learning already.

*World’s smallest violin Felicity.*

But it seemed someone up there was taking pity on her because the beep to the automatic lock rang throughout the Foundry as Diggle came striding in form the side entrance. “Felicity?” His voice calling out her name sent a reassuring wave of comfort over her and when he came into view, his deep brown eyes flew over everything: over Sara on the medical table, over Oliver hovering over her, before pausing on Felicity and frowning. “I got your call. Sorry I’m late.”

*How was he to know there’d be problem on a Sunday evening?* “You’re here now.”

But Oliver, already in deep recognisance mode, was past the point of friendly salutations. Leaning back to Sara, he said, “Start from the beginning.”

With a deep breath, Sara did just that.

And it was worse than Felicity had thought.
“Between 11am and 12pm?” Oliver asked - with minor agitation - as the deepening glower on his face grew its own website. “Could you be more specific please?”

Also majorly restless - borderline frantic - Sara hadn’t stopped pacing, “It’s not like I wear a watch Ollie,” in fact she was wearing a hole in the floor in almost the exact same place Felicity had paced a little over an hour ago as her gown swished and slid with her. “We left Laurel’s just before 11am,” later than Felicity thought the gala started, “and it took us roughly 15 minutes to get there. Why is this important anyway?”

Throwing her a look, Oliver turned to where Felicity sat at her computers. “Does that help at all?”

“Believe it or not, it kind of does.” Fingers flying over several keyboards, blues framed by dark rimmed glasses never stopped hunting the screens. “It gives me a time frame. From there I can estimate distance and speed, try and triangulate where he may have taken you.” Abruptly pausing, she aimed an apologetic glance over her shoulder at him. “Emphasis on ‘estimate’.”

He shook his head. “Just do what you can.”

“Always.” Twisting back, her fingers went from 0 to full power in a second. “I doubt you were taken out of the city,” she called back to Sara without looking, “it would waste too much time.”

“All that bastard has is time.” Diggle asserted from somewhere near the gun rack.

Absently, Felicity nodded. “True.”

“So he kidnaps us,” the ‘us’ being Laurel and Sara - the word kidnap making the dormant sickness in Felicity’s stomach rise - and the speaker being the latter of that duo, “he knocks me out,” literally on the head, “takes us someplace in-doors,” because that was honest to goodness the best Sara could remember from her hazy snapshots of the day, “and then injects me with some sort of sedative-”

“I thought it was Ketamine but I think it might have been Rohypnol.” The silence that followed had Felicity looking at them once more to elaborate. “Date-rape drug.”

It did not help with either of the glowers on Oliver and John’s faces.

“But why drug me?” Sara asked out loud – but she was looking at Felicity as if she held the answer. “Why not leave me there after knocking me out? Why take me at all, when all he wanted was Laurel?”

“We don’t know if it’s Laurel that he’s after.” Oliver intersected, his eyes on nothing in particular.

But Sara’s shot to his. “Come on Ollie,” she said this as if he were fooling himself but not everyone else, “you said it yourself; it’s Laurel.”

She… had a point.

History never dies, after all. Or is that love?

Moot point.
Arms by his sides, Oliver’s hands didn’t twitch. But, like Sara, he was pacing. “He took her because of our history together.” Bingo. “But if we’re going by that standard, it would have made more sense for him to have taken just you.” He said to Sara. Though his paces were slow, they were filled with tension. “He knew you. After everything that happened…”

She’d be the best revenge.

Sara looked at him. “It doesn’t change the fact that he’s got her.”

“I know.”

“Did he say anything to you?” Felicity opened fire (on herself because, God - even though it was an unbelievably selfish though - what he’d said something?) “Did you actually see Laurel or did he just tell you that he had her?” Because maybe he was just-

“I saw her.” Well, there goes that hope. “She was sitting, tied to a chair.” Sara’s hands clenched tight enough that her knuckles turned white and Felicity figured she would snap in minutes if she didn’t give her something concrete to focus on. “She didn’t look good.”

She wouldn’t. But Felicity prayed - silently begged - that Slade hadn’t done anything to her, even though the list that now existed in her head of all the delightful things he could and would do was extensive. Okay, that is not a place I need to revisit right now.

But he couldn’t have- please tell me he hasn’t, please. She’d take it all for her, for Laurel.

Probably sensing Sara’s rising frustration - along with everyone else - Diggle attempted to send the conversation down a more helpful direction. “Did you smell anything? Feel anything?” Moving out from a dark corner, he placed a bag that Felicity figured was probably already filled to the brim with ammunitions and all the goodies needed for a ‘party’ on the table besides the medical cart. “Was it dark? Light?”

“It was dark in there,” her head shook from side to side as she tried to focus, “it’s so foggy. But-” she grimaced.

“What is it?” Dig pressed.

“There wasn’t much to smell but,” eyes focusing on somewhere that wasn’t with them, Sara muttered, “it was kind of damp. And there was a smell… metallic.”

Dig looked past her to strained Oliver and mouthed ‘not enough’. By how his eyes tapered, he agreed.

But Felicity had shut down in her seat, gazing into the empty space beside her chair.

Metallic… damp.

That steam factory?

Or at least, she’d guessed it was an old steam factory at the time… when she’d been lying on its filthy floors, too tired and in pain to get up. Or when she’d been strapped in - almost upside down - and half-drowned, there was always this damp, metallic edge to the scent of the place. Always cold-

“It was cold.” Sara murmured, her gaze still lost – with her sister – as she unknowingly spoke Felicity’s thoughts aloud. “Dirty.”
Grimy.

I couldn’t get it out of my hair, couldn’t get the stench out of my pyjama’s… so naturally she’d bought more. Except, she’d had to burn these two, at the end. Erase the memories.

But… her stomach hurt again.

She couldn’t just jump up and say ‘oh, I’ve been there!’ She didn’t even know where ‘there’ actually was. Reminder; Slade blindfolded her each time he took her from her house at night.

The fact that she’d probably been to where Laurel might now be being kept did nothing to help anyone. Except make Felicity’s palms sweat, make her heart pound with shame and guilt and anxiety, make her… remember the other four cameras that Oliver knew nothing about.

Each time Slade had taken her - once the fear started to recede to more manageable levels other than ‘in your face’ - she attempted to guess her location based on the length of each car ride, the amount of speed bumps the tires may have rolled over, the lights that flashed over her mask… it had taken a month for to narrow down four possible points on a map covering the south-west corner of the Glades and the border of the Business Park (the cornerstone of Starling and all its proprietors) where Slade might be playing around in.

One of those points - one of the four ‘rotating’ cameras she’d managed to install at 4am one very cold morning - was close to an old pipe and steel factory. The place where –she guessed – Slade liked to take her to ‘teach’ her about Waterboarding, about injections that led to red pain.

Near the bay, around by the harbour.

That’s where Laurel is.

Heart racing with an altogether different sensation - somewhere between hope and self-flagellation - her eyes trailed until they hit trio standing in various places behind her chair.

They were there, but, she was completely alone.

Was this how Oliver felt? In the first few months after his return, even after he’d recruited Dig, after he’d started bringing her into the fold, did he feel like an outsider? Did he feel this alone, even in the company of family, as though he had to be so isolated? To keep the people he cared for safe?

Shake it off. Shuddering off such grey feelings, Felicity cracked her knuckles - oh ew, that never works; why do I keep doing it- and spun in her chair, back to her monitors. Thankfully, the others were in ‘plans of attack’ mode and though she knew it would only be a matter of minutes before Oliver asked something of her again, it was enough time. It had to be.

“Are we bringing Roy in on this one?” She heard Dig say… and it may have been her imagination - it so wasn’t - but she was sure she heard a note of ‘please tell me no’ in his tone.

Which may have been why Sara spoke up. “Roy? No, Ollie; this is my sister.”

“I’m aware of that.” Oliver answered, quietly.

“Roy’s unstable.”

True.

“He’s doing better.”
Also, very true.

“Is better enough?”

“It’ll have to be.” There was a short pause behind Felicity has her fingers did the walking and the talking for her. “We may not have a choice.”

Sara breathed out. “I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to.” Oliver sighed. “But if we do need him, I don’t think he’ll be a problem.”

“Why do you say that?” Dig asked, very much in the range of ‘did I miss something?’

“If Felicity’s on the com, he should be fine.”

Oh great.

But… it was kind of true. She and Roy had a connection now. And a mantra - they’re awesome - one they used when she practised yoga with him. One that had, more than once, helped calm him. But it wasn’t fool-proof. Again, Oliver knew this. He’d been there and had seen the results for himself. But, she guessed that the white lie was maybe, kind of, necessary this time. Either that, or Oliver was trying to shut them up so he could think in peace.

Speaking of…

“Felicity,” she felt him approach behind her, “do you think you-”

She lifted a finger, fast, like fwup. “I have an idea.”

She could practically hear him blink, but, like always he was serious and he took her just as seriously as did himself. “Tell me.”

“Weeks ago, I started an on-line search of all the places in Starling where Slade might choose to well, be Slade,” this was true, “of any place he might operate from. For various reasons. It would have to be local and it would need minimal power, but I’m guessing he also wants privacy… maybe a bathroom-”

“Felicity.”

“Right. Sorry.” Not the time. “I came up with a list that was a little too long to be helpful.” Also true. “But I had a light bulb moment recently,” so not true, “and I managed to shorten it down to a few places.” Also not true.

Peripherally, she caught Oliver move closer; more ‘side on’ than ‘directly behind her back’. “How?”

“We know he’s linked to the man in the skull mask who, from what we know so far, likes to work in dark corners; old buildings that haven’t been used in years.” Fact. “Well, I was thinking that - since we’ve covered 60% of the abandoned houses this side of the Glades - that maybe Slade would go further out for someplace bigger, more secluded - privacy is always an issue - but with enough power?”

Thin. Very thin. That was so very much reaching… and from the way Oliver was looking at her - and the silence from the two behind her - they were probably thinking the same. She knew Slade had men at his disposal, knew he had money and places to be because she’d seen it.

They hadn’t.
“Felicity,” Oliver started; his tone a dozen different types of ‘that’s sweet but, no’, “I-”

“Oliver.” She cut in. “Do you trust me?”

He stared at her for a long second.

“…Yes.”

Why did that look hard to say? “Then remember what happens when your IT girl makes intuitive leaps.”

‘You’re usually right’. He’d muttered that once.

Finally, his mouth upturned. “What did you find?”

Thank God. She smiled and for the first time in since that morning, it didn’t threaten to crack. “On a personal hunch, I looked further a field and - following the weekly routes of Slade’s shiny new Sedan - I noticed -”

“Sedan?” Diggle perked right up. “We know he owns a Sedan?”

“Black and elusive- wait.” Felicity sent a look to Oliver. “You didn’t-” you didn’t tell him?

A sound left his throat but no words came out as he sucked his lips in behind his teeth.

A ‘No’.

Good. Great. Don’t tell the tactician about their tactical advantage. Super.

“Long story short,” grimacing up at Oliver (because she hadn’t said boo to a goose either), Felicity explained, “I-”

“We.” Oliver quietly corrected.

“We planted some cameras the day after he showed up. Caught him leaving his car about a week later.”

There was a moment before Diggle spoke again. “You’re going to explain this later right?”

“Yes.” Oliver replied.

And because they owed it to him, Felicity added. “In great detail.” With anecdotes and everything. Now,” she continued from where she’d been cut off - such a bad habit down here - with a flourish of enthusiasm, “I noticed a pattern. He’s super careful but, so am I.” Uploading a link, she pointed to the screen on her left as it showed video feed from one of her 4 secretly installed cameras. “It - his car - passes Bridgman Street and that old intersection leading to the Somers warehouse too many times to be considered ‘irregular’.”

After the incarceration of Martin Somers, his company was liquidated and his warehouse shut down. It was still used, however, as a meet up point for drug dealers and the occasional weapons trafficking.

A little further on from his warehouse was the steam factory.

“Remember that area?” She asked Oliver without looking and he made a non-committal sound as he stared at the screen. She felt the others gather around her. “Not far from there are some of the biggest
factories and warehouses in Starling.” And the most forgotten. “And there’s been some suspicious activity recently.”

“Define suspicious.”

“Cars, guns, plus men holding guns = possible gang affiliation, black market resources or… Slade.”

Oliver nodded, acknowledging her point. “Good enough.”

“I’m spotting a problem.” Sara said.

Dig agreed. “Too big a field.”

“What does it take to impress around here,” she muttered, flexing her fingers for more work and - surprisingly - feeling Oliver’s warm hand place itself on her shoulder.

She immediately tensed and it became worse when his palm seemed to get stuck there.

Ahem.”There’s a subsidiary of Queen Consolidated - Masons Holdings - that acquired the tenure for two of the factories out there decades ago.”

Maybe Oliver felt her reaction, maybe he didn’t. But his hand didn’t leave her.

“Why a subsidiary of QC?” He muttered; his hand unmovign. But his thumb did; brushing over the revealed skin at her collarbone in slow circles, as if he were trying to soothe her. Ugh; could he be more perfect? Unfortunately, it was also inches north of some bruises that still hurt like hell, which meant her attention went straight to there. “There’s no reason why Slade would use anything that could be linked back to my family. Unless he thinks it’ll hurt me.” But, it was more a petty kind of hurt than a sucker punch in the gut. Not Slade’s style. And by Oliver’s tone, he didn’t think so either.

But here was the extremely difficult part.

Those Trojans she’d set up in her bid to uncover at least one of Slade’s financial backers? A few hours ago, before Sara’s dramatic arrival, they’d finally struck gold. And it was bad, really bad.

“No, but,” licking her lips, she looked up at him, moving her chair; ignoring how the twirl sent a jolt of dull pain down her side. After throwing up, every movement felt taxing in a way it hadn’t the day before. “Oliver, you might want to sit down for this one.”

His expression focused in on what she wasn’t saying. “What is it?”

“After Slade showed up at the Queen Mansion, I set up digital Trojans: malevolent programs infiltrating company software. Viruses.” She elaborated for the sake of the question marks hitting her from 3 sides. “I’ve been looking for who might be funding Slade’s extremist activities.”

“I remember.”

“Because you said he wasn’t wealthy before.”

“He wasn’t.”

“Right, so… it’s Isabel.” Pull the plaster off in one quick rip. “Isabel and one other organisation which I’d rather not touch just yet.” Her eyes did not whisk straight to Dig’s and for that she was proud because...

Argus. The secondary backer. Or someone once hired by Argus. An affiliation of some kind? Either way, she’d hit a run of the mill Argus firewall. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t hack it; but Dig’s amazing
ex-wife and current girlfriend was in the employ of Argus and she didn’t want to make a difficult matter any more so.

That and... she’d been in contact with the woman. Lyla was without a doubt the go-to person in difficult situations. But she couldn’t tell them about any of that, not yet.

As if he knew exactly what she was going to say, Oliver straightened. “Isabel.”

“Stellmore International acquired the rights to all of Masons Holdings sublets, including their-” Felicity started to explain but Oliver was focusing on the real problem.

“Tell me why you think Isabel is backing Slade.”

_Please don’t be mad._ Turning fully with her seat, she pressed her lips together at the way he was standing, at the way he was looking down at her. He looked so by himself...

So she stood, her face aligned - if lower - with his. “One of my Trojans hit a financial trail made... made the night we were in Moscow.” _The night you slept with Isabel_, she internally added because she didn’t need to say it; his eyes flashed at the words. He’d already guessed. “A cool $1000, 000 wired to an account - a misnomer - just outside of the city.”

“A false account?” Dig cut in.

She glanced to him, keeping place in front of Oliver. “A short lived one. It was real, for all accounts and purposes but it was closed two weeks after the transfer.” Meaning it had been created for the sole purpose to receive that lump sum.

There should have been no trail; sloppy. Then again, Isabel shouldn’t have been making transfers of a million dollars on a business trip that she shouldn’t have been a part of in the first place. There was a decent chance Isabel hadn’t thought anyone would look there. Or hadn’t cared if anyone dared try to. “I think that’s how he got his toys into the city.” His men. Without paper trials, without noise, _with_ discretion. She turned back to Oliver. “Under the name ‘Wintergreen’.”

Jerking, he stepped back.

Dig, watching him, slowly spoke. “I take it you recognise the name.”

Oliver didn’t answer.

“It doesn’t matter.” Letting out a noise which was awfully close to a growl, Sara pounced on the information. “How does this help us find Laurel?”

But it did matter... at least, the Isabel side of things.

A side Oliver seemed to be stuck on. “Why would she...” Looking away, down, his brow puckered, his face tightening in confusion. “What reason would Isabel even have to...?”

Of course, _Felicity_ had the answer. Of _course_ it was Felicity who always had to break his heart, to crush his hopes, to tell him truths about his loved ones that wrecked him from the inside out, to reveal the darkness in others, in the people he’d loved, the ones he’d lost and those he’d slept with...

_But someone has to._

“Your father.” Speaking gently - as if softer words would soften the blow - she didn’t take a step back when Oliver’s eyes shot to hers. Hard. “When you told me that your mother knew her,” she
shrugged, “well, it rang a few bells.” It would, what with how many secrets Moira Queen kept and was still keeping. “So I looked into it.”

At the mention of his mother, she saw the muscles in his neck flex as his jaw tightened. “Isabel knew my father?”

God give me strength, because, yack. “Biblically.”

“Jesus.” She heard Dig mutter.

Oliver’s eyes closed.

“I know this is the last thing you want to hear but,” oh, I really don’t want to be the one to say this; why is it always me, “I think sleeping with you in Russia was part of her plan.” A really nasty one.

A plan to completely screw him over; both literally and figuratively.

Arms lifting, the tips of his fingers pressed into his forehead and he breathed in a breath deep enough to lift his shoulders.

Seeing that words were beyond him, Sara stepped in, hoping for light to be shed for anything they could use to find her sister. “Her plan?”

Worried, Felicity didn’t look away from Oliver whose hands had now travelled to rest at the back of his skull. “She was an intern at QC 12 years ago, when she was 19 years old. About a year after she’d started, she was given a position in the company that most new hires would kill for. And it put her close to Robert Queen.” Now for the punch line. “A few years later,” roughly two years before Oliver left on the Queen’s Gambit, “two tickets purchased under the name Robert Queen, for a flight to Moscow, were cancelled. The ticket was one way.”

Oliver didn’t move.

“It was the day your sister was rushed into the hospital.” And from that Felicity could only deduce that whatever romantic getaway the head of the Queen family had planned had been nuked with the reminder of the family he already had. And loved. “48 hours afterwards, Isabel was transferred out of QC to a subsidiary. The rest is history.”

The rest was irrelevant.

“She fell out of a tree.”

Felicity blinked and her fingers unlinked, when did I link them? “What?”

“Thea.” It was a mutter to the floor, his hands rubbing at the back of his neck. “She fell out of a tree. Broke her leg.” His voice was small, soft and when his hands fell, he still didn’t look at any of them. “Dad had to catch a train from central city to make it in time… They were lovers.”

No elaboration required there.

“I think so.” Felicity quietly affirmed.

His eyes flickered up to hers. “How did she meet Slade?”

“I don’t know but, I think Slade might have been reviewing your every move. You said you were a member of the Bratva?” She asked at his questioning frown, only to watch that frown turn to stone. “Maybe he went to Russia, following you out of China…” she halted because she wasn’t supposed
to know about China.

Oliver’s eyes burned into her; wide, dark and searching.

Her smile – his smile – was small. *It’s okay.*

China. Another hell for him to walk through. “Tracing your footsteps, I’m assuming.” She continued, “And if my assumption is close to correct, then it’s probably where he met Isabel. Especially if he was digging through your life; it’s what I’d do.” Learn a person’s past and the history of their loved ones and you can predict what they might become. Or where they might turn. Cut off their avenues of escape.

“Scary.” Dig huffed.

Felicity exhaled. “Yeah.”

“No, I meant you.” He took the sting out of it by winking at her.

“This is fascinating but,” said in a way that told them Sara thought this was anything but fascinating, “how does this help me find my sister?”

“Us.” Oliver immediately corrected. “How does this help *us* find Laurel.”

For a moment, Sara simply looked at him.

Then, “Who is Isabel? Who is she and what does she have to do with this?”

“She was one of the buyers for QC after the earthquake.” Felicity answered for him, hoping to offset the landmine. And it was probably a really good idea that Roy wasn’t here seeing as how talk of the Undertaking always put him on edge. “Now she’s co-CEO. If she’s working with Slade, my guess is that QC has a part to play. This is personal.” To Isabel.

“Of course it is.” Sara breathed. “Oliver slept with her; of course it’s personal.”

*Oh... Oh wow.*

Dead silence.

Jaw tight, Oliver pressed down on his lips.

*So awkward.*

Stood there, head inclined down, his hands fisting at his sides; she remembered what he’d said. ‘*It didn’t mean anything*’.

But she hadn’t understood. Until later. Loneliness does things to people.

So, maybe that was why Felicity spoke.

“That’s not fair.”

It was barely audible but they all heard it.

Looking at Sara, seeing the fear there, she gave her the most compassionate smile she could muster for her friend. “It isn’t.” They’d all made bad choices in their lives. This was just one of them. “I want to save Laurel too.” She really, really did. She needed to. “But the blame game doesn’t get us
anywhere. Isabel played him.” In her peripheral, she saw Oliver shift and knew she was being watched on 3 angles. “Heaven has no rage, you know.”

“Er… not really.” Sara responded inquisitively.

Looking left to right, she saw the joint confusion. “Oh, er, it’s a quote,” I forgot I’m the socially awkward one in this group, “Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned”. William Congreve: The Mourning Bride.

The lull in conversation was natural because she was the biggest buzz kill-

So close - she caught the smell of leather and warm skin coming from him - Oliver touched her shoulder once more. “I own my mistakes.”

Did that mean… he considered what happened in Russia to be a mistake?

And it just came out of her mouth. “How was it a mistake? Well,” she allowed, “aside from the obvious.” Isabel being evil incarnate - especially now - and all.

After blinking, Oliver frowned at her. “What?” And she knew - just knew - that Dig was throwing her 50 different shades of WTF Felicity Smoak?

“So you slept with her.” As if was the simplest thing on the planet. “So you had a moment of weakness. It happens. It’s allowed to happen.” She stressed at him.

Stop beating yourself up. She’d done that enough for him when she’d found out.

The hand on her shoulder? It moved down; leaving no inch untouched at her side and- yep, ow.

“You weren’t…” he swallowed and tried again, “from what I remember you weren’t exactly a fan at the time.”

“Did I think your decision was a good one? No. Do I think you should have thought for a moment on how it could backfire and hurt you.” Hurt me, “unequivocally, yes. Did I want you to be happy?” The look she gave him was gentle. “Yes. Did I think you deserved more? I still do. But you’re allowed to do whatever you need to do to bring that about without being judged for it.”

There was a moment where he simply took her in. Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it, because he smiled - achingly unsure but also grateful - briefly before it fell away, along with his arm and she definitely winced at the slide of his palm over the soreness on her skin.

He might have noticed if not for the fact that he was back in the zone and his eyes were now on the others. “Where does this lead us?”

Humming - because he was all kinds of sweet - John said, “you think it’s possible that Isabel wants revenge on Oliver and his family for something his father,” he gestured to Oliver, “did years ago?”

Shaking herself, Felicity pursued her lips as she turned to Dig. “When you say it like that, it sounds absurd.”

“I’m not discounting it.” Dig shrugged. “Add that to the evidence,” he pointed at the monetary evidence onscreen behind her, “and I’d say it’s a real possibility.”

It was a real possibility that Isabel Rochev hates the Queen family so much that she’d sleep with the heir knowing her history with his father, knowing he’d one day find out about it, just because… she
could?

_Bitch._

It looked like Oliver didn’t want to think about it at all. “How sure are you?”

Glancing at him, she didn’t need him to elaborate. “About 98% sure that Isabel is somehow involved with Slade, however that may be, which involves the Mirakuru, your family’s company - I need to brainstorm that one but we both agree she can never be given full access - and… now Laurel.”

For roughly 6.3 seconds - she counted - Oliver stared into space. Then he breathed out slowly, “which two factories?”

Two destinations. Too little time planning. And it was already 9pm.

But this was about Slade. Who had Laurel Lance. So John figured Sara wouldn’t have waited any longer anyway.

Or Oliver.

The air was strained. Worry seeped through the cracks Dig glimpsed in Felicity’s composure; yet, she was - oddly - the most controlled of them all.

Whereas Dig couldn’t feel anything but frustration and resolve. Frustration, because while Slade roamed free and easy, they were all trapped in a cycle that looked to worsen before it got better. Resolve, because he wouldn’t rest; not until Oliver’s tormentor was stopped and the man in question didn’t spend his free hours contemplating life in Slade’s grasp…

But, at any cost? _Maybe._

If the cost was a life? One of _theirs_? No. _I didn’t sign up to let that happen._

In the beginning, it had been the three of them; John, Oliver and Felicity in a seemingly doomed fight against the corruption of Starling City as a whole. But underneath? It had been a joint effort on John’s and Felicity’s part to save Oliver’s soul. And he’d be damned if he let all that effort go to waste.

In the meantime, Laurel was the top priority.

Unfortunately, they had to find her first.

Maybe it was bad taste to admit, but, Diggle had hoped that the whole ‘Oliver and Laurel’ mess had come to a close already. Neither exactly brought out the best in the other. Mainly it felt as if they didn’t know how to place each other in their lives but Laurel’s ‘ghost’ seemed to always return, armed to the brim with new issues to wade through. Drama they both created, but the type Oliver definitely didn’t need right now.

Except Oliver not only routinely accepted the advances of both Lances sisters - _I’m not going anywhere near that hot mess_ - be they romantic or platonic, he also seemed incapable of making a
firm decision upon who he wanted, needed, the most.

Yes, Laurel was still a major artery in Oliver’s life.

And with how hard Dig saw Oliver yanking down on the straps to his quiver, that artery was bleeding.

Damage control. “I was in the middle of a bath when Felicity called me. You know how much a room at the Talbot costs?”

Securing the Velcro snap on his glove, Oliver sent him a look - both a glower and a bewildered frown - telling Dig he was still somewhere in his own head, guilt mode in full swing. “What?”

“Like describing a moon to a mole.” He placed two hand guns on the table before him, checking the chamber of each.

“I don’t take money for granted.” Oliver exhaled. “But I’m sorry your plans were ruined. They sounded... nice.”

Turning to his comrade, John arched brow at him. “Nice?” As in, ‘understatement’.

The expression on Oliver’s face was a question in and of itself.

“I’ll elaborate. The hotel we were staying at? The baths are pools man.”

“...Okay?”

“Just me and Lyla,” Dig secured an ammunition strap to his thigh, “in the pool,” he tugged on a zipped case of pistol magazines before moving to check his side-arm, “with a bottle of 20 year old whiskey, two glasses and chocolate coated everything on the side,” he slapped the barrel back over his pistol, “and I get a call from Felicity telling me that Slade has decided that now’s the perfect time to finally make a start on his plans, whatever they may be,” and slammed a clip into the hilt. “Nice’ does not cut it.” John shot him a look that told him he knew the answer to his next question. “When was the last time you had a weekend getaway go that well?”

Actually considering the question - cutting through the sense of urgency - Oliver took a minute, his brow-line understandably intense, before saying, “I don’t think I’ve ever had one go that well.”

Romance and Oliver had never been exactly Simpatico.

Shoving everything in the rucksack, Dog absently muttered. “Kind of wondering what a decent weekend even looks like to you.”

For a few moments, only the sound of him shrugging on his jacket could be heard... but he couldn’t hear Oliver move. And when he glanced at him he could only describe him in one way:

Split down the centre.

Laurel needed to be found. It didn’t even have to be tied to their history - their joint pasts - and it wasn’t exclusive to just Oliver; Sara had a much greater stake in this than he.

It came down to the simple fact that Laurel - a civilian - should never have been brought into this, into Slade’s vendetta. And it must be eating away at Oliver.

Yet, the look on his face...
Dig frowned. “What is it?”

A sound - somewhere between a dismissal and an unsure hum - escaped Oliver before he’d even opened his mouth. “Weekends… I wouldn’t know where to start on the perfect weekend. But,” narrowed eyes spoke more of concentration than frustration, “I had a… interesting lunch today.”

“Interesting?”

Blue eyes flitted from Dig to nowhere, then slowly back again. “Remarkable.”

“Huh.” He looked him over. “Good remarkable or bad remarkable?”

“Good.” His friend breathed. “Really good.” Looking away again, Dig swore Oliver was reliving this ‘remarkable’ lunch of his, “I haven’t enjoyed something so simple like that in…” Softly, his brows lifted then fell once more, “I don’t remember.”

It was almost too miserable for Dig to touch, that tone. That Oliver hadn’t enjoyed the simple pleasures in life the way the rest of them did-


Treading carefully, Dig asked. “Who were you with?”

“Felicity.” Oliver didn’t sound surprised but he also didn’t sound… normal. He was still elsewhere.

“Oh yeah?” Dig cleared his throat, come on man. “Big Belly?”

“Hm.” Fingers brushing against each other, this small smile - a miraculous feat given the seriousness of the situation - on Oliver’s face made Dig think he was recalling something very nice too. “We talked.” He shook his head, looking back to Dig who was also smiling a little now; it was void of any tease. “I don’t do that a lot, you know? I don’t just… talk to people. I don’t go out for lunches, at least not ones where I’m constantly lying about my life. It was fun.”

Now he sounded surprised.

“So?” Dig shrugged, “do it again.”

Only this time, let it involve a few drinks.

They could both - Oliver and Felicity - use some time off. And if they wouldn’t do it for themselves, let them do so for each other, since it seemed neither could ever put themselves first. Even when it’s necessary to do so. A day - or a night - to have fun, to relax and let loose a little bit, with someone they trust.

“It isn’t that simple.”

He could almost literally feel his eye roll against his skull.

Only Oliver could make such an inconsequential thing as a lunch, sound like he was asking for the world. “It’s lunch Oliver. Something I’m sure Felicity has on a daily basis.” For some reason that got him a look from Oliver and it was just on the right of side misleading for Dig to leave it be. For now. “Just ask her.”

Oliver closed shut the glass case leading to his arrows. “She won’t want to.”

Lord give me strength, “you think Felicity won’t want to have recurring lunches with a friend?
Spending more time with you isn’t exactly something she’d consider a hardship.” *Trust me.*

Quietly, Oliver sighed, turning - ready and able for a rescue mission - to face him. “It’s a lot to ask.”

“It’s lunch.”

Oliver shook his head in a ‘that’s not what I meant’ kind of way. “She’s under enough pressure without adding complications.” *Complications. Right.* “I still haven’t found out what’s wrong with her.”

It was John’s turn to sigh. “Which was my second question.”

“I didn’t get anywhere.” And it was bothering him, if the shadow that suddenly covered his face was any indication. “And it’s going to have to wait a little longer. Laurel can’t.”

“I know.” Slade had really bad timing. Or spot on timing, depending how you saw it. “We’ll find her.”

Nodding, Oliver looked towards where Sara was talking to Felicity- the two were muttering in low tones and their hands were clasped in a way that made Diggle think they didn’t even know they were doing it, which was sweet in ways he didn’t think an assassin could be - before he started to walk over to them-

“How was it different?”

Stopping, Oliver looked back at him over his shoulder, a frown on his face.

“The lunch?” Arching a brow, Dig slung his duffle over one shoulder. “I know it’s been a while but we’ve been out to Big Belly before and other places. You, me and Felicity. What made it so remarkable this time?”

Completely nonplussed, Oliver blinked. Once. Twice. “I’m not sure. It just… was.”

*Uh huh.* “What did you two talk about?”

Interestingly, he saw Oliver swallow before something deep in his eyes started to lighten.

Deliberately, Dig’s other brow rose to join its twin. “That good huh?”

A cough on the narrow edge of a genuinely bashful laugh had Oliver’s cheeks turning slightly pink.

*Whoa.* “Come on. Dish.” With a full blown smile, Dig enjoyed the way Oliver seemed to shed loose a few nightmares the more they talked. “What did you talk about?”

With a deep breath, Oliver levelled Dig with another look - as if he was saying ‘you asked for it’ - he couldn’t discern.

He cleared his throat, glanced back over to the girls and said, “Sex.”

Then, still without looking back to Dig, what could only be described as the brashest - yet happiest - of smirks spread across his face.

Abruptly sauntering off, he left a speechless Diggle behind to stare after him.
“Area secure.”

Felicity switched over to ‘available’ on her com link. “No sign of activity?”

“Not here.” Since he was sounding slightly husky, she figured Oliver was running. “We’re moving out to the steam factory.”

“Good luck.”

With that, the trio of badasses headed off to factory number 2… and Felicity watched over them as always. Except this time, she kept her side of the com closed.

She was multi-tasking.

And having two conversations whilst running an open link to both would be disastrous.

“He’s taken action?” Lyla asked. “Overtly?”

When she’d first hailed Lyla on her cell, she’d managed a fast ‘please forgive me for taking your amazing boyfriend naked from you bath and pulling him into work on his weekend off’ before Lyla dismissed it - with a wave of her hand, I’m assuming - and took over to concentrate on the priority.

“I’d say kidnapping a legal attorney constitutes as an overt action.” Still monitoring her boys and girlfriend, Felicity stood in front of her computers with her arms folded across her middle. A bid for security she couldn’t reach. “Is it enough?”

“For Waller?”

“I was going to say ‘for action’ but that works too.”

“No.” The reply was blunt enough for Felicity to wince. “Amanda won’t take a risk on anything but a sure thing, not when Slade’s involved.”

“Sounds personal.”

“In a way, it is. She tried to recruit him.” Lyla added, though she didn’t have to give Felicity anything really. “She failed.” Enough said. “He killed 2 Argus agents for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And a few that were exactly where they were supposed to be.”

It didn’t take much to reach a conclusion. “Waller sent assassins after Slade?”

“Yes.”

“…Colour me not at all surprised.”

“But this is a problem.”

“I know.”

“Felicity, if he escalates-”

“I have no idea how to tell them, Lyla.” Even thinking it made something heated and terrified rise up
into her stomach.

“Then find a way.”

Helpful. “Are you ever anything but to the point?” Felicity muttered, a hand rubbing at her forehead.

“Look,” and Lyla’s tone was not unkind, “this is supposed to be hard for you. But if he has as many men and ammunitions that you think he does then we need to be ready. You need reconnaissance and something I can sell to my boss.”

“I can’t give her the Mirakuru.” I won’t.

“Then get her a location. A map. His plan. Something that’ll allow me to return to Starling or at least provide the munitions you need.”

The breath she let out felt like it had come from deep her bones. “I will.”

“Felicity…” the pause put her on edge because it was a sign of concern from Lyla and the woman knew better than to reveal that kind of feeling. “The longer you leave it the greater the damage will be.”

“I’m deeply aware of that.” She sounded weak and felt weaker.

“I’m not sure you are. The only reason I haven’t told John about what you discussed with me is because I believed it’d only make the situation more dangerous for you. But I think now’s the time. Or at least soon. Telling them will help. Maybe not at first,” Lyla added and her tone insinuated that Felicity prepare for an explosion, “but eventually. You shouldn’t be alone in this.”

Hearing this from a woman who’d admitted to Felicity to be being systematically tortured herself once, years before - a woman who’d also been held in a Gulag for weeks - told her that Lyla knew the difference between having no one… and having a ‘someone’.

Like Lyla does now, compared to a time when she was ‘Diggle-less’.

“But,” and this is a point to be made, “I am alone. In being alone… I’ve kept people safe.”

“I know. I hold no judgement for how you responded to this threat. Soldiers have been known to take the hits, inhumane horrors, for their brothers. But there’s only so much a person can force themselves to bend to the will of another. How far do you plan on taking this?”

“If you’d asked me that a week ago I’d answer that with ‘as far as I have to’.”

“And now?”

“Now… I’m not sure. I keep slipping,” telling signs of stress, “and it’s being noticed.”

“By who?”

Oliver.

She made a non-committal sound accompanied by an awkward shoulder bump. “A friend.”

“What changed?”

Again… Oliver.
“Hiding from him…” breathing a shallow breath, Felicity swallowed, “it’s getting harder.” Especially when he pushes, revealing a tenacious care for her wellbeing that still stunned her.

“Does this friend happen to wield a bow and arrow with the kind of proficiency to put expert marksmen to shame, wear green leather and commit multiple felonies night after night?”

Eyes shooting everywhere, Felicity floundered. “Ah, no?”

Well done.

There was a smile in Lyla’s voice. “You might be underestimating your importance to your ‘friend’. At the very least I think he deserves to discover just how much his IT girl loves him.”

Felicity scoffed. “We’re just friends Lyla.”

“Funny, I didn’t mention being otherwise. Listen, I’m about to head into the office. You’ve been given the all clear; I’ve already sent my men to secure the Pawn and I’ll do what I can here but I’m going to need a little more for a direct strike.”

“Alright. But keep your guys sited on the target until I have confirmation of full cooperation.”

“Email me when you do.”

“I will. And Lyla? Thank you. Really.” For so much.

“I meant what I said. But from what John tells me, your team wouldn’t be much of one without you. John needs you. And I need John. You keep them safe so I’m going to try to reciprocate.”

A lump in her throat prevented Felicity from responding. Lyla didn’t seem to need to hear it.

“You’ll hear from me soon.”

The line beeped before dying and Felicity shut it off.

Weeks ago, she’d reached out to the impressive Lyla Michaels after discovering that she had been on the originally task force sent to capture Slade Wilson before realising what a monster he truly was. Yes; Argus knew all about Mr Wilson, more so than Oliver did, at least they did in regards to his whereabouts the prior year. Needing to trust someone who could provide the requisite resources for the other part of her plan, she’d told Lyla almost everything, knowing that she might relay to someone like Waller. Having Dig anywhere close to the crosshairs seemed to be all the preventative Felicity needed to keep that happening.

“I’m onsite.”

Jumping, Felicity rushed to her seat, opening the channel to John. “Is everything okay?”

“So far.” Dig murmured, low and quiet. “Oliver’s already inside.” With his rifle and scope, Dig was keeping watch. “I have eyes on Sara. She just followed him in, round the side entrance.”

Good. “Any sign of, um, anything?”

“Not yet. We’re going to find her Felicity.” He added, consolingly.

A shot of nerve-induced uncertainty had her replying with, “This was all based on a hunch.” A hunch founded on a lot of evidence but…
“I don’t know; your hunches have been pretty outstanding so far.”

Regardless, she felt herself start to smile, even as she said. “There’s always that first time.”

Humming, Dig half-joking, half-serious, responded with, “I’m willing to take that chance. Oliver certainly is.”

Internally groaning, Felicity bit her lip. “I think Oliver trusts my word a little too much.”

“It’s more that he trusts instinctively that you’ll make everything better. Or try to.”

Well… that was one way to shut her up. Luckily, this was a private 1 on 1 chat that Oliver wasn’t privy to. “Oh…”

“Are you okay?” Dig asked.

It took her back to earlier…

“Are you okay?”

Like it was automatic, her head shook, her forehead pinched. “I’m fine. I just-”

“You look pale.”

Her lips pressed together. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing Felicity.”

“…Yes,” she breathed, “I’m okay John. I just really wanted this day to end well.”

“It still might.” Like, ‘cheer up’. “Then you can go on another lunch date with Oliver.”

If she’d been drinking coffee she’d have spat it out. “Lunch date?” He told him? Guys do that? “There was no- I mean there was a lunch with food and talking but no date in sight, no sir.”

What did she just say? Fail.

“If you say so.”

Could he sound any smugger? “Dig,” she stated, “you know Oliver doesn’t see me that way.”

“Do you even know the many different ways he does see you as?”

“T-that’s-” stuttering, her mind failing to escape the impossibly lovely implications of that question, Felicity closed her eyes, “That’s beside the point.” She shook her head. “And it was a one off. I highly doubt he’d want to have lunch with me again, I mean- not just me.”

“Sure he would. He told me so.”

Say what?

“He… he did?” He talked to John about it… because he’d liked it that much?

“Yes.” And though he still sounded very satisfied with himself, Dig’s tone was also compassionate. “He enjoyed himself.”

“He… really?”
He sounded close to laughter. “Really-”

“Dig! Bring the van round.”

Oliver.

Opening her com, Felicity immediately asked, “What do you need? What’s happening?”

“We found her.”

Her heart thudded.

“What, really?” Not that she wasn’t thrilled but… she’d expected chatter, more resistance, some sort of fight to break out. Gunfire, Slade’s goons- Slade himself, something. “Where?”

“In the centre of the ground floor. Near some large pipes.” And from his tone, he was not a happy camper. “She’s alive. Stable.”

“Unconscious.” Sara all but growled.

Oh no. “Get her back here. Dig’s en route.”

“Have an IV ready.” Sara ordered. “And a blanket.”

“I will.”

“Thank you.”

Oh pretty bird, “Just concentrate on Laurel, Sara. I'll see you soon.”

Sara shut off her link, concentrating on her sister. There’s was no camera close to the site, no way for Felicity to observe what was happening, how or why. Sure, she could hack into a satellite… but like earlier, with Lyla, she had something else she needed to do-

“This doesn’t feel right.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jumping, Felicity re-directed her attention to Oliver and Sara; neither sounded particularly breathless but they both definitely expressed a certain ‘on edge’ quality in their tones.

“This was too easy.”

Opening her com to him – and only him; perks of being the voice behind the curtain – Felicity added. “I agree with that btw.”

“I thought he’d be here.” It was a whisper, as if he didn’t want anyone to overhear. “It’s like he just left her for us to find so that…” He trailed off.

“Oliver?”

“Felicity, do a sweep of the area around Verdant and the Foundry.”

Er, “Sure.” What’s on his mind? “And by sweep I do hope you mean ‘check the cameras’,” she said as she typed, “because me in full tactical gear, carrying an automatic rifle does not strike as an impressive look for me.”
It was a rhetorical statement, so he didn’t reply. She didn’t blame him either. “It’s just a feeling.”

“Oliver, I’m not seeing anything suspicious.”

He let out a long exhale. “Nothing’s adding up.”

“You thought he’d come here?”

“I thought, maybe he’d go after the heart of our operations.”

‘The heart of our operations’.

How was the Foundry the heart of their operations? When they were out in the field it was just the computers and her-

Me.

I’m the heart?

“I doubt he’d come here.” She murmured softly.

He reciprocated in kind. “I had to be sure.” Someone called to him - Dig - from, presumably, inside the van. “We’re on our way.”

“I’ll keep the light on.” Metaphorically speaking anyway.

She turned her com off.

And… that was it. They’d found her. So quickly.

It was definitely ominous. Her pulse was suddenly pounding, the blood in her veins telling her with each beat that something was very wrong. What had they missed? It felt like they were all running downhill at warp speed and heading for a brick wall.

‘This doesn’t feel right’.

He was right.


Sighing, Felicity tapped her fingers across her desk. “I think it’s time.”

Time to make that call.

Mobile to her ear, Felicity waited as the number rang… and rang… and-

“Hello?”

The voice was polite, very normal and not in the least bit tense. Felicity was about to blow it to smithereens.

“Samantha? It’s Felicity Smoak.”

Silence. Then…

“…Miss Smoak.” As if the woman had swallowed, there was minor pause on the line. “Something’s changed?”
Believe it. “I know I promised to give you more time, but that time has just run out.”

“Oh God.”

“Breathe Samantha.”

“He’s coming for us.” Her soft voice sounded petrified. “For my son.”

Like with Oliver, rip off the band aid. Though cautious, she was honest. “If he isn’t already, he will be soon.” Slade took Laurel. He took her after he’d promised not to touch her because he was ‘touching’ Felicity. Ugh, an image I didn’t need. There was no telling how else he might break his own rules. “Samantha,” repeat her name; she’s far from being alone in this, “it’s time.”

Unsteady breaths sounded in her ear. “I—I understand.”

“Do you remember what to do?” And where to go?

“I do. We’ll hear from you?”

“Soon.” Very. “Once you’re in Starling, I’ll contact you again. There’ll be men - 3 of them - waiting for you at the rendezvous point. Do you remember what to say?”

“Yes.”

I’m so sorry. “It’s going to be alright.”

“I’ll believe that when I feel like my son is safe again.” The bite in her tone was probably a better alternative than outright terror. “When I finally meet you, I want an explanation.”

“You’ll get one.”

“And I want to see Oliver.”

Why, oh why, did that make her heart clench? Oliver. The woman held a piece of Oliver that no other did. She’d slept with him - like many another - and had his child - like no other - even if he hadn’t known about him. It didn’t matter. Oliver was a father. Father of a child who - I repeat - Samantha gave birth to. They could meet… and sparks could collide. They could meet and maybe feel that it would be worth engaging in a relationship for the benefit of William, as farfetched as it might seem. A lot could happen.

And none of it felt right.

No matter what – right or wrong – Oliver’s world was about to upend. And it would be all Felicity’s doing. It was so much worse than telling him that Thea was Malcolm’s daughter.

“You will.” She said quietly.

Laurel lay on the table.
The satin-soft material of what looked to be an expensive black cocktail dress, cascaded slightly over each side and her normally perfectly styled hair streamed over the metal surface, damp with presumably sweat.

Hair that Sara was currently running her fingers through.

“She’ll be fine.” Felicity reassured as she attached the saline drip. “It may take a few hours but,” glancing at the warrior woman, she gave her a brief smile, “she’ll wake up.” *Promise.*

Absently nodding, Sara exhaled. “I’m more worried about what he might have done to her.”

Felicity looked away.

*Problem.*

From the look of Laurel’s body, Slade hadn’t done a thing. There was no bruising; no blemishes indicating a particular treatment, a disturbing focus… nothing. Again, like with Sara.

The knowledge settled like lead in her stomach, even as something inside her relaxed in relief.

She was pretty certain Laurel had been given the same sedative Sara had but… why hadn’t either Lance sister been harmed? Again, it wasn’t that she wanted them to be hurt, but her theories – the ones she’d been building since that afternoon – had been based on the idea that Slade had an endgame involving one of the sisters or both of them.

In comparison to her, they were prime targets.

Why kidnap them, and then do nothing with them?

“How is she?”

Lifting her head from the syringe now secure in Laurel’s arm, she saw Oliver taking that last step towards them. “No worse than Sara was earlier.” Fingers sliding down to Laurel’s wrist, she checked her pulse rate on the medical monitor. “Her BP’s normal. So far there’s been no sign of there being a problem. Other than her being unconscious.”

Eyes less blue than grey, flickered over Laurel’s form. “Did he hurt her?”

Sara shifted.

Looking from one to the other, Felicity shook her head. “…No.”

Oliver’s gaze moved from Laurel to her. It didn’t lift.

Still wearing his leather suit, he stood there; impressive and resolute. But when he’d first arrived, he’d been carrying Laurel over one shoulder before pulling her into his arms and laying her down. A look from him had asked Felicity to check for signs of torture, for a trap - like a suicide bomber - or anything resembling maltreatment. Other than the obvious.

The furrow at his brow told her he didn’t understand her answer. “Nothing?”

Again, she shook her head; lips pressed together.

He rubbed his fingers over his eyes. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe it does.” Sara uttered, “If it were a warning, I’d say this was a scream.”
Hand dropping, Oliver sighed. “We won’t know what he did - if he did anything - or what he wanted until she wakes up.” Which might take a while.

“Detective Lance-” Sara’s eyes flashed to Felicity’s, “is fine. He arrived at the function later than planned - pretty sure it was on purpose - and was dragged inside by his Chief before he could reach the alley. I called him. I think he thought you were with Oliver,” She explained to Sara as she pointed to Oliver, “and Laurel was romancing a politician out of his money.”

“That’s one piece of good news at least.” The woman breathed.

Oliver didn’t look remotely phased.

Felicity knew that he was thinking about the why’s of it all too.

Finally - because he had nothing - he exhaled, loudly, hands at his hips. “Why don’t we all get some rest? Something tells me tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

“I can stay here…” it was quiet, soft and meant to be soothing. An offer from Felicity for Oliver to… well, use her. For whatever.

And the way he responded blew her brain to smithereens.

“You need your rest,” his eyes - oddly clear as crystals in the glow of the Foundry - swiftly travelled over every inch of her and amended his words, “I need you to rest.” Head lowering slightly in a move she now recognised as him trying to take up all of her focus, to make her see him and only him, hear him, see him, “I want you with me tomorrow, rested. For what I have in mind, you’ll need it.”

Deadpan, she heard Dig snort behind them, saw Sara gradually arch a brow at Oliver and look like she wanted to say something...

Felicity didn’t react… except her lips twitched, her eyes danced - because why not - and her cheeks flushed. So, she reacted a hell of a lot.

It took a minute - a long minute, where Dig’s shoulders had actually started to shake - before Oliver got it.

His mouth opened, a little noise escaping suggesting that he was about to try get himself out of the hole he’d dug - a hole that spoke of his own fatigue - in a sentence sure to be filled with traps and fragments, when he abruptly stopped, closed his eyes, shook his head… and laughed at himself. It was short and very sweet.

He opened his eyes, blowing out a shallow breath. “Felicity…”

She smiled at him; and yes, she was tired too. And achy, everywhere. Though she was sure a full night’s sleep wasn’t in the cards for her, she knew Laurel wouldn’t be waking for hours yet. “I’ll be back in a while. With coffee.”

“Okay.” This small serene smile was still on his face and he started walking away for some reason. “Just let me get changed.”

That froze her in place, “Uh what?”

Over his shoulder - still walking - he said, “I’m not letting you go home alone.”
She heard the words he didn’t say; *I’m not letting Slade get anyone else.* But… no. “Oliver-”

“-Felicity.” Halting, His face hardened. “I’m coming with you. It’s not open for discussion.”

Speechless, she… had nothing. Bupkis came out of her mouth, totally useless against such testosterone.

But Sara wasn’t. “Ollie, what about Laurel?”

Briefly – *like, for a second* – he looked away from Felicity. “She’s unconscious.”

Like when he said it earlier…

“*Sara’s unconscious.*” *He ground the words out.*

“*Right,* and if she really did squeak this time, well, then she could be forgiven, *then we should be monitoring.*”

*His tone took a turn for condescending.* “There isn’t really much we can do about that until she’s awake.”

“*True, but-*”

“*And we aren’t finished.*”

Felicity cleared her throat, *push it away,* because *oh* how she liked the thought of him coming home with her. “She’s right.”

Oliver shook his head, about to speak-

“What if she wakes up while we’re gone?” Felicity pushed.

“Then we’ll come back.” He looked so perplexed. “I just want to make sure that you’re safe first.”

Sara - finally taking both hands off her sister - took a step towards them. “I’m sure Laurel would like to feel safe when she wakes.”

Silence.

Like bars on a cell door, there was nothing he had in his arsenal to break them. But the look he sent Sara…

*And I’m in the line of fire.*

“Sara, I am the *last* person to make Laurel feel safe.” He gritted out. “The one who could died last year.” Sara flinched. “I didn’t need you to bring that up.”

She exhaled, “doesn’t make me any less right about it though. This place,” she gestured to her surroundings, “it’s yours. You should be here when she opens her eyes.”

Because, Laurel didn’t know about the Arrow. About who he was… and Felicity didn’t want to witness the emotional overflows, the declarations of affection and the ‘I always knew it was you(s)’, ‘I had faith in us’, and - her personal favourite - ‘what’s stopping us form being together now(s)?’

Even a hug from one to the other would split Felicity open right about now. She wasn’t in the mood for the reality… or the lie. But which was which?
It wasn’t even grudging, Oliver’s expression. He flat out disapproved. But something in him must have agreed because he turned to Dig. “Can you go with her please?”

“Already got my keys.” Said keys jangled in Dig’s hand and Felicity felt a flash of warm comfort in her chest drive away the chill somewhat. “I’ll stay with her.”

“Thank you.” Oliver’s eyes flickered to Felicity. “Seven hours.”

Sleep? It had been ages since she’d slept that long. “Four.”

“Seven.” He gestured at Dig. “And I’m asking Dig to make sure you eat breakfast.”

John’s head went from one to the other. 

Excuse me? “You can’t make-”

“Oh he can.” Dig. Gritting her teeth, she turned – feeling stiff as stone – and saw John looking far too pleased for her liking. “And I will.” He added for everyone’s benefit.

“I don’t want to see either of you until the electoral debate.” Oliver ordered.

“That’s in the afternoon!” And Felicity couldn’t look more appalled.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Keep me updated.” He added to Dig and ignoring Felicity’s open mouthed expression.

“Roger.”

Then, without further ado, Oliver walked away. To change. Maybe change his fat head. Okay, that was unfair but she’d wanted to be alone. To contact Lyla and keep a trace on Samantha…

Looking from the two members of her team, Felicity pursed her lips.

Dig smiled. “Let’s go.”

This isn’t too bad…

No, soaking in a hot bath after a long day of worrying and vexation – of secrets and lies – was beautiful.

The only thing missing is Oliver, sans shirt. Being in her own bathroom meant she could be that honest. And pants.

Her sigh was so pitiful she splashed water at her already very wet self. I spend far too much time daydreaming about that guy.

Dig had suggested this. The moment they’d entered her house - since he had an all access pass - he’d gone straight to her bathroom and started running the tap for the tub. And she was grateful for it.

It helped with her bruises.
Absently, her finger touched against one. Still hurts. A mottled green. Lovely. Her hands skinned over her thighs... which were just as bad. I’m missing skirts.

Now was the time for her brain to completely filter out all thoughts and worries and spend a glorious 20 minutes soaking. Having Dig, a solid presence, in her living room provided a faint comfort she hadn’t experienced in her place for too long.

She’d washed first; soap making the water turn into a grey mix of dirt and grossness, so she’d refilled it for her to just relax in.

Hmm... Closing her eyes, she dipped her head back into the water, feeling the heat flow over her scalp and sighed once more.

It was so supremely soothing - so steadying…

So much so that when she opened her eyes once more to find Slade Wilson standing over her, staring down at her in his three piece suit, her immediate thought wasn’t to scream.

But it’s Sunday.

Sunday. Her one free night a week.

It was all she could comprehend - wide eyed and frozen as she was - before a large hand, Slade’s hand, grasped her neck and forced her head under the water.

Then she fought.

Though she knew she was screwed.

Like her body and mind had finally come to life, it completely ignored how the rest of her understood that fighting against a superhuman was futile.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, her chest hurt; terror lacing it with ice and acid. Water splashed everywhere, probably soaking his expensive ensemble; finery she could just make out through the blur of the water.

There was no room to move, the impervious sides of her tub traitorously curving in on her. Holding her down-

Arms hurting, she figured her hands and fists were banging against his own as hard as they possibly could; she didn’t know. She was numb. Shock numbed her.

John. Oh God. What did Slade do to him? Dig would never have let him enter the house, even if he had to die stopping him. But she’d heard nothing. No grunt, no whisper of a silencer, not the breaking of her door, no voices…

It had been silent.

Under the surface – as the water seemed to rush in her ears – it was deafening. And air was non-existent.

Oliver.

Bucking - she couldn’t hold her breath any longer - the burn in her lungs cancelled out the vision of Slade bent over her. No-
Oliver…

She’d never see him again. She couldn’t think about anything but that one thought.

Oliver.

Even though she was out of air, her mouth wouldn’t open. Voluntary Apnea.

Her body knew that if it did… she’d die.

I’m sorry. Like all the other times, no one could save her. Not even herself. And Oliver would suffer for it. I’m sorry.

Colour turned to greys and blacks until her eyes felt like they would burst from their sockets.

Oliver…

Mercifully... Darkness.

Surreal… the beauty of it.

His clothes wet, sleeves torn... no matter.

Slade simply observed her curled up form soaking the bathroom floor. As she’d fallen unconscious he’d pulled her out of the water and dropped her to sprawl naked at his feet. He didn’t cover her. Wouldn’t, until later.

Punishment.

He liked to watch them... her reactions. The amusing way she’d tried to hide them.

Just like how he watched her make the wrong decisions. Watch her love a man who was destined to die. By my sword.

Watch as she slowly killed herself, walking her own ‘mile’. Watch the strength in her bloom whenever they played house together, whenever she suffered.

People are never so honest until they think they’re about to die. She’d wanted to live so much she’d managed to split her nails when she’d ripped at his clothes.

It wasn’t surprising.

It was magnificent.

He had plenty of suits…

But there was only one Felicity Smoak.

And hurting her… it made him happy. Gloriously so.
And... a little sad.

Stupid girl.

So he was glad of it; glad that she was so stubborn, that she could take his punishments. That she’d listen when he spoke. That she’d learn.

It was his reward for living so long without her. Shado. It was Shado’s reward for being killed. It was Oliver’s reward for killing her.

It was Felicity Smoak’s reward for choosing the path she was on. It was her reward for being weak enough to target. Her reward for being strong enough to drive him insane.

But he already was, so what’s the harm?

It was his soul’s recompense for walking through this world for years, empty of emotion. Only to suddenly feel it, to enjoy it.

The best was yet to come.

“You have no idea, do you?” He asked her, knowing full well she couldn’t hear him.

You have no idea that I’ll never stop.
Chapter Notes

Profusely apologise for making you guys wait so long for this: I had to re-write it and I'm so happy I did. A shift change at work makes it a little less easy for me to update too.
Also, 5.17? It's given me some major fic ideas that I really want to write but CAN'T right now!
I hope, very much so, that you enjoy this. That it was worth the wait. (Also, I didn't finish replying to reviews and it was either doing that or updating but thank you so much for all of the. I'm continuously blown away by the response to this story).

I should have said yes.

In the silence, it hadn’t taken long to think it and even less time for the thought to obsessively repeat itself.

Hidden from sight, from Sara - his eyes trailing aimlessly over to the computers from the cot where he stood - Oliver remembered the way she’d looked at him tonight and felt the stiffness in his bones - paid in full by the events of the day - ease, just as his arms and legs tautened.

She’d seen right through him, he knew it, even if she hadn’t said a word.
For weeks, he’d been worried by Slade’s lack of action in regards to Sara, to the ‘he and Sara’ of it all. Visceral nightmares had plagued him for days about what Slade might do to his then girlfriend… only, he hadn’t done a thing. Even now; he’d taken her but he hadn’t. Done. A. Thing.

So it made the way Felicity’s eyes moved over his all the more memorable for the realisation she found there. Realisation and defeat. Knowing that Slade was only just beginning, that he’d been holding back - and how foolish Oliver was to have not anticipated any of this because Slade and kidnapping weren’t natural bedfellows - which now played on his conscience, making him think that maybe he didn’t deserve the peace he’d - the peace they’d - created earlier that day.

It had, initially, been his way of watching over her without intruding - she could have refused - but it had ended in him needing it too. It was that simple.

But it wasn’t close to an option for Felicity to forgo sleep like she’d offered to. Or for him to choose the situation over her. Again.

He’d made a decision. He wanted to be better, to do better. Still, when she’d asked that, asked if he’d wanted her to stay…

“I can stay here.” it was quiet, soft and meant to be soothing. And it was; a cool drink on a parched throat.

And when he’d answered…

“You need your rest,” he saw exhaustion written on her skin, on the way she stood, “I need you to rest.” It was pivotal. Ducking slightly - a move now recognised as him trying to take up all of her focus, to make Felicity see him and only him, hear him - he added, “I want you with me tomorrow, rested…”

He should have said yes.

But he hadn’t.

Every instinct had screamed at him to go with her because there was still something very wrong with Felicity Smoak... and now he had to wait.

Doing the right thing was rarely the attractive alternative.

After they’d left - Felicity and Dig - something came to him and he didn’t understand why: ‘What if’. Two unassuming words. Words that - confusingly - wouldn’t stop repeating in his head.

What if?

What if… what?

What if he’d listened to the feeling in his gut?

What if he decided not to trust an instinct gone dry over one still fresh, still chasing him? Not nipping at his heels or haunting his steps, but begging him to listen; to step forwards. To no longer deny the strength he now possessed, the kind of strength that could break down invisible walls and destroy chains instead of being held down by them, by his own darkness. To remind him that he was no longer the Ollie Queen he used to be.

That Oliver Queen might not be so bad a guy...
Occupy the seat - in Big Belly - across the table from him, Felicity released a shallow exhale suddenly saying, “You’re a good man Oliver Queen.”

“Hm?” Having moved back to his side of the booth - the feel of her hands on his biceps ghosts under his skin - he’d ordered them one last coffee. “What was that?”

“You.” And though somewhat shy after he’d held her - which was odd considering she’d been the one to bring up sex - Felicity held his eyes. “You’re a good man.” The words were slow, as was the soft compassion she offered in her face, her smile. “No matter what you might think.”

No matter what?

It was a nice thought and he huffed a laugh, glancing down. It wasn’t disingenuous but his vulnerable - self critical - half smile made it seem more so. “Am I? I’m not sure.”

Not that he was decent. He knew full well that a person could do good things without being good at their core; he didn’t need to be decent to save lives.

Felicity didn’t share this opinion. “But you are. Really.” It was a statement. And a statement from her, in the whisper that it was spoken, was as loud as a scream. “I see it. Every day.” She swallowed, but it wasn’t from nerves. “And the least you deserve in life is to know that, to know that you’re good.”

Each word, like hands on his skin, built up the oddest feeling of reassurance in him that made him feel like she’d just held him too.

The breath he sucked in was shallow. “Thank you.”

And...she smiled.

“Anytime.”

What if.

He still wasn’t sure. He wanted to believe… but he wasn’t sure. But from his experience, what if was a dream. The dream.

For now, all he could concentrate on was that he’d failed. He’d failed and he had no idea what to do next; instincts were no help here. So he’d done the only thing he understood, obeying a sentiment that split him right down the centre.

Obligation.

To Laurel.

Sara was right. Laurel’s first step into this world - his world - shouldn’t be taken without him there as witness. Even if it was more than one step past any point he’d wanted Laurel to cross, he was responsible for how this would all play out. Who else could describe the how’s and why’s?

Who else could omit?

There were some things better left unsaid, untouched and he needed to control how much Laurel would learn.

In a very real way, Slade’s promise to dedicate his existence to Oliver’s eternal misery could start here. With Laurel. With how she may react. With what she may do. Or say. It could tip the scales
either way on how Oliver would respond. Not too long ago, she’d hated the vigilante. Before that, she’d idolised him, me. Presently he worried what her next reaction might be. It wasn’t something he needed right now, wasn’t something he’d ever planned on occurring, this distraction; something that Slade obviously knew very well could hurt him and bring back memories best left unsaid.

The very last thing on his mind for several months now was revealing to Laurel his secrets.

But seeing Sara on the table... it only reinforced the fact that Slade was very much the danger - one they should have been focusing on, someone they had no choice but to move around and accommodate - he had been all along; his silence had made Oliver drop his guard and for that, he owed Laurel the truth. A reality he’d continuously denied her.

Knowing he’d taken her as well, had only added to the futility of his first efforts.

He’d fully expected Slade to go for Sara, a given, but her sister?

Felicity had said it, but he hadn’t taken it in. Whether he pushed the people he cared for away or not, Slade would still target them. But the way Slade had gone about it made it feel more like a taunt than an act of vengeance. As if he was saying that he could do what he wanted, whenever he wanted. And he could.

How could Oliver acknowledge that without thinking of Thea? Or his mother, his friends? That Slade could go for them at any time and he’d be powerless to stop it.

Like a hand was wrapped around his throat, it was all Oliver could do to choke back the bile.

He’d thought he was past this uncertainty. But it made him think; Slade could have done this at anytime, why now? Why today? There was no sense to it, to the time Slade had taken.

Unless it was defensive. Unless Slade had sacrificed a fast and hard approach to a slow overhaul via psychological warfare: like Isabel taking over the company from the inside out, something that made his skin crawl.

Trying to add logic where there might not be any was preferable to facing the guilt burning in the pit of his stomach.

The bottom line was that this was all happening because of him.

He hadn’t admitted - not even to Felicity when they’d been tracking late into the night, though he guessed she already knew - that, after weeks of searching, when it became obvious they wouldn’t find Slade, he’d been so… relieved.

He hadn’t wanted to find him.

Better that Slade stay dormant, stay underground and part of him had hoped, as ridiculous and naive as it was, that Slade may have found something worth living for in the past 2 months. Something that kept him quiet, that maybe he wasn’t quite so unredeemable.

It was a nice thought, but just a thought.

The rest of him understood the truth and as such, hadn’t tried to push.

The equivalent to stirring up a hornet’s nest; pushing Slade into making a move Oliver would only rue later was a death sentence for those he loved. But it was the kind of thinking that wouldn’t go down well with Sara. Even with John.
John...

It had settled deep down inside him that John was living.

He’d seen this fully after Russia.

Dig had a job he found fulfilling, a woman he loved and prospects and plans Oliver could never hope to have but still wanted. Badly enough to wonder when he definitely shouldn’t be. It was the piece of him he buried close to his chest. Kept secret. Kept safe. It hurt to unearth it so he never tried.

Dig really didn’t need any of this; he didn’t need a phantom form Oliver’s past threatening the new world Dig had built for himself. And he’d, more than once, shown it. So Oliver hadn’t said a word - to either of them.

They - both - would prefer to take the fight Slade; John because he wanted the threat of an enhanced enemy neutralised ASAP and Sara because Slade was supposed to have died five years ago. Because he’d become a living embodiment of everything she feared, because he’d personally threatened the very few people she held dear, those who reminded her that she was human too and because the small peace she’d gathered about her had begun to unravel and she blamed Slade.

However, where John saw the danger of approaching Slade as they were - unprepared - Sara couldn’t care less. She wanted a fight. She wanted to take him out, wanted him to hurt, wanted Slade gone and her family and friends safe. All without a viable plan of action.

With this he could emphasise but it wasn’t helpful. Not having a plan was what made us vulnerable today. Not preparing for the worst was why it suddenly felt as though everything was capsizing.

It was war. There was no breathing room in war and Slade had given them plenty of it that they’d taken for granted.

So what was their excuse now?

Gazing into the caverns of the Foundry, Oliver’s already tight chest fastened. His throat threatened closure. Like a noose. A rope to strangle himself with. As if his emotions - his frustration and his anxiety - were beginning to eat at him.

Arms forced lax by his sides, hands at his hips, he clutched his phone in his fingers.

And the more he tried not to think of it, the more his mind dragged the knowledge that, all this time Isabel Rochev had been left to her own devices; slowly pulling pieces of his family’s legacy out of his grasp - like a spider pulling at her web - and into her own because he hadn’t seen her for what she was. He’d stopped watching her, leaving her to her own devices because he’d believed that, thanks to their encounter, she’d been neutralised. That he didn’t have to worry about her. That he’d done a good enough job.

Conceited. As if sex had solved anything for him in the past.

It wasn’t until the plastic and metal of his phone began to creak that he realised his fist was clenched over it.

The reach for calm was an uphill battle. He had to be though; he had to be centred, especially with Sara in the room. She was vibrant and wilful... she was a loose cannon, blind to the dangers she could open to those around her when she was roused. But it was so very difficult to do so, to stay composed, to ignore the burn in his chest.
He hadn’t known. Not about... *Dad.*

A flood of emotions smacked into him and he closed his eyes, his memories making them sting.

He’d loved his father. He loved him still. Even when he was reminded of the many, *many* wrong doings Robert Queen had committed before he died... Oliver still loved him. But his father’s legacy was making it harder and harder for him to do so with impunity.

For his father to have an affair - *to betray mom,* even as he knew she’d done the same to his dad - with a woman half his age, a woman with less warmth in her than an ice pick - though maybe she’d been different once - made him sick, because it forced a realisation; that it was probably their similarities that had made his father be so lenient with his stupidity when he was younger. The things he’d seen in his son that he could empathise in. Their similarities that had made Oliver susceptible to Isabel, as if she’d already known how and where to prod because she’d already tasted from the Queen’s finest vat... their likenesses that had made him *want* to as well. With her.

*Christ.* Oliver remembered how he used to be before the island; how he’d flirted and slept around behind Laurel’s back, how he’d actually planned a getaway with her sister and could only think ‘like father, like son’.

“*Stellmore International acquired the rights to all of Masons Holdings sublets, including their—*”

“*Tell me why you think Isabel is backing Slade.*”

*He hadn’t been able to hear anything else; so attuned to what his head and his heart were telling him. What Felicity’s eyes were trying, pre-emptively, to apologise for. As always.*

*But he couldn’t- he didn’t have it in him just then to tell her how much he cared that she tried. And she did: she always did. When no one else cared to, she did.*

And she faced him now. Turning to him in her seat, he saw her look him over, pressing her lips together because she could clearly see the way he was begging more from her than he should ever ask in his stare.

*Then she stood; eye to eye, as always. Close enough to touch but not too close as to invade. Like he could breathe, but he wasn’t by himself in this. “One of my Trojans hit a financial trail made... made the night we were in Moscow.” When I slept with Isabel. He couldn’t help how his eyes instantly narrowed. “A cool $1000, 000 wired to an account - a misnomer - just outside of the city.”*  

*Wintergreen.*

Why hadn’t he told Felicity everything? It would have been so smart to just... to hand her the keys to his memories and have at. Those two years on the island, names, dates, faces, places... she could have had searches going this whole time. But he hadn’t. It went against the grain. To share those pieces of himself, his sins.

He didn’t know how.

She’d forgive him, he knew that, but he wasn’t ready to face forgiveness. To see the expressions she’d make if he told her truths about what he is, if he told her how he’d driven a friend to insanity with his selfishness and how he’d subsequently killed him for it. Or thought he had.

Again, ‘what if?’
“Your father.” The way she spoke - the kindness in it, free of judgement - did nothing to soften the blow. “When you told me that your mother knew her,” my mother, keeping more secrets that could hurt him, “well, it rang a few bells. So I looked into it.”

Every bone in his body tense enough to snap, Oliver gritted out. “Isabel knew my father?”

“Biblically.”

_Her reply broke something inside him._

Thinking on it now, _had_ his dad loved her? Loved Isabel?

Enough to leave on a trip to Russia? One-Way. No refunds. The notion that he almost had, that Robert Queen - the man he’d called father and _dad_ - had almost made it to the airport, had almost left his wife and children behind for his _mistress_, hurt somewhere deep inside him, in a place he thought he’d long since left behind once he became an adult.

That his father had more than simply _considered_ it...

And hours later, the reminder still made his stomach turn because, if only he could rewind time.

To go back and stand there in that hotel in Russia, to look at Isabel only to say ‘thank you but, no’.

To turn away from her and what little she offered instead of obeying a very real weakness. Then maybe he’d buy a bottle of vodka from the bar. Take the hour he had free and go do what he’d been absently thinking of doing - but hadn’t because, _rules_ - instead of telling himself not to and go to Felicity’s room. And just... talk. Just be. Reminisce over the past year and wonder what the next one would be like. Then they would-

Then they would... what?

He didn’t know.

But he regretted not finding out, not ever knowing.

Besides, anything was preferable to that look on her face; the one he remembered so clearly. The momentary jolt, like she’d taken a blow. The shake of her head when she’d understood but also _hadn’t_, because why would he _ever_...?

Her faith, belief, in him scared him... because what if it suddenly stopped? What if she realised one day that he wasn’t everything she saw in him? Where would he be then? What would he do?

Fortunately, her opinion seemed to have changed.

“_So you slept with her._” Felicity stated, as if was the simplest thing on the planet and he almost winced because, in a very real way, what he’d done in Russia had _been_ simple. Very. “_So you had a moment of weakness. It happens. It’s allowed to happen._”

Speechless, he’d only stared at her.

And yet, the hurt written on her face at the time... She hadn’t just felt it for herself; she’d felt it for him. She’d wanted him to have more that a quick fling in his hotel room with a woman he couldn’t wait to get away from afterwards.

“_Did I think your decision was a good one? No. Do I think you should have thought for a moment on how it could backfire and hurt you, absolutely yes. Did I want you to be happy?_” The look she
gave him was so gentle. “Yes. Did I think you deserved more? I still do. But you’re allowed to do whatever you need to do to bring that about without being judged for it.”

Everything inside him had silenced at that. Like he’d been given permission to make the countless mistakes he’d made, just because he was human; and something deep in his gut - present since they left Russia - had lifted. As if she’d known - and she did - that he hated knowing that he’d done the same as his father with Isabel, barring any affection and that in some respects he was just like him. That even though he loved and honoured his memory, his father was not a man to look up to. Not a saviour or a saint, not even close.

A sinner.

I didn’t save this city; I destroyed it. And I wasn’t the only one.

Was this – Isabel and Stellmore International – part of that?

As usual, he was out of answers.

Teeth grinding, it made him want to hit something. A lot of something’s.

Even if he could take a deep breath, even if he were able to practise those breathing exercises Shado had taught him, the meditations Masao had drummed into his head, the yoga he’d watched Felicity-That he’d watched Felicity practise with Roy.

It stopped him just as it tugged at him, the memory. An island that didn’t keep him shored and he allowed himself to lean into it, to remember - to feel- every single part of it as his facial muscles relaxed.

It had been so uncomplicated at the time. No pressure, no games… just Felicity teaching Roy the basic stances. Her voice - quiet yet full of awkward amusement and embarrassment at first - had carried throughout the Foundry, drawing his attention. Her laughter coming from the mats behind her computers made him curious, made him listen. Originally, her suggestion - helping Roy via meditation instead of physical control - had baffled him.

But listening to how she’d made Roy repeat phrases - things that centred him - words Oliver wouldn’t have dreamed of conjuring in the field; things that were ludicrous… until they weren’t, had forced him to conclude that Roy had simply needed a gentler touch; guidance from someone who couldn’t force him to commit. Meaning he would. Given the choice. Choice; it was everything.

Yet Oliver’s focus was on the surreal cheerfulness that infiltrated the Foundry whenever they practiced; that weightlessness that had made him stick around instead of leaving with Sara for some privacy...

It had been irresistible, the peace of it.

Hypnotic.

So much so that he’d eventually gravitated towards them - intrigued - during a session. And - after watching and wondering - he’d joined in. It had taken her back, he could tell, when he’d slipped off his shirt and shoes to kneel on the floor beside Roy to look up at her, waiting for instruction.

The slow flush to her cheeks and her slack jaw - the furious blinking behind blue rimmed spectacles - had made him bite back a smile. Just as the memory did now, except this time it ghosted away; his smile drowned out by the tension in his head.
Afterwards though, she’d barely said a word; offering to simply show them.

Effortlessly contorting her body into shapes and positions that, even in long-sleeved baggy shirts and hauntingly formfitting - yoga pants were almost obscene to witness, he figured that for her legs to look like *that* in a skirt she’d have to be flexible. She’d have to be fit. Even if it struck him dumb.

It helped him forget; his thoughts emptying as he’d moved.

Only once did she interfere and it wasn’t with words; it was with touch. As though speaking - critiquing - would ruin the ambiance. She’d tentatively - as if she expected him to rebuke her - pressed down against his lower back so that his pelvis would align itself with the floor - it had instinctively lifted - and he’d let her. That was all.

But he’d *really* enjoyed it. Being taught instead of being the one doing the teaching, being touched... having eyes on him that expected nothing.

The exercise explained how Felicity could be so in control of herself. So *shielded*. He admired it about her, *liked* how it was something they had in common: their ability to compartmentalise...

Loathed it enough - her almost alien composure -to make him want to crush it. To break it between his bare hands. It covered her completely, like armour. A wall that, unlike Laurel’s, didn’t bite back. It just made you bounce off it. It was as maddening as it was disturbing because why would she need to shield form him of all people? Humans weren’t designed to live alone. He knew the double standard here; the amount of times he’d tried to keep people out of his life because of his very real fear of losing them; keeping them away from him so that, if he were to die, they wouldn’t be so attached. He knew the futility of it but tried anyway.

He also knew better now; you could live alone. You could die alone. But it should never be by choice.

Lifting a hand to his face, he rubbed at the shadow of his jaw. He wanted the night to be over, for it to melt into day, though technically it already was ‘tomorrow’. The election rally couldn’t come sooner.

Lifting up the phone in his hand, Oliver brushed a thumb over the screen for what felt like the fiftieth time.

‘We’re here. Checked the house; it’s clear. Keeping an eye out.’

The words - Dig’s text - had been self-explanatory. Area secure. Slade - or his men - hadn’t gone anywhere near Felicity’s house. There was nothing to suggest otherwise; John would have kept him apprised about any discrepancy. No matter how minute, he’d know Oliver would want to hear it.

...It seemed there was nothing to worry about.

‘We’re here. Checked the house; it’s clear. Keeping an eye out.’

He kept reading it. Reading and re-reading until the simple sentence blurred. Until the hollow in his stomach lessened.

He was tired - more wearisome than needing sleep, though he **did** need sleep - but he felt too tense to rest. He was waiting for something, anything to happen. Something he could work with. Exhaling, his thumb moved again, knowing there were no new texts or calls but checking regardless. It hadn’t been that long since Dig has sent-
How long had it been?

It was irrational, he knew it was, but like a bullet, fear shot into him. And it shouldn’t have; there was no reason for it. As of this moment they were safe, all of them. Yet... there was no shaking it.

*How long have I been standing here?* Pulling out from his texts, he looked at the time on his phone-01:37am.

...*Okay.* Breathing in through his nostrils, he pressed his lips together.

Dig wouldn’t be texting for a while.

In reality he’d been walking in circles - dragging his feet - pacing and he hadn’t even realised he’d come to a stop. Restless, he resisted the urge to bounce on his feet like a boxer and, once again, looked back down at the phone.

*‘We’re here. Checked the house; it’s clear. Keeping an eye out.’*

A muscle in his jaw twitched.

It wasn’t enough. The text wasn’t enough.

Not to shift his concentration, not enough to *stop*. Stop remembering the way Slade’s chuckle sounded like grating steel against steel instead of the boisterous laughter he’d heard echo between trees once upon a time. Stop hearing the scrape of a sword being drawn from its hilt, stop seeing the sight of dark eyes filled with the certainty only brotherhood brings. Stop watching that light fade, the friendship crumbling, affection replaced by hot coals of hate. By black holes of a very deep, very personal despair…

To stop hearing *her* voice in the silence around him and seeing her face and wondering if-

*Stop*. His eyes shut tight. *Now.*

If he didn’t... he’d leave.

He’d leave Laurel.

Torn, he brought the phone up to his forehead; a furrow deepening his brow in an invisible effort for control.

*She’s fine.* Felicity was fine. He’d see her in the afternoon at QC. Fresh faced. With coffee, *I’ll buy it. No-* he’d pick her up and take her to work. They’d talk damage control and form a plan. It would be fine.

A shaky breath left him.

Why couldn’t he let it go? The feeling that she wasn’t fine. It was ridiculous… but he still found himself racing over his touch screen, entering words and pressing send; Dig would understand.

*‘Update? Is she asleep?’*

On watch, Diggle wouldn’t sleep. He’d let slip that he’d slept a little *too* well the night before. He’d be awake and receiving his message any... second… now.
And…Nothing.

A few seconds could feel like a few minutes; a few minutes, an hour. Feeling a prickle of anxiety on his skin - the need to tap a foot, to walk about, to go for a ride on his bike - his agitation mounted.

The seconds topped a minute. Then two-

*Answer.* The phone didn’t light up. “Come on, Dig.” He muttered, frowning down at his cell-

It vibrated.

Relief washed through him - taking a front seat to awkwardness - and, feeling absurd, he swiftly flicked to the message: ‘*Just got her to go to bed.*’

It was closing 2am. She was only in bed now? He started to reply when his cell pulsed again.

‘*Might be late to QC in the morning. Getting her to eat first.*’

…it’s. Yes.

He wanted that, more so than he wanted to see her. And he *did* want to see her.

‘*That’s fine. Update when she wakes,*’ he sent back.

‘*That’s fine. Update when she wakes.*’

Baseball cap and bat in tow - *I’m a lover, not a fighter* - Stan stood in the foyer of a clean, almost sterile home that he’d never stepped foot in before this night and glanced at the text, praying. Seeing the words, his eyes closed with a shaky exhale. “Thank fuck.”

Mr Wilson would be pleased.

And Mr Wilson being please meant Stan was safe. Or at least, he wouldn’t be skewered on a sword and everyone was happy. Until Boss man was unhappy and then everyone would be feeling that particular chafe.

It was *difficult* to please Slade Wilson.

Feeling jittery, Stan ignored memories best left alone as he tucked the other guy’s phone back in his pocket. Glancing up at said ‘guy’; the unconscious bear of a man tied to a chair, he gulped, remembering. *Shit, was he hard to put fucking down.* The size of him alone - seeing him barrelling towards them - had almost made Stan wet himself. He was still sweating, pits and all soaked. He reeked, *oh man.*

Mouth gagged and hands triple tied, the man’s dark skin didn’t hide the blood slowly travelling down his face.

John Diggle had put up one hell of a fight.
They’d come in through the back door - Mr Wilson had keys - slipping inside silently, where his boss moved around like he owned the place - but that’s how Mr Wilson is; a badass with cash - like he’d memorised everything about it.

Everything about the woman who lived there.

**Boss man is Boss man.**

This *John Diggle* hadn’t heard them until Mr Wilson had *started* in the bathroom. A sharp shout followed by splashes that made Stan fidget, made him think when he really shouldn’t be, and thuds against a tub and it had taken *no* time at all for Mr Diggle to try and get to her - *like a bull* - only to have Stan and his buddy Rob standing where they’d been ordered.

In his way.

Neither had been prepared for how huge this guy was.

And if that wasn’t enough, the look on the guy’s face, the dawning realisation. The fear. How it morphed into anger, *fast*. How he’d moved, scary powerful, told Stan - with his limited understanding as he’d contemplated the pro’s cons of fleeing - that he’d probably once been some sort of Special Forces stooge.

*He’d gone fucking postal on us.* Knocking them down like flies and he’d actually made it to the bathroom, where he threw the door open… but whatever he’d seen in there had made him stop dead. Though Stan didn’t favour his chances with Mr Wilson, John Diggle had proven more than a match for the two of them.

At least… until Frank.

Appearing out of nowhere -*from thin air man*, he hadn’t been in the car with them -he’d yanked the guy backwards by both shoulders and then more or less proved why Frank was hailed as one of the boss’s favourites.

It had taken minutes - more than a few - but the job got *done*.

Rage and shock met precision: precision won. Like the other guy, Frank was *built*- on more than his mama’s fine home cooking. He knew more than a little about how to fight and where to bring the pain, evidenced by the man now with his ass unconscious in the chair.

Rob was unconscious too, bleeding all over the carpet; his left arm and clavicle broken in who knows how many places and Stan couldn’t even breathe properly thanks to what he was sure were broken ribs. And a broken nose; it sure *felt* broken. He’d never broken a bone before in his life; he could barely stand and was pretty much freaking the fuck out. *This really fucking hurts.*

*That Diggle guy*… he was dangerous.

But if he was dangerous, then what was Frank?

Not that it mattered; Mr Wilson would probably consider this the first and last time he assigned Robert to anything. *Man, this wasn’t what I signed up for either.* The whine was more internal than external but, from the look Frank shot him then - like he wouldn’t waste spit on him if he was dying of thirst - it had made it at least partially out of his mouth.

“Quit complaining.” The order was barely mumbled, so engrossed was Frank in perusing the odd pieces and pictures covering the woman’s furniture and walls. *Don’t know why he gives a crap.*
“We’ll sedate him later.” Dark eyes roamed the cupboards, speaking whilst half of his attention was taken up by… whatever the hell he was doing. “Need to make sure he regains consciousness first.”

Slouching against a wall Stan scratched his cheek. *I want a beer.* “Why?”

“Does Mr Wilson pay you to ask questions? Just make sure the texts get sent.” Snake-like, Frank’s voice slithered as his hands did the walking and the talking for him. He moved slowly around the living room before heading towards the hall.

The hall leading to the woman’s bedroom.

Stan’s gaze shot momentarily away when his stomach threatened to turn. *Come on man.* Not this again.

It was sick.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Frank muttered distractedly; fixated on the prize. “Better not hope he wakes up while I’m gone,” he threatened, making Stan’s gaze shoot fearfully to John Diggle as he stalked into the bedroom…

And then shut the door behind him.

Crossing his arms, “Fucking perv’.” Stan muttered, grimacing and furtively watching said door.

He’d seen him.

After the big guy had gone down, boss-man left the bathroom with the woman - naked - in his arms. Like he did this every day. Like it was normal. Like he carried naked chicks for a living, like he’d expected it. And the woman…

Smoking hot.

*Oh yeah.*

The kind of body to launch a thousand hard-on’s. No joke. Absolutely fuckable. Even now, just his memory was enough to* cool it.* No sense being humiliated; he’d wait till he was alone. Though he thought about it; wondered whether the boss was going to do her while she slept if he was into that kinky shit. Or maybe wait till she woke; she didn’t have a stitch on after all.

The way Mr Wilson had held her though... Stan didn’t know what that was.

But even he – with his arrest record and long-standing habit with prostitutes – couldn’t stomach the way Frank had leered at her.

Like she was dinner and he was starving.

Stan had watched his fingers clench and curl claw-like - as if he’d wanted to rip into her - with the muscles in his shoulders and neck bunching aggressively, all as he’d stared. Stan never wanted Frank to look at *him* like that. Then he’d seen him lick his lips, had seen the sweat on his brow and the promise in his eyes that tapered the more he’d stared.

A promise she really wouldn’t enjoy.

Stan didn’t understand Mr Wilson allowing it, especially since he’d held her so carefully, with her pressed into him. Even if she was fully nude. Yet - unless Mr Wilson had been lost inside his own head, which he might have been given the load in his arms - he’d still let Frank have a long look at
the goods.

And her marks.

He got it then. *Shit.* It was probably the first time – in a really long time – that Stan had looked away from a naked woman. Even one unconscious. It felt… debasing.

Stan huffed it off, unfolding his arms to cross them behind his head. *None of my business.*

Still, Frank rubbed him the wrong way. And by rub, he meant ‘royally scared ten shades of shit out of him’. The kind of guy you’d find in dark corners and *avoid.* It was different to how Mr Wilson frightened him. He was just plain terrifying.

But Frank? He liked to hurt people. Preferably during sex. The prettier, the better. *Sadist.*

Stan knew he wasn’t a good guy. But he was better than Frank.

What little he’d seen and heard of Frank wasn’t good, but for the most part Stan had seen him wanting what he couldn’t have: boss-man’s toy. The woman. It was kind of weird too though; Frank’s tastes usually ran to brunettes and red-heads. Not bottle blondes. Stan knew a fake hair-do when he saw one. His sister was a hairdresser; he’d let her try her ‘potions’ on him.

Maybe he should have stayed at home with her instead of chasing after highs he couldn’t afford and offers of strength he’d never possessed before. *A bunch of bull…*

Still, he stayed right where he was. The money was too good; it was worth a little dirty work. And, if he was honest, he wouldn’t give a shit about what he was ordered to do if Frank wasn’t with him half the time.

Stan looked back to the bedroom, hoping Frank wasn’t jerking off in there; they didn’t have all night.

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Sat on edge of his cot - away from the lights - Oliver sighed; his hands at the back of his neck felt like restraints.

It wasn’t that he was trying to cling to it, the sensation resting ghost-like behind his eyes. Just because it meant that he got to stay right where he was, that he didn’t have to move, didn’t have to think too much, or feel anything but *this.*

The light she was so generous with.

Her smile still traced his face with invisible fingers. But it was the touch - the kiss - of each simple word felt through his clothes to the skin of his chest - the certainty in those eyes that that had looked into his own to say ‘it’s going to be okay’ every second he’d held them - that was gradually leaving him.

His receptiveness to it surprised him; the rawness of it. As if he’d gone without light for too long, it made his palms itch. Made his bones throb, made him feel chained in his leathers. Cooped up in his own home. Made it impossible to do anything but…
He stood, needing to move. Stretching - the back of his neck cracked twice - Oliver made his way back over to the medical cart; he needed a purpose. A distraction. Focus.

Fingers rubbing once more at the skin over his eyes, he asked aloud. “How’s she doing?”

He sounded beyond done.

Either Sara didn’t notice or she didn’t acknowledge it. “Better.” Touching Laurel’s brow, she continued, “Her BP’s steady. Looks like whatever Slade used on her - used on us - has run its course. She could wake up anytime now.”

Sooner would be better. Grunting in space of an answer - if he opened his mouth he’d snarl in frustration - Oliver rolled his head, freeing that crick in his spine.

He needed to know if they’d missed anything. If there was a purpose to all this, to Slade’s actions today. He’d made it personal; more so than his vendetta dictated, deliberately sending him a message he understood all too well. But…

Had he also told her things? Had Slade told Laurel things Oliver wasn’t ready - he’d never be ready - for her to know? Had they spoken at all?

Had he scared her?

I hope not, Oliver side-eyed said Lance sister. “Do you think she saw anything?”

“Right now, I’m just grateful he didn’t do anything except drug her.” Sara’s tone, laced with quiet - righteous - anger, told him the coming day would be a long one. On top of everything else.

Oliver’s eyes flickered to Sara’s… but hers stayed on her sister.

I'm sorry. He felt it bone-deep and whispered. “Me too.” Looking away - gratefully - he breathed out; dissatisfaction eating at him.

Too quickly he noticed that his fingers - itching to find something or someone for target practise - were non-stop worrying over his thumb. That he had the urge to bounce on the pads of his feet in impatience. That what he really wanted, wasn’t to be in the basement of the Foundry, staring at Laurel’s unconscious body for hours like he had been, doing nothing. Nothing but waiting.

I’ve been waiting for weeks.

It made his teeth ache, the continuous knowing that Slade was in Starling and the closest they’d come to finding him had been Felicity’s doing. And even that had been broken. All that effort wasted.

Slade had hurt them. And they couldn’t even retaliate. He was so sick of responding after the fact.

“Dad’s home.” Sara absently offered, “I didn’t tell him; I just made him go to bed.”

All Oliver could give in return was a non-committal noise because he wasn’t fully with her; his mind a wilderness of dark eventualities. Of failings and agitation.

But she continued regardless. “This is on us, you know.”

Pulled back, a hand pressing - massaging - against the ball of his spine, he hummed, “Hm?”

“This.” It wasn’t hard to guess what ‘this’ was since all of her attention was still on Laurel. First the League, now Slade. He got it; Laurel had been targeted before and Sara felt responsible. “This is on
us. Slade only went after her because of us.” Sara finally spared him a glance. “How could we have thought that he wouldn’t go after her?”

_But I did think of that._

It had been one of his first thoughts. And there were other questions beneath that one too: how could we be so careless? How could we think that being together would halt Slade from touching her? How could we forget like that?

But he’d never once thought that being with Sara would stop Slade from alternating to a different sister. He’d just hoped for the best, because what else could he do?

“…It’s the hardest thing to give up control. I know I’m not like you guys, but it doesn’t mean I don’t understand the risks. It doesn’t mean I don’t understand you. You want so much to keep everything covered in bubble wrap; you want to believe so much that you can... even though you’ve been proven, over and over again how ridiculous an expectation that is in real life, you still want to try. And it’s great, really, how much you care about people – even strangers – but, that’s not how this works. That’s never been how this works.”

He couldn’t control the people around him.

It had been on a constant loop in his head at the beginning. Felicity had figured it out, quickly, laying it on for him, withholding nothing. And she’d set up alerts too for suspicious activity but they didn’t have the manpower or the resources to watch over Laurel day in and day out on a hunch.

Now it sounded like a bad justification. But what else could he have done save ignoring his duty to his city?

“Slade wants me to suffer.” He intoned, carelessly. “Taking Laurel _then,_” almost 2 months ago when he’d still been reeling from Slade’s arrival, “it would have been immediate. And that isn’t his goal.”

Like Slade had said: _I’m here to honour a debt._ To drag it out and make the remainder of Oliver’s life a progressive decline into misery.

Psychosomatic warfare. Maybe the waiting - the shackles of it - were part of that plan.

_If so,_ Oliver reflected as he took in Sara who looked ready to throw herself into the ring with the first Mirakuru enhanced agent she could find, _he’s done a good job._

Slade was already winning and he’d barely lifted a finger.

“We should have been watching her.” Sara reiterated, undeterred and Oliver wanted, just this once, to ask _how_ they could have possibly done that. “It’s Laurel, Ollie.” As if any measures were fair play. Eyes flashing, they spoke words. _Your Laurel._ “We should have known.”

Maybe, maybe not. “Well, now we do.” Cagily holding her stare, his fingers slid across the back of his phone. Again, tempted. And it was ridiculous but he glanced down to it, knowing it was for nothing but unable to help himself. Feeling the stiffness in his shoulders, he knew Sara was equally as weighed-down, even if the cause was something quite different.

As proof, she shook her head. No forgiveness. For either of them. “It’s not enough.”

With a grimace, his eyes closed.

_Sara._
Feeling that long slide back into a history he’d never been able to leave behind - familiar territory, that old feeling of guilt - Oliver knew that she was right. “I created him.” Opening his eyes, he shook his head before looking away again, admitting. “This is on me.” Not you.

Not the Sara Lance on the Amazo who had so desperately begged him to go home with her.

In his peripheral he saw her shoulders fall slightly - her tell for ‘there he goes again’ - and it put him on edge. “Playing the blame game won’t help here Oliver.”

He knew she wasn’t trying to undermine the gravity of what he’d said but-

“I’m not.” He snapped, terse. And it was rare for him to do anything close to losing control of his temper, if the way Sara started was any indication but he couldn’t not. “But I know exactly the kind of man he is.” The kind of man I helped him become. “I killed him. Rather than cure him, I killed Slade.” It was something the others didn’t know; he was too ashamed to speak the truth, because that should have been the end of it. Right there, on the Amazo. But, like all nightmares, he’d risen from the ashes. “He went after Laurel because of me. He took you because of me. This was always his plan Sara; he knew what it would do to me. This is,” hand lifting he searched for a word that felt appropriate because he had nothing else to go on, no other explanation for his once-friend and comrade who now wanted to hurt him so much, “this is all a game.” His hand fell and he gritted his teeth at his own ineptitude. “And it’s perfect, isn’t it? It took us off-guard when he finally made a move.”

But was this his only move? That was what would keep him up tonight. Tomorrow. It was what made this whole thing worse.

She must have heard it in his tone because, suddenly, Sara couldn’t keep her eyes off of him. “We got her back Ollie.” Her read of him just missed its mark. Still, it had merit.

Eyes tapering, he flippantly gestured over her and Laurel - would you deem this a success - as he tried to move away-

“Ollie.” Sara’s hand reached his arm - just to touch - with such an incredibly earnest look in her eye, it reminded him of times long since dead. “We got Laurel back.”

It was useless to him to count the small victories, not now. “Not the point.” It really wasn’t.

“But we did. She’s here, safe. We got her back. You got her back.”

I didn’t do anything. “Felicity got her back.” The name sent a shot of that same something from earlier through him. It was hard - near impossible - to say her name and not feel it everywhere, feel her presence in the Foundry.

Shit.

God, why hadn’t he just left with her?

Sure; let her leave on the proviso that they would talk – tomorrow – but if he’d gone with her, they could have talked tonight. And now he’d know more. They could have had burgers, they could have planned, they could have slept...

It hit him then, why he kept going back to that. It wasn’t just about her being in Starling, but right there next to him. Needing her there just so he could breathe. So he could sleep and not dream nightmares. Happy as he was that she was resting - safe with Diggle - he didn’t want to be by himself. He needed someone there who he didn’t have to explain his every other word to.
Odd that he felt like that - in the basement of the Foundry he’d made a home - with Sara and Laurel Lance in there with him.

Feeling that - the weight of change after years of nothing but ‘the same’ - he swallowed. “We just followed her lead.”

“She surprised me again.” A slice of fondness coated Sara’s words. “She got it right.”

His eyes cut to hers. “You expected less?”

“No. That’s the strange part.”

“There’s nothing strange about it.” Nothing surprising. Nothing new. Felicity Smoak defeating the odds, and probably has been since she was born.

The problem now was that, though Laurel was secure, they still had nothing.

There was a short pause before-

“I’m sorry.”

It took a moment for it to register the out-of-place apology. “What?”

Sara leant against the table, straight backed. “I know you wanted to make sure she’d be alright.” Like there was something pressing into him under his skin, waiting, his body immediately responded immediately to those words. Hands fisting, his jaw clenched, but he didn’t say a word. “She looked tired earlier.” Sara continued. “I asked if she was okay and she said she was, but... I think she was lying.”

For some unfathomable reason, something inside him twisted.

“You-” Wait. His mouth clamped shut before he could finish; he needed to organise his thoughts. *You wanted me here, you got me here. Let it be.*

“Hm?” Her mind clearly elsewhere, Sara wasn’t really seeing him.

Right. If he said anything then, she wouldn’t take it the way it was intended. And he really didn’t want another argument. Not that it was necessarily a go-to, especially not now. Since they’d broken up, they hadn’t argued. Not once.

At that, he almost smiled.

It wasn’t that he and Sara were incompatible; Sara understood him in a way many couldn’t and would never be able to. And he’d miss that. It was one of the reasons why being with her had felt so obvious a path. But they were both too alike in some respects and not enough in others; he’d realised that in having that tacit agreement - that they were and are the kind of people who behave the way they do for a reason - they missed things about each other. Fundamental things. Important things.

Oliver was a vigilante with the moniker ‘Arrow’ given to him, but that wasn’t all he was.

He was also a son, a boyfriend, an ex-boyfriend, a brother, a friend, a partner... he had feelings and, as much as he wanted to drown them, he also had wishes. He had dreams. So did Sara. Even if they both buried them deep.

Their darkness might be of the same breed but their ideals for the future? Pretty much irreconcilable, which was the greatest irony. Their masks were their reality. And neither liked the others true face
very much.

As friends, as family, they worked. They were good. They loved each other.

Being near her now, he wondered why. Why had they chosen to start again? Why had she come to him that night and why had it been so easy to fall back into the past with her, knowing what the result would inevitably be? Was it hope? Caring about Sara had never been difficult - another reason to try - but why like that? Why hadn’t they realised they’d begun another cycle on the waste of the last, on the remains of before?

Why hadn’t he brought it up when she’d first returned, the why’s of what they’d done? And whose reasons were whose? They could have talked...

A week ago. A month ago.

5 years ago, on Lian Yu.

What if?

He’d deliberately not thought about their ‘talk’ at the beginning of the week but this - the here and now - made it come back to him with a new clarity…

Tuesday Evening...

Gulping down water, Sara gasped when she finished and breathed, “That was quite the workout.”

Breathing shallow breaths himself, Oliver didn’t bother to reply.

They’d been thorough with each other.

Placing the bottle down, Sara stretched what was sure to be aching muscles; a note of strain lacing her voice when she spoke again. “What I said earlier? About the way you run your missions? Sometimes I wonder whose captain of this ship; you or her.”

Felicity.

It was a chilly evening between stone walls. Verdant didn’t do business On Tuesday’s so the heating hadn’t been switched on. Still, he preferred it. Over-extending himself as usual during his calisthenics workout, the cool air helped. Made him not want to stop. Oliver felt it, frigid and dry on the back of his throat; a cool burn to combat the heat in his veins and he silently enjoyed it.

But his mind, like Sara’s, was in other places. On the events of the day. She’d been mostly silent until now and he wasn’t sure this was a good thing; even with the affection built into the casual tone she’d made an art form.

Not after Helena.

On tenterhooks since their last argument - an argument where Sara had made it clear she didn’t understand why Helena was still alive in the first place or why he hadn’t killed her last year when he’d had the chance - it was where his thoughts strayed.

Dig had reasons - many of them - for being pessimistic, given the history between Oliver and Helena
but the implication that Oliver hadn’t killed her because of any unresolved romantic feelings, had stirred up loose memories for him. Of failure and recompense. Of a likeness between him and Helena that he’d never been able to explain or let go of, even to Sara.

The idea - that he still had feelings for her - was null and void, but Sara and John believed it. In truth, it was once very much part of the justification. Why he’d aimed to help her, even when he’d been in a relationship with McKenna, even when Helena had threatened Tommy…

Until she’d had aimed at Felicity.

Until she’d touched her.

Threatened her with a bolt to the chest.

Then tied her up, leaving her to lie helpless on the floor.

Any reasons not to kill Helena now stood on principal alone. He’d helped create her, so he hadn’t wanted to resort to that but if he had to… after that… he would.

Still if she could be saved, then so could others. So could he. I had to try.

Now he was glad for it. Glad for the catastrophe last year that his hesitance had brought him, that he hadn’t sent an arrow through Helena’s heart after she’d hurt McKenna. She was showing signs of change, signs that she was redeemable, that she wanted to be forgiven. It made him hopeful and he latched onto it in the face of so much negativity. Even if it now meant that she had to pay the price for her vengeance for the rest of her life. An actualisation he was intimately acquainted with.

Seeing her at the Police station earlier had brought that home for him - her face free of the strain of her anger - that even the darkest of souls, the most inveterate of people, could change, could be saved - and somewhere deep down, he wondered if that applied to Slade Wilson.

...Maybe.

Frowning, he finally side-glanced his girlfriend. “Captain?”

Her hair fell in her face when she bobbed her head. “Felicity being in charge.” In favour of concentrating on physical exertion - in contorting her body into shapes fit for her Katas - Sara stuck to close sentences. “It’s smart. She wears it well. It doesn’t stand out but it’s like nothing happens around here without her say so.” She shot a smile at him. “I like it. You need someone to keep you grounded.”

Unreceptive, he just looked at her.

Grounded?

“She doesn’t... strand me.” Not ashore. Not anywhere.

That’s how he saw it, how he translated grounded. Stuck. On. Dry. Land. She’d made the word feel like chains. And that wasn’t Felicity.

“I don’t think you even know what she really does.” She missed how her words made his abdomen contract because he knew exactly what Felicity really did for him. He just ignored it. “Or why she’s here. I mean,” letting loose a shallow breath, Sara sank down to the floor; the epitome of graceful, “I get why we’re here, why John’s here, even Roy- but an IT girl? Not exactly what springs to mind when you picture vigilantism.”
Funny; it was exactly what came to mind when he thought about it.

And he could understand why a person might be curious in the how and why of an IT girl joining two (then) men to take on the city’s underbelly but...

“I’ve never thought about it.” Why would he, when Felicity had always fit so easily into his life this way? “You make it sound strange.”

Stop doing it.

“It’s different.” She amended. “She’s invaluable. Honestly, I’m kind of jealous you found her first.” She shrugged at the look he sent her, her tone taking a turn for coy. “What?” Mischievous.

Like how she used to be.

It might have worked, might have made him smile or roll his eyes, but the tension he still felt - the piece of him that was remembering things from the day that he hadn’t reconciled, refused to allow him even a brief moment of respite - had him frowning down at the sticks in his hands instead.

“Ollie?”

He glanced back up to see her peering at him, some concern marring the impish expression.

He dropped the frown. “Hm?”

She seemed to deliberate for a moment. “Do you ever think she joined because, well,” a small, sly smile lit up her face, as if they were in collusion or she was trying to distract him from thoughts she knew were hurting him, “you know?”

Whatever she was trying to insinuate fell flat. “What?”

Hesitating, she watched him for a moment. “Ollie, really?”

“She,” eyes flitting over their surroundings, he exhaled, “I’m not exactly in the mood.”

To play games.

Sara held up a hand. An ‘alright’. “I was just wondering if her reason for joining this crusade,” it was intriguing to him how she said this and not our – intriguing and lonely; they were together but she wasn’t with him, “was because she might have liked you. Liked you, liked you.” Head rolling to rest on her shoulder, she might have looked cute if not for the intelligence in her gaze. “I mean, you can usually tell that kind of thing. And it’s probably nothing anymore. Not that it would be a problem if it wasn’t.” She smiled again, this time it was kind. “It’s sweet.”

Sweet.

Sweet.

That she saw it like that, or could see it that way... he didn’t know how to react to that. She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Taking in just the word without the meaning behind it... sweet... it didn’t fit; there was no place for it. This, them - him and Felicity - it was the furthest thing from sweet. There were other words, different words; words he couldn’t say. Wouldn’t. Or think. Which was fine: Sara was doing all the thinking for him.
But to reduce it like that, to something so simple...

It made him still, those two words - it’s sweet - as his eyes following her every move.

He was listening - he’d always listen - but his face and body, was undeniably a stone.

And she’d done that, with her special brand of blind.

Eyes dancing, Sara continued, unseeing. “Just between us, is that how…” her hand gestured in a vague way that could have meant anything but really said, ‘did you flirt with the tech guru to get her down here; is that how you pulled her into this’?

He felt that in his chest… and it was painful somehow.

He wouldn’t have dared do what she was implying. Not for an instant. Not to Felicity. Never.

He’d wanted her help, but only if it was willingly offered. No facades, no lies, no rules broken, no manipulation. Just honesty. Give and take, knowing he was taking so much more than he’d ever be able to give back. He’d craved that. Hoped for it. And when she’d given it, he’d been quietly pleased that he’d managed - even with the monster inside him - to earn irreplaceable aid from such a remarkable woman.

It had been - for lack of a better term - a big deal, and whether Sara meant what she’d said the way he heard them, her words were absolutely derogatory.

And that’s when he felt it again.

The pit.

It was in his stomach - had been for years now - and the many problems in his life only added to its volatility. To its violence. But it was also something he’d ignored - had been able to ignore thanks to the constant stream of light he’d been gifted with for months - because it meant admittance to truths left unspoken, untouched.

It had boiled once again - rising - 2 months ago, after Slade’s return. And it had melted away over coffee with Felicity a few days after that.

It burned hot again now.

Ashes and tar. It felt black. Heavy. Created from five years of breaking; of pain, grief, guilt and sorrow. And shame. The heart of the monster he brought into the mask he wore, the thing he took with him.

The same monster who loved too dearly for any object of focus to survive.

A demon. And for some unfathomable reason it reared its head now, growing tight; like a hand was squeezing his insides, enflaming the wound.

Face blank - surface control - he watched Sara dig unintentionally deeper into it.

“Was she swayed by the infamous ‘Ollie’ charm,” she stretched her toes as he looked down at her, motionless, “before knowing you were the vigilante?”

It was suggestive but it was also curious, innocent even. As if Sara genuinely wanted to know if the reason Felicity had joined him in the first place was because she’d been attracted to him.
Because why else would such a woman join, as Sara saw it, a damned war?

And that was the crux of it, he realised; Sara who believed that every living creature was dark and either hid it behind masks (like he did) or wore it on their skin (like she did) did not see this mission the way he did. The way Dig and Felicity understood it.

She saw it as a dead end. A suicide mission.

Sara had faith in him, but a nihilistic attitude could only take you so far. So, her understanding of why an IT girl would join a tragedy waiting to happen, would always be - unless she found a different way of viewing the world - limited.

So the only reason she could possibly fathom for why… was shallow sex.

And that was utterly absurd. Offensive.

He couldn’t believe she’d even go there.

If that was what Felicity Smoak had been about, he’d have seen it. And he wouldn’t have engaged her beyond their initial meeting. But, God, she wasn’t like that, not even close.

He knew that Felicity understood that sex could be used as a way to vent, as a way to find release when there was no one on the planet there for you. But he also knew that she understood the truth of it. The part... when two souls connect. To her - making love - was a way of showing another how much she cares for them. How much she wants them with her. How much she trusts them with all that she is. It made whoever she chose doubly fortunate. Blessed. A lucky son of a...

But sleeping with someone had never been a way of guaranteeing something for her. Never used as a tool, never as a weapon. Or a trophy.

And if the idea was reversed; that she could have been manipulated by him, that he’d used his looks and his status as her boss to bring her into the fold making the only reason Felicity would get herself involved in an anti-criminal campaign, her feelings - her being besotted - for its vigilante leader.

He didn’t know if he was taking this too far, if his thoughts were speeding far past where Sara had meant for them to go.

Felicity was five years younger than him. And he could admit to flat out knowing that she’d been attracted to him when they’d first met. The way she’d grow flustered and had babbled so effortlessly and delightfully...

He’d relished it.

But not because he could use it. Even with that, no man could ever use Felicity Smoak. She’d never allow it.

No, it was because… he’d been quite taken too.

With her.

But for the thought to even enter Sara’s mind… Felicity wasn’t her.

She’d never - that he knew of - gloried in the high of petty crime, drugs and promiscuity the way Sara once had. Of sex, orgies and bed posts; he knew instinctively that Felicity hated the idea of notches, of conquests and gloating. She wasn’t Laurel, who’d very swiftly stepped into the role of
girlfriend, ignoring his many misdemeanours, believing him handsome and droll; loving him only for the things she could see because there were many that she couldn’t. And it was those things that she never dug deeply for. She wasn’t Helena who’d fallen with him out of loneliness and fast into lust, wasn’t Isabel who’d needed an escape or McKenna who he’d affected a fake ‘real’ with…

She wasn’t any of them. She stood alone in a place they couldn’t reach. In a place he’d never attempted to.

That Felicity could ever be swayed like that - by an offer, by a kiss, by sex, or anything more - made that thing inside him; that dark and unnatural creature, threaten to unfurl.

It was why he didn’t move now - hadn’t moved once yet - not an inch. Even as the pit deepened, he remained a stone.

But his mouth betrayed him. “No.” And it was brittle, his voice. Like thin ice. “It wasn’t - isn’t - like that. That’s never how it’s been between us.” There had never been an ‘us’ to discuss. “It isn’t why she joined.” They were a partnership. Not a ‘friends with benefits’ liaison. “That’s not why she’s here.”

How many different ways could he explain it before realising he shouldn’t have to?

At his words, the wind seemed to leave Sara’s sails a bit. “Pity.”

He recoiled.

“I mean,” Sara started on witnessing the sheer disbelief in his face, “you’re so focused on this. Thinking that you might have had something other than your father’s wish list in mind,” wish list, “made me feel better. It told me that you hadn’t changed too much.” She lifted her hands in the universal ‘what can you do’ pose. “And if you could come back home and find a way to live with your family, maybe I could too.”

It was care. Affection. Admiration. He knew that, heard it, but... No.

Felicity Smoak had nothing and everything to do with re-acclimatizing to Starling.

“I get that but,” he shook his head in a tight fashion, “No. She liked me.” He softly uttered. And she did; a man knows. “At the beginning.”

When he’d first walked into her office, silently observing as she’d fallen all over herself. How it had fit with his poor excuse of a lie - a lie he’d created knowing it would entice her because he’d wanted her on his team since ‘you’re cute’. How he’d secretly admired that though she’d obviously been dazzled by his presence, she hadn’t allowed his status, heritage or charisma to colour her view of him; immediately letting him know with a look that she saw right through his bullshit.

She saw me, as he’d stood before her when so many others, his family and friends, hadn’t.

It - his low tone, how he spoke - was a warning Sara didn’t perceive as the threat it was. “I liked her.”

Oliver understood the sensation - the depth - of immediate attraction. But he had far less experience - or none at all - with immediate trust. And even less with the slow - monthly - rise in appreciation one could feel for another person that Felicity Smoak continued to teach him.

“Really?” It wasn’t so much a rude shock for her as it was gentle surprise that had Sara’s face fluxing in wonder. “You mean you-”
He moved to dissuade her. “Not in the way you’re thinking.”

Not…exactly.

Her head tilted; oddly shrewd. “You’re sure about that?”

But he was firm. Certain. Pointed. “Yes.”

No.

And that still confused him.

Just as it seemed to confuse Sara. “Didn’t you ever think about it?” She ruminated - as if she wanted him to say ‘all the time’ - and a slight grin began to form. “You and her?”

What did she want him to say?

“No.” Images flew across his vision and he swallowed them away, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he affected unpretentiousness. “Never.”

“You weren’t attracted to her?” Like she couldn’t believe it, “you’re both down here, through the night, and not once do you even think about it? I mean,” her lips upturned at one side as she pushed once more, “she’s pretty cute.”

As if that was the solitary requisite to gaining Oliver Queen’s attention.

If he tensed any further he’d break. “It has never, not ever,” because he felt like he had to highlight it in a bold neon green, “been like that between us Sara.”

He didn’t talk about the lipstick. Not with anyone.

That pink stain on full lips that had wrapped around a red pen like she’d always held it there. The red had hit him first, then the pink… then the blue of her eyes, the light on her hair, the vibrancy of her shirt and he didn’t think he’d ever forget how easy it was to just stare at her. To wonder what and who she was and why she was who she was; this strange, nervous, creature who had made him smile. That he could probably spend minutes, hours even, studying her as she worked.

Everything that was them was slow, yet fast.

It had been muddling in how easy it was to talk to her socially awkward self, to be truthful. Knowing that he was lying to her – that she knew he was lying – and wanting, needing her help anyway and liking that she wanted to give it back. Realising that without her, they – he and Diggle – were lost. Incomplete. That in so many ways, the only reason why he’d stayed above water all this time was because of her.

It had - her involvement in his life - nothing to do with attraction.

But thinking on it, the idea of that with her…

It would be different.

Moments of pleasure - a burst of lust - he knew all too well.

But this slow roll of lava - hidden beneath the skin - this pressure; it was foreign. It would be something else. Something more.
Something he couldn’t consider.

When Sara muttered, “Sorry,” he had to blink to return to her, “I didn’t mean to make this weird. It’s just difficult to remember sometimes that she’s just a tech girl from QC.”

“Felicity’s never been just that.” Or just anything. There weren’t words present in the English language to qualify or quantify all that she is. “I started all this but without her here, I’d have died long ago.” Too disordered to do otherwise, he spoke openly. “I was lucky.”

He’d felt that more recently in abundance.

The past few days, in their hunt for the Huntress, Felicity had kept steadfastly silent. And it would have worried him; he’d briefly thought that she’d agreed with Dig and Sara, but then she’d gone out of her way to make sure he knew that it was for him. Which was why she’d worked on all cylinders - when she was obviously past the point of little sleep and rest - to catch Helena, not kill her. A mark of solidarity he was sure he didn’t deserve but was undeniably grateful for nonetheless.

It had made movement easier.

Now, at the close to a day - a night - he’d prefer to forever put to rest, he knew he wouldn’t find much reprieve either. So he’d taken Sara up on her offer to spar - after an hour’s calisthenics - a likely way to soothe the sores of their earlier fight.

To make him forget about Laurel for a moment.

Felicity had been the one to bring his attention to her; after being held at gun point by Helena’s hired thugs, Laurel had every reason not to be okay and - so caught up in the situation - he’d realised that he didn’t actually know if she was or not. So he’d visited her. And she’d hugged him; an occurrence more regular as of late. Tightly too. And she’d looked at him strangely - in a way she never had before - and he honestly had no idea why it made him feel uncomfortable.

But walking back into the Foundry on his return, he’d caught Felicity near-to cradling her forehead and shying away from the already low light. Another migraine.

So, yes, all thoughts of Laurel had left him.

*Why hadn’t she said anything?* Earlier, when she’d refused food and drank a gallon of water instead of the coffee he’d offered.

Wrapped up in everyone else’s agenda, he’d missed it. After a touch on her shoulder had made her wince - near-to flinching - he’d sent her home, utterly confused by how unenthusiastic she’d seemed at the thought of a full nights rest.

It made his worry rise.

She’d been outstanding with Helena, with Sara. *She’s always outstanding.* But he’d needed someone on his side this time and she had been. Far from judgemental, Felicity had simply worried that the mix of 2 x-girlfriends - one of them who he’d been in love with, the other who he’d held a deep connection to - and his current girlfriend would end catastrophically. It almost did.

His argument with Sara only hours before still echoed; of how, when she’d been scared for her sister, she’d accused him of being unable to choose between saving Helena and rescuing Laurel.

*“What do you want to do Ollie? Soothe your conscience? Or the right thing?”*
As if it was that simple, as if it were a choice to make. As if the right thing was to simply kill Helena and rescue Laurel.

The Lance sisters and their absolutes.

It didn’t matter which way he turned, which action he took; he’d inevitably fail.

“Felicity joined because she believed in this, in what we could accomplish.” It came down to this; an explanation that shouldn’t be required. “Dig joined to keep me alive but she joined out of belief. She has real faith in what we’re doing.” Her heart and soul was in his work, their work. And he allowed himself to marvel at that. “But I only recently realised that she might also be trying to save me.”

Even if it was from himself. Maybe Dig was trying too.

When he’d felt the bones of his life crack and break into little pieces too small for him to put back together, Felicity had given him structure. When his world began to crumble, she’d offered stability; an ethics and routine that he’d grasped onto with both hands.

“That’s a lot of trust there.”

“She’s earned it.” He grunted, not clarifying that how he’d trusted her from minute one.

Still he glanced to Sara on his answer… It wasn’t Sara he saw.

In her place, a light blue blouse over tight black pants - paler than normal skin, expressive eyes and a full mouth - infiltrated his vision, with a voice telling him… telling him everything he’d needed to hear just a few hours ago…

**Earlier that day**

“It’s not your fault.”

Oliver exhaled. “You always say that.” Maybe if she kept saying it, he’d believe it.

“I say it when it’s the truth.” Felicity’s words -soft, as if she hadn’t really talked all day: and she hadn’t - seeped into his skin. “You know I wouldn’t lie like that.”

“I just…” Quiet and low, his voice trembled before he could control it. “I don’t know how to believe that. I don’t know how to get there.” Where everyone else seemed to be.

To step beyond all reminders that he’d failed and hurt the people he’d grown to care for since his return to Starling. People like Helena. Like Laurel. McKenna. It kept piling.

He heard her chair twist closer to where he sat with his elbows on his knees and his face buried between his palms before she said. “You’re not strong enough.”

It hit his stomach: he stilled.

“Since I met you, your first instinct has been to blame yourself - always - even for the things other people do. You haven’t the strength yet to let that go, to let yourself to be forgiven. It just shows you’re human Oliver, which means you can make mistakes and that it’s okay when you do.” He couldn’t see her but he felt her gaze, her smile- he was sure she was smiling. “Survivor’s guilt isn’t transitory.”

“At least in blaming myself, I have an answer.” He mumbled into his palms. “It’s something.” Something to focus on.
“And something is better than nothing?” She hesitantly put out there.

But it hit him like a hammer throw.

“...Yeah.”

“Okay then.” She sounded... chipper. “Then I’ll just have to keep reminding you until you don’t have to resort to blaming yourself for everything.”

Black was all he could see, but if what he felt could be described as a colour… he’d see yellow.

He’d feel the sun.

Clearing his throat, he pulled his hands down his face until they were joined - as if in prayer - with the tips of his fingers under his chin. “It’s a full time job.”

“I told you before; if you’re not leaving, I’m not leaving.”

He hadn’t told her – he never would – that he’d loved hearing that.

When she’d said it, how she’d said it – expecting nothing in return, telling him that she was with him no matter what – made him feel like he wasn’t completely by himself. It had been years since he’d felt that way and the sensation was priceless. For the first time in so long, he’d felt like it was okay to be a little selfish. To need his friends with him. And he understood then that she could take anything he threw at her and she’d still be standing afterwards, she’d still be right there; at his side. Not behind his back or far in front of him.

A weight in his chest - a warm, irrepressible feeling that he could only shy away from - had Oliver glancing to his right, barely moving enough to see her face. He waited. He waited for her to blush, to babble and correct herself-

“‘It’s for life.” She murmured and it felt, again, like permission. “Unless you’d rather I not-”

“You’re hired.” He whispered, lingering on the way her face - her tired eyes wide and expressive, tell me what I can do to help you Felicity - froze and lit up. “You’ve signed the contract.” He paused to shake his head. Once. “I’m never letting you go.”

It was as much a warning as it was a promise.

It took a moment; her mouth just slightly open, eyes blinking as they searched his expression for the lie... her hesitant smile at not finding it.

Pretty.

“But did it start off that way? Ollie?”

Fractured.

Towards, away, from; he was always pulled in different directions. Thoughts of trust, of warmth and light were provocative and he tried to leave them behind. They couldn’t help here. He flicked the thoughts away with the shift of his head, his face lined with the frown at his brow. “Why the questions?”

She shrugged, making little of it. “You’re different with her. It’s not a big deal; it just made me wonder if you’d ever-”
“Well,” he almost bit out, putting a stop to that, “we haven’t.”

Nodding to herself - her lips oddly curved down - she mumbled, “Good.”

Just like that.

Good.

What was that supposed to even mean? How was he supposed to read it, seeing as how she was being even more walled up than usual?

Gaze still on hers, he couldn’t help how he sounded. “Excuse me?”

She wasn’t fazed. “If you can’t tell me about things like this then-”

“I thought I just did.” He countermanded, his brow line steadily becoming more pronounced.

“After I asked you.”

If it was something to worry about, if he and Felicity had once been an item and if feelings had since remained there with them - in a hypothetical scenario - then he’d understand this line of questioning-

Questioning.

He was being tested.

This had nothing to do with Felicity. It was about them. Him and Sara.

“You don’t see what you’re like with her.” Sara said. “Most of the time, you don’t ask for her opinion on anything but-”

“She’s me EA.” The bridge of his nose creasing - confused and insulted - he shook his head, because this wasn’t important. “I consult her-”

“You don’t ask her because you already know what she’s going to say.” She continued gently and he closed his mouth, unable to say another word. “You know each other well enough for that. And you trust her.”

It was a layered statement and she made it sound more significant than it was. “This isn’t something you don’t already know.” He said, after finding his voice. “Don’t you trust her?”

She indicated her head. “One hundred per cent.”

“Then what is it?” It prickled at his spine - that he’d done something - and he was unsettled to see Sara looking elsewhere, “Sara?”

“I was just...” it seemed so wrong for the confident assassin to appear unsure. Ultimately - giving in to thoughts that clearly made her insecure - she shrugged again. “It made me wonder.”

Like getting blood from a stone. “Wonder what?”

It was so slow to come and she was trying to pass it off as something silly, if the quirks in her expression were anything to go by. “Wonder how I could get you to,” but the rare vulnerability he caught when her eyes hit his made him realise just how important this might be to her, “be like that with me too.”
Since he wasn’t. Right.

In a way he’d brought this on himself. “You think I don’t trust you?” That she’d question it though, his trust, was worrying. “Even though I have you watching my back when we’re in the field?”

“You never needed me to watch your back Ollie.” And she was so quiet; so sure of her words. “You did just fine without that before I came back. Pretty sure you still have eyes in the back of your head, even when I’m there.”

“It doesn’t negate the point.”

“You and Felicity,” as if he hadn’t spoken at all, as if she needed to come back to it, “there’s this thing you both do. You don’t even have to say a word half the time, but you still do it.”

Shifting because he knew that thing well, he still breathed, “what are you talking about?”

She just looked at him. Then he got it.

Jealousy.

The words ‘I want that with you’ were practically shouting out to him from her eyes. She wanted that and she didn’t understand why or how they didn’t have it.

And he understood where she was coming from, but he couldn’t bring himself to soften because it felt as if she’d taken something he’d deemed a very commonplace occurrence - a valued facet of his relationship with Felicity that he was grateful for - and made it special. Made it breakable. Vulnerable to outside forces.

Beyond friendship, he and Felicity had a system of communication built on mutual interest and ethics. She understood what he did and why and vice versa. And it stunned him that something so natural could be used to explain Sara’s worry.

“There’s nothing to wonder about here.” Frustrated - his mouth a tight line though his words were soft as silk - he tried again, because this wasn’t the first time Sara had brought up the trust between them. “What I have with you is unique. You know that; you’ve felt it.” And he was getting tired of the same argument.

If it wasn’t Felicity, it was Laurel and the way he sometimes still was with her. For the past 2 days, it had been about Helena. About how he’d so swiftly brought the Bertinelli heir into the Foundry, about how he’d taught her how to use a crossbow and how he’d told her things he couldn’t dream of entrusting to Laurel. It wasn’t that Sara pushed or dogged him about it. But it filtered in sometimes. He knew that - as a couple - he and Sara were in trouble, knew that he was as much to blame as she just as he knew that what they both thought would happen, hadn’t. That what they’d both prayed was possible probably wasn’t. It left a sour taste in his mouth.

Mostly he just wanted to obey the urge to continue training until he couldn’t remember the day. Sleeping with Sara no longer felt like a cure.

But she wasn’t letting this go. If he turned from her now, she’d take it the worst way.

If he was honest, what she’d just brought up… the trust between him and Felicity was more. It could
be - to any girlfriend - a source of concern. But Sara knew Felicity; she knew how much he depended on her expertise. The way he was with both of them had to be different.

At least, that’s what he’d thought. “Do you know why I went to Felicity when I started all this?” He didn’t understand why she didn’t understand.

It took a little longer than normal for Sara to reply. “Not really.”

“You went shifting through CV’s in your spare time?” He could admit; it sounded that ridiculous. “And you just… found Felicity’s; the only hacker in the building?” Bullshit ghosted behind her eyes but it wasn’t an attack. It was just… he was lying. “I didn’t know hacking was on her resume.”

Point taken. “It isn’t.” He conceded, sighing.

Her head tilted. “Are you going to shock me with the truth now?”

His eyes flew to hers and before he knew it he was speaking. “I don’t know, okay?!” The smart thing would be to keep his mouth firmly shut but this wasn’t going as smoothly as he’d hoped. Since when is that new? “It just,” he searched for the right word, “happened that way.” Just one big coincidence. Except it really hadn’t been.

“What way?”

What way? How to describe it…

He felt lips quirk.

“Magic.” He mumbled and he hadn’t meant to.

Brow furrowed, Sara stared at his mouth. “What?”

Exhaling nosily down his nose, he repeated himself. “Magic.” The tension in his face - where he’d felt it line his muscles as he pulled his hand over them - loosened with a memory. To cover it, he walked over tool box. “The first time I met Felicity wasn’t the first time she met me.”

Cross-legged on the mats, Sara watched him as he began moving. “Explain that sentence.”

“I’d seen her before.” He said, wiping down his escrima sticks; he needed something to focus on that wasn’t her. “4 years ago I came back to Starling in secret. Under surveillance; no one could know I was here.” Amanda Waller had threatened and when Waller threatened she tended to get her way. “I had to sneak into QC to access my dad’s computer.” Flipping both sticks over, he strode towards the glass case housing his training equipment. “I had to hide from her.”

“She was there back then?” He could practically hear Sara’s mind at work. “She must have been, what, 20 years old?”

“Yeah,” and like a wave, that same sensation - the rightness - slipped over him. “It was like saying hello - like we were being introduced - only we never spoke.” He felt himself start to smile and killed it before it could take root. “She didn’t see me.”

In the silence of the Foundry, he sounded hushed. It was a secret; as if saying it too loud would break the magic of that moment.

Staring at his reflection in the glass, he slotted the sticks into their holders.
He’d taken it, that one instance of normalcy. He wouldn’t give it back. “I hid from her but I saw her
look at my picture - it was on dad’s desk - and she just...” what words could he possibly use to
describe the perfection of what happened next? Huskily, he nearly laughed. “I was mesmerised.”

In a world where the dark was his slumber, where pain was nourishment, where disloyalty, betrayal,
anger and secrets were a refuge, where guilt was his hiding place and loneliness the clothes on his
back; Felicity Smoak had been blinding. A kaleidoscope of bright colours and natural goodness.

And he’d been so thankful to fall into her orbit, if only for that one second.

“I think I smiled.” He remembered that, how startled and so taken he’d been with the moment. “And
I hadn’t smiled - not really - in so long I’d forgotten what it felt like.”

“I remember thinking,” Sara’s voice, so sudden and whisper-light, made him glance at her, “when
we met up again after the Amazo went down,” when he was battered and bruised from Slade’s brand
of torture – it wasn’t exactly a time he wanted to revisit, “that I missed your smile. I kept waiting to
see it, thinking it could lighten up the forest.” There was something like sadness in her face and he
felt it in his stomach. “You used to always be smirking. But there you just... didn’t. Not once.”
Probably mulling over memories, she chewed on the inside of her cheek. “I think it scared me.”

Oliver straightened, brows slowly rising, his face soft with helplessness. “I scared you?”

“A little.” She admitted. “You were different. More so after the fight on the Amazo. Cold. Like you
were suddenly okay with dying. With killing.”

The truth was never easy to hear - he could remember a time when his mind-set took an edge darker
than any hue Sara’s could reach.

To survive he’d become the thing that stopped him from returning home.

He cleared his throat and moved back to the subject at hand, because the past still hurt. “When I
returned I didn’t remember her. It was only after I set up here,” surrounded by the artificial light from
his computer monitors and wondering what he’d have to do when he ran into a problem that out-
skilled his modest IT abilities, “that I did.”

“So you went to her then?”

“Not immediately.” And he wasn’t ready to admit how much he’d wanted to meet this stranger just
to confirm that she hadn’t in fact been a mirage. “I looked into her.” Turning back, he shrugged. “It
was perfect: a hacker. A really good one. She was on Argus’s list too but she’d been quiet for a
while; they never found anything concrete.” She was too adept.

Sara looked thrown… but then she started grinning. “She was on a list!” As in, ‘our Felicity Smoak
is on a list of potentially dangerous criminals’?

Distracted, he nodded.

“Wow. Felicity Smoak; mastermind.” Keeping still had never been one of Sara’s strengths so he
wasn’t surprised when she moved to stand again. “But what made you want her on your team?”

The fact that not looking at her hurt? Or that it was welcoming, not being judged on status or family?
That she didn’t immediately find faults in his behaviour because he wasn’t the same man who’d left.
Maybe because he’d seen just how much she wanted to live - how open she was to alternatives - that
she was as alone as he, only in a more literal sense. Or because the moment he’d spoken to her he’d
trusted her without knowing why?
She’d caught him by surprise.

In the end it was simpler to just say, quietly - like he was keeping it close to his chest, “Like I said before; she was a reliable resource,” a rebel without a cause, “who could be trusted. And I’d needed that Sara.”

He’d needed something to be easy.

To this day, he still didn’t understand why it had been so essential. Why trust and companionship was needed by a man who had believed he was going to die in a gutter somewhere without anyone knowing what had happened.

Or why they worked, and they did. Very well. He, she and Diggle; they were a well oiled machine whose parts complemented each other.

There was a pause in conversation but this time, he didn’t watch for Sara’s reaction, because he was shifting away, entertaining the idea of taking a ride on his bike now that he’d explained.

But Sara couldn’t see that in the lines of his back. “Do you still need that?”

Feeling his brow tighten, he stopped walking because he could feel something else too; the trap. He turned to look her in the eye once more, Okay, slowly speaking. “What’s going on?”

And by the expression on her face, what he’d explained hadn’t been enough; it wasn’t what she’d been searching for.

Pressed together, her lips quirked into a rueful smile. “Just trying to get to know you better. I guess.”

Bafflement shattered the hard lines on his face. “Sara.” This was getting ridiculous. “You know me better than almost anyone.”

“I knew who you were. But you’ve changed since then. It’s okay,” she added at his second headshake - the reflexive denial written on his face - with a somewhat lascivious stare, “I like the changes.”

I like you.

That stopped him - brick meet wall - because, no. She didn’t. Sara enjoyed the similarities that they now shared - just as they’d shared other likenesses back then - but not the changes. It was why they argued and was laced into the things she said, the things she’d say since her second return to the city.

“You used to smile more Ollie.”

Remember when we got caught skinny dipping? How you had to hide from dad? I miss how that felt. How easy it was to get excited about something so small.

I used to listen to Laurel talk about you, and wonder if that could that be me. Sara and Ollie instead of Laurel and Ollie. But then you’d text me behind her back and I’d remember.

I’m glad you still like tequila shots; it’s something we can do together now.

Did you look for me on Lian Yu, after the Gambit went down?

Where do you think we’d be right now, if we’d never gone away? Would we have jobs we like? Or do you think we’d be off somewhere getting tans and drinking till we pass out? Do you think you and Laurel would still be together? Or do you think you would have given us a chance... like now.
You don’t want to talk about what happened to you after you left Lian Yu, I don’t want to talk about the League. Let’s not make this about how we survived.

Raging crushes either go away or grow into love. Looks like I’m the fool. But it’s okay; I have what I want now.

Every other sentence, wired to their pasts.

When they were alone, together in the dark of a bedroom, or the grunge of an alleyway; they’d talk. And she’d say these words; she’d tell him that maybe they had always been meant to try with each other. If after 5 years, it was still so natural to come together once more, then maybe it was fate. Like, they were supposed to find out all along.

He hadn’t the heart to tell her his initial reasons for trying.

When she’d said that, a few nights after they’d first slept together, he’d felt so wrong. That’s the only word that suited the sensation that had rested deep in his gut. Wrong. Not for the first time, guilt had been his go-to in relation to a Lance sister. Not immoral exactly, more that for a third or fourth time - he forgets how many times it’s been and isn’t that just miserable - he’ll have disappointed or hurt a Lance sister.

But... he’d thought they’d been on the same page. He’d thought a lot of things.

It had been easy to push it aside and agree with her; there was a certain symmetry to her words and he’d wanted them to be true. Really, he had. They were both so alone in the world. Both so unwilling to burden others with their lives, to bring them more danger; it had been more right than wrong to come together. They were a good fit. But sleeping with her had nothing to do with wanting to try for a future. Not for him.

He’d been so sure she felt the same.

Obviously he didn’t know her as well as he thought he did.

On the day of his mother’s inauguration, he’d been angry. And the anger wasn’t a chill; it was a hot wave, slowly roving. Full of heart. Sadness. He’d felt lost. No one in his life had measured up the way they were supposed to and the events of the day had shaken him.

Laurel - at the time - hadn’t been able to spend more than a minute in his company without wanting to escape. He understood. Guilt did that to a person. And he was a stark reminder of the year’s events. But he’d hoped - near coveted the idea - that they could have stepped past it, to try and keep each other in their lives. To be there for each other.

The memory of Tommy had made that - also at the time - impossible.

And then... Mom.

The woman who’d snuggled him close as a child didn’t fit with this stranger called Moira Queen. Mayor Queen. I don’t recognise her anymore. Call it hypocrisy; he knew his life was nothing but a tangled web of lies. But his secrets? They weren’t insidious like hers; they were there to keep others safe, not himself. Not to be used to blackmail and coerce.

The memory of that day still climbed to his throat like bile. And though he loathed admitting it, he did something odd afterwards that he, now, wished he hadn’t – even with knowing his reason was justifiable.
He’d avoided Felicity.

There was no rational excuse for it. Just a feeling he’d had. She’d done nothing but be honest with him, reliable. A very good friend. Necessary. And yet...

It was difficult to describe how he’d felt but the closest it came to was the undeniable sensation that if he saw her, he’d do something they’d both regret. He just didn’t know what that meant. The anger, the sadness, the gratitude, the shock, the want to feel something else - anything other than sick realisation - and the need...

The mix had felt dangerous in the oddest way and he didn’t want to say or do anything to jeopardise their relationship.

The only way he could think to avoid that was to avoid her, knowing that she might take it to mean the worst.

*Hey. You aren't going to lose me.*

To think he could make her believe otherwise…

So he’d let it go completely with the feeling of having Sara in his arms; the escape of pleasure and the freedom of choice allowing him to find relief elsewhere and not acknowledging that it also felt like he was lifting a finger to the world.

But he still distinctly remembered wanting to see Felicity after he’d spoken to his mother. Wanting to argue. And push. *Press.* Which wasn’t like him, like *them.*

That she knew everything about him was a problem. That he could explode in her face and still have her standing there, facing him, ready to fire back on all cylinders because it would be the right thing to do. That he’d wanted to crowd her in, to force his way past her defences and demand she tell him *why* she was so steadfastly and unquestionably loyal to him of all people when she could have just kept quiet. When she could have let his already high opinion of her remain that way instead of making it soar far beyond his reach… too far to touch. And then… *something* would have happened.

Still she tried, Felicity. Afterwards. She revealed and forgave. Every day. Every week. It made him dream of what he could be, what he could *do.* Made him thankful.

She’d thought he’d hate her. And that worry had merit because, in a way, he’d considered something similar. Briefly. But not in the way she’d feared. Not at all.

The truth of the way he’d considered... it was as unsafe for her as it was shocking to him.

Sleeping with Sara had helped dull that ache. Feeling her warmth, her understanding; it had been a needed reprieve and he’d sensed she’d felt the same. He’d always equated sex with affection and she’d given it freely. He’d missed her that way most of all.

But once upon a time, that kind of comfort had come from Laurel. So he’d had to force himself to adjust to a different kind of consolation. In the end, he’d grown to recognize the type of love he felt for Sara and he too, had wondered at what might have been...

*Another what if.*

It was a dream. Worse, a lie. A deception of the heart. Especially since his few dreams for the future
never featured Sara Lance.

And now, seeing her there, he didn’t know what to say.

She didn’t have this problem. “The changes suit you.” Her tone was playful, her voice gravelly but the sincere quality to it made him want to turn away. And he felt her gaze, the natural attraction he’d always sensed she’d had for him, travel over him. “If you’d been this focused years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself.”

Oliver shut his eyes. It hurt and this time he knew why.

Again, since she couldn’t fully see his face, she had no clue. “Come on,” a smile lit her tone, “tell me. What is it Oliver Queen needs now?” At his silence, she laughed as if she thought he was self-conscious. “I won’t judge. Is it still Felicity Smoak?”

She meant it, 100%, to sound like a kind tease and it was. It should have been.

Yet he had to literally grit his teeth when ripple of unrestrained hostility shocked him out of his inaction. In every reflective surface his face was testament to the strength of it and he whipped around before he could rein it in, his head twisting to see her. “What?”

He didn’t recognise his own voice.

But she’d pushed.

He’d said he wasn’t in the mood for games but, wanting it, she’d pushed.

Inevitably, silence followed.

It reigned for half a minute: 30 seconds that felt like 30 minutes, because it meant he had to watch her face as he glared at her. Had to watch that small smile slowly fall, replaced by a gravity that surprised him. And a hurt that appalled him.

Worse, was that he knew exactly why her question had made him react like that. It had touched a nerve; one much more sensitive than he’d realised. And he wasn’t ready to admit just how much her teasing, of another type of ‘what if’ had stung. Of how her pressing, had made him feel like she didn’t see him. Hear him. How some subjects was a place she could not touch.

It was muted when she finally spoke. “I’m guessing this is something else you wanted left alone that I didn’t know about?”

Damn it. He took a moment, clamping down on his emotions. “I don’t understand why this is important.” It didn’t really work, but he tried. “Why do you want to know?”

Another moment bled into another minute where she didn’t look away. “Because I’m your girlfriend.”

And… that should have been obvious to him.

“I don’t know how we got here.” Sara Lance didn’t do coy; confused as she was, he also heard the disappointment. “Why are you angry with me?”

Because he’d just realised what it is that he’d been holding off and it took deeper than normal breaths to cool down the agitation in his chest. “I’m not.”

She was unmoveable. “Could have fooled me.”
He knew that’s how he sounded, but he honestly wasn’t angry at her.

He was angry at himself. “I’m sorry.” Exhaling, done with this, his tone turned penitent. “Really, I just...” Facing her fully, he gave her what she wanted. “I don’t know what I really need right now or what I want. Just what I know. And what I know is that when we’re down here,” he took another breath because he couldn’t believe he was about to say this, “I don’t need anybody else.”

Sara’s expression slanted in slight wonderment. “You don’t need anybody else... but us?”

But me?

He winced, feeling that in his stomach again.

“Having you here,” so low, his voice sounded almost coarse and it carried everywhere it wasn’t supposed to, “is personal, Sara. I don’t technically need you on this team. You’re here because I want you here. I want Roy here. But I did this on my own not too long ago.” He let that sink in, watching apprehensively as her expression continued to be soft but unreadable. “I got by. But I also made mistakes and sometimes I took too long.”

Confusion made her brow crease. “I don’t-”

“Felicity gave me 360 degree vision.”

And that changed... everything.

It had never been about anyone else.

She knew what it meant; having Felicity on the team - strategically - meant that his blind spots were covered. In that sense, Sara was correct; he didn’t need her to watch his back. He had backup in the field without actually having to worry about said backup being in the line of fire. It was perfect.

It gave his enemies layers to fear; this vigilante who could find them no matter how deeply they entrenched themselves, not knowing who they were really fleeing from was a bright and bubbly IT technician in 2 inch heels.

Which gave a certain satisfaction.

Emotionally it meant knowing there was someone in his ear who could hear everything he does or says. It meant allowing her to listen into all the dark corners of Starling, knowing she could take it. A person who knew when he was hurt because of the pain in his voice, who heard every weakness he possessed and understood its roots even if she didn’t agree with them. Who endured the sounds of his deliberate attempts to hurt others, to maim, to kill, and did so silently because she understood why. It meant having an invaluable ally who he could trust implicitly. It meant having someone in his life that knew his darkness and saw past the surface... and liked what came through.

And Sara heard that in his voice, all of it.

So still; her expression was a blank canvas. “You don’t need me here; you want me here.”

Oliver waited, hating that she’d brought this all up. Hating that he’d had to say it before he was ready. It had been a bad day and it was about to get worse.

“But when she’s here,” she finished, “It really doesn’t matter if I am or not, does it?”

Fuck.
It was like a smack to his face.

Put that way, it sounded so much more callous than he’d intended. “That isn’t what I meant.” It really wasn’t. He was just trying. “I like that you’re down here, with me. Felicity… it isn’t romantic Sara.” He was pulling at strings, he knew that.

Regardless of their problems, he did love Sara. It was just that, sometimes love wasn’t enough.

“Well what did you mean?” Shifting her stance Sara forced a casual form, though the pain - something she normally did so well - could been seen like an echo on her skin. A tautness.

This wasn’t the worst way this could go, but it wasn’t a way he’d have chosen.

He took a breath… and began.

“You came back… and I wanted you here.” The gentle longing - always graceful - that began suffusing her face was the kind that ached. “I missed you.” He swore to her, “and I brought you on this team because I care about you.” His words, all but whispered, were fervent with sincerity. “I wanted you to be part of my life in a way Laurel could never be.” It was as honest as he could make it without admitting that he’d once wanted as much - if not more - with her sister. Not in the Foundry where Sara was; but in a house. A place to call home. With fences. And grass, a garden. Symbolic of a life outside of the darkness within him. An idealistic image that he’d finally understood months ago held no meaning because it would involve denying half of who he was. The point however, was that he’d considered a possible future with Laurel. But never with Sara. “It’s just that…” he licked his lips, searching for those perfect words to explain why he was failing in this with her.

He’d thought… he didn’t know what he’d thought. But, if anyone could fit into this life it would have - should have - been Sara Lance. Fellow vigilante. Touched by sins and evils, as he had been, that others couldn’t fully comprehend. Or at least, he’d told himself that. Originally. But now?

The past was difficult to step forwards from. It hadn’t initially touched him that Sara remembered how he was like with Laurel and that she might wonder at the differences. Remembering that - how he and Laurel had been; the affection, the need for her to see him a certain way, even if that way was the wrong way - he understood where she was coming from.

Being with Sara… he didn’t mind whether or not she saw his blind spots, his rougher edges. There was comfort in that, an ease he appreciated because they were similar. But where she’d once considered that to be a sign of love from him - evidence that they were the right fit - maybe it was the exact opposite.

He was too comfortable letting her see the sides of himself he’d never show her sister, because Laurel’s reaction mattered in a way that Sara’s just… didn’t. Not in the way a girlfriend’s should.

And maybe she realised that.

Whenever he and Sara had a problem, it was Laurel she turned to and not Oliver. As if Laurel had the requisite information at hand that would help Sara deal with being in a relationship with him, because she’d been there. The flaw in that was too sore a wound to touch. And it made what she wanted here all the more ironic.

Yet he hadn’t given her much reason not to wonder about it.

The part of himself that believed in quick wins and easy paths wanted them to make it, to last. The part of him that was done with searching for the kind of happiness he could never have, or deserve.
It wasn’t ideal; he didn’t love Sara the way he’d loved Laurel - the way he’d wished he could love her - and it wasn’t a love designed to inspire. Or to heal. It was based on acceptance, familiarity and loneliness. A self-fulfilling prophecy between them. Facing that now, hurt so much more than knowing it would have done two months ago.

And for that - for taking so long to see it - he couldn’t be anything but sorry. “Sara—”

“Why?” She cut in seeing it, everything, and he faltered before he could take a step towards her. “Why start with me what you had no intention of finishing?”

Blindsided, he literally leaned backwards.

He remembered - vividly - how she’d come to him that night, seeking one thing and being honest about it. A connection. She’d come home and had wanted to remember what home felt like in all its aspects, so she’d kissed him. Old habits die hard.

He’d kissed her back. It had been mutual.

The look on her face suggested he thought his surprise was a cover for contrition. She exhaled, shaking her head. “I’m not judging you.” But she was; in her hurt, she was. “But you must have known when I came down here,” her hand gestured around them, “that we were-”

“That we were going to have sex?” It was blunt, but real because he trying to get her to this, their cycle. “Forget about our problems by being together because we both needed someone who understood?” Knowing that what they wanted - a mother who didn’t use secrets like bullets and armour and a sister who didn’t hate her for who she was - they couldn’t have and it had made them strike out against the world. “Try for something real, even as we screwed other people over?” Stepping on their realities. Like Laurel, who they’d lied to and - when the truth came out - behaved openly unashamed in front of. Even though Laurel had made it clear where he and she stood months ago. “No Sara.” Shaking his head, he felt weighed down. “I had no idea that anything we’d once been,” he licked his lips, “was gone long before we started over.”

This – what they had now – was all they’d ever be.

The flare of honest pain in her eyes was heightened by the way her mouth open slightly. As if the breath had left her body.

His eyes closed. “We were never meant to have anything beyond this.” Part of him was dying. Or letting go. Sometimes they were the same thing.

“But you knew.”

As if he’d led her on. As if he hadn’t let her in on her own choices.

His eyes opened, utterly steadfast. “So did you.”

Did she think that she could just ignore that she was in love with Nyssa and find a future with him? That they’d live double lives together in harmony, dismissing all their arguments the past few weeks, all the times they’d disappointed each other and still think it could happen?

It made him nauseous how easy it was for him to now see how blind they both were. How much they’d damaged and how long it had taken them to realise this.

After glancing away, Sara straightened; her voice stable even as her eyes started to glisten. “You’re right.” Nodding to herself, she repeated. “I did. I do.”
Feeling bone weary all of a sudden - they were breaking up and though it was the right thing to do, he was still losing that comfort, that special someone waiting for you - Oliver rubbed a hand over his brow. “I’m still here.” He murmured. “I’ll always be here.”

“Just not the way I wanted,” she said, “and I did, you know.” She looked him in the eye. “I wanted. With you.” Trying to smile, Sara looked more like she’d scream if she continued speaking but somehow managed not to. “I’ve always wanted us.”

Us.

Him and Sara.

He’d never thought of it like that. Not with her. Not with… not with anyone. He hadn’t allowed himself to believe he could be part of a true ‘us’.

Everything was momentary; the relationships he had with women… they were transitory. McKenna, Helena, even Sara.

Laurel.

And he’d thought she knew that. He thought that when they’d begun again, she’d gone into it knowing as he did, that it might not be enough to simply have a history.

Which made him the bad guy. And he was.

But, “I know,” was all he could say.

And he did know; he’d known since she was 16 and giving him looks that told him she was all his, even then. He’d known 2 years later when they’d first fooled around and again when she was 19, when they’d first slept together. He’d always known. And a part of him had revelled – at the time – that he was loved by two sisters, even as the rest of him knew that he was scum. It had been a paradise just as it had been torturous. Lust and shame walking hand in hand.

It wasn’t an excuse, but at that age, he’d feared the future.

Now, he deliberately closed himself off from it, though he’d do anything to run towards it knowing that he could have one with even a modicum of happiness. When he risked it - when he gazed into his future and wondered - it wasn’t Sara he saw standing there. And he was pretty sure she didn’t see him at the head of hers anymore either.

But she had once. When she was younger. When she’d been besotted. When she hadn’t known better than to go for someone like him. When he should have helped steer her the right way instead of crashing her head-long into jagged rocks.

It didn’t matter that they’d changed since then, they’d always be the same people: ‘Ollie Queen’ and ‘Laurel’s promiscuous little sister’.

The sight of her now, standing there - that such a strong woman could look so sad - had a hollow forming in his stomach, a splinter in his chest.

“I wanted you to need me.” She said quietly, her eyes somewhere he couldn’t see. “Even though you never really did.”

He couldn’t decide what hurt more; that she knew it or that he agreed with her.
In every sense he didn’t need Sara Lance.

What she hadn’t considered is that maybe he’d wanted to need her too. Wanted what everybody seemed to take for granted; to be part of something lasting, where he was bound to someone the way he’d always imagined he could be.

It wasn’t meant for them.

But so were a lot of things.

Like… he could live without his parents, even though it had been horrifying to survive the loss of his father. And he could stay alive without back-up from Dig, his brother. He could breathe without Sara, his lover because she wasn’t the one who made his race so fast, his lungs try to keep up. He could live to fight another day without mending bridges with Laurel. He could live free without Thea ever knowing he’d survived the island because he knew she could live on despite him and he’d be proud of whatever she decided to become. He could save the city as a nameless thug, a stranger - in a world where Oliver Queen hadn’t returned to his former life - rising up to take the fight to the city’s black underworld.

Though the closure of having them in his life, of them wanting to mend rifts and accept differences and failures was healing, he could still live without all of it. A semi-existence. But doable.

What was absolutely certain to him, what he couldn’t survive - it had already been proven - was the absence of Felicity Smoak in his life.

Those weeks when she’d been in Central City he’d been a mess of a vigilante, a shoddier than usual excuse of a CEO and a pathetic friend, brother and son. So attuned to her absence, he’d taken to hunting down the man in the mask instead of facing his problems, hoping that he could do some good in at least one area but he failed even in that. Night after night. Rather than ask her to come back.

Rather than admit he’d needed her.

So aware of it, the constant feeling that all of him wasn’t where it was supposed to be had assaulted him. And when she’d returned, it had only brought into focus how lost he’d been without her. Seeing her at QC after a 3 week non-appearance had made any sensation of tension, of irritated anxiety, miraculously melt away.

It was replaced with something more obscure, but no less negative.

Instead of feeling glad of it, seeing her had only served to remind him of the influence she had in his life, of how it had felt like he was missing a limb when she wasn’t there and how much he depended on her when she was. Of how she hadn’t been there when he’d needed her. For that, he’d lashed out; replacing relief with antagonistic, entitled frustration.

Never, not once, had he felt that strongly about needing a woman before.

She was his partner. She was the one he turned to when all else failed, the one he searched for on entering a room. The idea of her not being there for an indefinite amount of time turned the world senseless. A nonsensical space where the passage of time was unbearable.

He didn’t want to ever have to go back to that.

Like the tick of a clock, he felt every second of Sara’s silent realisation. “I’m not enough, am I?”
Barely audible, she sounded so small, though she was in fact - to him - larger than life.

And she couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Sara,” he croaked and it felt like breaking, “no, it isn’t-”

*It isn’t you.*

“I know I’m not.” The slow strengthening of her gaze, the conviction, kept him silent. Still he shook his head and she countered it. “I couldn’t harness that light that’s still inside you. I didn’t even try Ollie; I thought it would be better to be exactly who we are. What I thought we were.” It was a regretful admittance but one without bitterness. “Those who live in darkness and revel in it.” Her lips upturned, “beholden only to ourselves. Like before.”

Like how they used to be. Loose, free and wild. It had sounded so amazing to him back then.

Now it sounded like the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard of. “Don’t put me on a pedestal.” He gritted out.

Briefly closing her eyes, her face grew hard but it wasn’t, he noticed, in anger. “Trust me, I’m not.” Her eyes re-opened, pinning him with a look. “Being with you hasn’t exactly worked out for me either.” As if suddenly cold, her arms wrapped about her though her spine was still straight. “And I don’t think it was about you, Ollie. I think it was about Laurel.”

He shifted, his eyes flickering between hers because he’d never heard this before.

“Some of the things I used to do,” she explained, “the way I was with boys and with you,” and her expression filled with such downhearted acceptance he almost went to her, “it was about Laurel. We’ve been talking - more than we ever used to - and it made me see that, ever since I can remember, we’ve been in competition with each other. Dad had my back; I was his baby.” His princess. “The one he over-protected and thought the world of even when I did everything wrong. I could do anything and he’d forgive me for it. But Laurel was the smart one,” her tone turned dry, “the family success, the one who exceeded in everything, even when she wasn’t trying to.” Smiling slightly, Sara indicated her head at him. “The one who got the guy.”

And he murmured, “You were jealous.”

“I was ridiculously attracted to you.” She murmured with a rueful smile. “You’d been friends with Laurel and Tommy for years and she’d come home and tell me stories about you both. It was easy to see that she liked you. So when she introduced me to you, I came prepared to like you too. And I did.”

The feeling was mutual.

But there was something in him, something like pride but not quite as superior, that made what she’d just said especially hard to hear.

Partly because he’d hoped what they’d had was deeper in meaning than simply upping a sibling.

And it was but it hadn’t been the foundation.

Mostly because, though he knew he didn’t deserve forgiveness for the way he’d behaved back then, he’d lived under the impression that the sisters had both wanted him because they simply liked that he was who he was. It was unbelievably conceited of him. But it was the delusion he’d breathed; that he was the catch, that it wasn’t just his family’s money, his skills in bed or his abdominals that made it so back then.
Later that had developed into a genuine want of their company. Then honest care and love, even before the island.

_I’d had no idea what romantic love really meant._

So he didn’t blame Sara, not one bit, for her own foolishness. She’d been hurt by her sister first. Then he’d hurt her by treating her like all she was worth was a good time in China, when she was anything but. _Even if it was exactly how she treated him back._

Staring at the floor, Sara continued. “I could see the parts of you that you hid from her and I played on that. You let me.”

He nodded, agreeing again, because he had.

“I wanted to beat her at something. I don’t feel that way now but back then,” and she didn’t; there was no vehemence in her voice, “but I’d wanted to win just once. I’d always felt that she’d thought she was better than me. The year before the Gambit went down; I was in college and any email or text I’d get from her was always a reprimand. Always a lecture on how I could improve. Or a way to tell me I shouldn’t fall back on old habits. She meant well: she wanted me to graduate and have a good life but it was a constant reminder of things I did wrong. You know I tried to warn her off you?”

He blinked at that, surprised. “Why didn’t it…” she’d warned her? And Laurel hadn’t… _done anything, said anything_ to him?

“Why didn’t it work?” She guessed and he tapped his fingers against his thigh, wanting to understand. “She didn’t believe me; she never did. And she snapped at me. Made sure I knew my place, which wasn’t beside you. That’s when I agreed to go with you.”

She’d lashed out. “To get back at her.”

Acceptance lining her features, she just nodded. “In part.”

“And now?”

“Coming back to the city…” she let out a long breath. “when I saw a chance to make it work again with you, to re-do what we once had and make it better,” she gave him another helpless shrug, “to show myself and maybe even Laurel that I could do what she couldn’t, it felt too much like fate for me to resist. I mean,” she shook her head, “what if it should have been us? I ignored the signs and warnings; I ignored what my gut told me. I had to try.”

All he said, whispered, was, “I know.” And he did.

Sara didn’t have nightmares like he did, she wasn’t plagued with the same stroke of guilt that he was. But she did dream. And when she did, it wasn’t his name she murmured so softly in the dark.

But he’d done the same after all; he’d ignored what had whispered in his mind deep into the night.

“It was a lie.”

“I know.” He repeated softly.

Swallowing, she tried for humour, “You know everything now?”

“I know you.”
The look she gave him felt like tears. “I'm sorry Ollie.”

And that was where he drew the line, “You have nothing to apologise for,” because he was just as culpable as she. “Not ever Sara.”

“But I was using you.” Finally, a tear trailed down her face but it didn’t detract from the truth of her words, “my reasons were selfish.”

We were all selfish. Suddenly he felt old. The past a sweep of history that dragged you under instead of lifting you up. He understood that kind of selfish; he’d lived its creed once upon a time.

“I was,” he cleared his throat; just say it, “I was using you too.”

“Yeah,” she whispered; like she’d already known.

He felt it wash over him. Felt it behind his eyes and he blinked away the moisture. “I’m sorry.”

Like always, she laughed; a bird-like chirp that made his chest hurt because once upon a time they could have been great. Now they were just short-lived. “How about we’re both sorry?”

On the tail end of a swallow, he said. “Okay,” because her friendship was absolutely something he never wanted to lose.

“So,” She let out a sigh, “were over.” Obvious though it was, it needed to be said.

“Yes.”

The ending to almost a decade of ‘what if’s’ between them.

He saw it now, just as she did; the same dance camouflaged as new, thinking that because they were different people now, that it would change things.

Sara’s gaze slipped away. He saw her neck flex as she swallowed, tensing as she dealt with whatever emotion she was feeling. “You know,” she started, “It’s about Laurel for you too.” Her eyes caught his again and it was impossible to miss the hidden meaning behind them. “I’m not her. I’ll never be.”

Why would he ever wish for that? “I never wanted you to be.”

The look she sent him told him she thought he was utterly blind. “Yes you did. That’s why you didn’t tell her about us.”

Wrong.

God, she couldn’t be more wrong…

Leaving with her on the Gambit had been his way of nuking his relationship with Laurel. The commitment she’d offered… he hadn't been ready. Too much of a coward to say it to her face, he’d slept around, seeking an escape because maybe it would get back to her through the rumour mill that followed him like a virus and he wouldn’t have to confess at all. He’d return home to find that she’d moved on, rightfully.

And yet, he also remembered thinking how awful it would be if she did.

It hadn’t been until he’d been stranded on Lian Yu that he’d discovered he loved her. That he’d wasted time being a jackass.
When he’d returned, it had taken the space of 48 hours to know what he’d realised one year after being shipwrecked. That he could never be with Laurel and do what his father wanted him to do. The man who could carry out that request wasn’t the man Laurel loved. And when he thought he could possibly give it up, he’d gone to her. Had made love to her. Had tried to be that man once more. But looking back on it now, could he have lived a life without that purpose? A life he wanted Laurel to steer clear from?

The answer wasn’t yes.

Then, after Sara returned to Starling, he hadn’t told Laurel simply because he’d wanted them separate from each other. There was already friction present, why throw a match on dry timbre?

Both sisters had made him covet facets of each but neither woman was like the other. They were two halves of the same coin.

Maybe there was a grain of truth in her words. Maybe in Sara he’d been searching for Laurel, just as in Laurel - last year - he’d been searching for what he’d found in Sara the past 2 months.

He felt his stomach falter and concave. Toxic.

He didn’t want to change the woman he was with. He didn’t want her to change him, not any more, even though he knew he wasn’t much of a catch.

He wanted ‘real’. He wanted it so badly it hurt.

.. 

Present Day

His whole life was a story in ‘what if’s’. In failings and roads not taken. And he wondered why he couldn’t just let it all go.

It took a while before he broke the silence. “It doesn’t matter now.” Felicity had been gone for hours already; it was too late to worry over what couldn’t be changed. “She’s safe with John.”

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising.” He muttered, weary and feeling every bit of it.

She wasn’t having it. “When it comes to my family, I get tunnel vision.” This wasn’t news. “The past 6 years… they’ve made me more scared these few months than I think I’ve ever been. I’m always worried that because of me, they’ll get hurt. That someone or something will take them away from me because I didn’t do the right thing at the right time. So, I’m always going to choose them Ollie.”

“You don’t have to explain that.” He knew it off by heart; he’d felt the same about his family, about Laurel in those eight months after his return. But he’d learned since then that family isn’t blood alone and that sometimes, sacrifices are required.

“Maybe. But I feel like I owe you that.” Sighing, Sara let herself relax, looking at her sister. “Getting to know her again, it made me see things I wouldn’t have when I was younger. And she’s been so sad recently. It isn’t like her.” It was true: as much as Laurel had been through, she was the type of person to charge her way through life regardless. To him, she had. Maybe Sara had seen something
he hadn’t. “You know she was a little envious?” Her light tone contradicted the words and it made him frown. “Part of her wants to be free, the way she thinks that I’m free.” She explained and again, he got the irony. Sara only appeared free on the outside. Inside, she was shackled by regrets, by love and by choice. “I thought she hated me. Especially after that dinner.”

There was a memory he could have forever lived without revisiting.

_The dinner._

The feelings it still wrought were, at best, unpleasant. He’d let go of something then, after his talk with Laurel in the hallway leading to her apartment. But the turmoil inside him would revisit occasionally.

He pulled a face in distaste, hiding it quickly. Describing the meal as awkward didn’t cut it. Instead of it allowing him to remember how good it had once been, he’d instead felt supremely uncomfortable in his own skin. Sara hadn’t wanted to go but Felicity had been right; they could do nothing while she worked on the servers except sit and wait. So, turning to him, Sara had pleaded with Oliver to go with her. As her date. _And_ her backup.

It had been on the tip of his tongue to outrightly refuse, knowing how it would be but, again, Felicity had intervened.

“How many chances do we get to have a life Oliver? Just… take a while. Go to the dinner. Don’t go to the dinner. Either way, you should seize the moment. Be with Sara. Time is precious and we don’t how many chances we’ll get.”

Seize the moment.

He remembered thinking, at the time, that she wasn’t doing much seizing herself. In fact, for awhile now, Oliver had barely seen Felicity outside of the Foundry or QC.

But that thought had been quickly replaced by Laurel.

The way she’d inevitably reacted hadn’t surprised him and he’d given it to her because, in a way, she’d been right.

Until she’d been wrong.

Then she’d made it all about her; his reasons, Sara’s actions, her father’s attempts at bringing life back into a relationship with his ex-wife, however misguided it was and… it had stunned him. Maybe he’d been blinded by love, he wasn’t sure, but not once had he ever considered Laurel to be the type of person to completely overlook the people around her.

Her addiction made it difficult for her to emphasise, he knew that. It clouded judgement. But wilfully going out to hurt others, not realising that being with Sara had been a cry for help for him- that he’d needed someone who could relate to him, who he could care for - because his world had been, once more, twisted upside down - unseeing of how much her father was trying to hope once more, or how much her sister had missed _home_, was so unlike the Laurel Lance he’d known.

Behaving as if they’d all taken from her and given nothing back.

They’d made up since then and in many ways had formed a friendship he’d never thought they’d have.

She hadn’t apologised, but then neither had he. Laurel had 7 years of reasons to never apologise to
him and he’d come to terms with that long ago.

“I know she doesn’t now,” Sara continued, “but even if she did hate me - even if she blamed me - I’d still be like this. I’d still put her first. After everything that’s happened, after you and me on the Gambit, after Tommy; I think it’s about time she gets put first, don’t you?” There was a flutter in his chest at her tone and not a pleasant one. “While she’s unconscious, we make her the priority. At least until we know more.”

It wasn’t a choice he’d make anymore; that Laurel should come first, before anyone.

Before Felicity.

“Always Laurel Lance. Everyone else be damned.”

Dig’s words, at the time, had been solid. If Laurel had been in any kind of danger, she would absolutely become his top priority. If Laurel needed him, he’d put her first and go to her, regardless of what he was doing at the time.

He wondered exactly when that had changed.

*He had you and he was going to hurt you. There was no other choice to make.*

Maybe…

*Then* he decided it wasn’t important; the energy involved in explaining it wasn’t something he was willing to expend just yet. “It won’t be long.” Gesturing to Laurel, he moved away on restless legs. “You were already awake by this time.”

Instinctively lifting his hand, he looked at his phone - he’d forgotten he was holding it - and saw nothing new save how much time had passed. Laurel was taking longer to wake than Sara. He hoped Felicity was sleeping just as soundly.

But part of him wondered; if he stared hard enough at his cell, would she wake up and call him? Talk to him and bring him out from under the painful silence in the Foundry, the stillness and tension of his body, the worry in his head...

It was so stupid.

He wanted *that* feeling to return. The peace. Though he’d learned that the things he wanted, he could rarely have - and so kept them at a distance - for some reason it was much harder to remember right now than it had ever been just why he had to do that.

Where he walked, Sara’s eyes followed. “You sound pretty calm.”

He wanted to laugh at that but it wouldn’t have sounded at all humorous. “Sara,” he kept his gaze fixed on the screen, “You know me well enough,” he said in an undertone, “to know that I am anything but calm right now.”

He wasn’t anywhere close. He wanted to tear into something but that wouldn’t help. It never helped, even if he liked doing it.

Thumb swiping the screen, he heard Sara inhale.

“…Could have fooled me.”

It struck where it intended.
Nothing changed exactly; not his expression, not his stance, the slight scowl on his face, nothing. He just… stood there. Rooted.

*What was that supposed to mean?* Whatever it was, she’d meant it exactly the way he’d heard it.

Slowly - not lowering his arm - he turned his head to see her across the med-table. “Excuse me?”

Dead in the eye, Sara proceeded to floor him. “Laurel’s the love of your life.” Shaking her head, her eyes flickered briefly away, “Why-”

“She’s not.”

It came out so gutturally, it stopped her still. “What?”

Side-on, he wasn’t sure how to take this. Part of him was confused but... with the direction this conversation had abruptly taken, he felt the rise of something ugly in his chest - like it had on Tuesday - so much clearer than the tangled weave Sara was bringing back around. Moving right now wasn’t optional.

But he had to say it. “Laurel is *not* the love of my life.” Like the strike of a sword, the words were final and heavy as he watched Sara’s mouth part.

“But…” she stopped at the slow shake of his head.

“I don’t know how much I have to give.” After those five years he hadn’t been certain if anything human was left residing in his bones. “Or what I’m capable of offering. I don’t know if I can love another person more deeply.” With aching clarity his gaze didn’t leave Sara’s, didn’t blink. “For so long, on the island and afterwards I thought, maybe, it was possible. But it wasn’t *real*.” Licking his lips, he silently asked for forgiveness from an invisible entity; call it God, the Universe or What You Will, even as relief started to make him feel genuinely lighter. Whether he deserved it or not, he asked to be allowed this, to be given the right to *crave*. “I want real, Sara.” He focused every available piece of energy inside of him on making her hear him. “Laurel *needs* real.”

And he *wasn’t* real. Not with her: he wasn’t the man who could give her that.

But Tommy had been. He’d been right there, waiting for her to see him. He would have given her *everything*; his love, his undivided attention and his time. He’d have given her a home, a place to rest and warm arms for their children to land in. They’d have been *happy*.

This he knew because Tommy had died to save her. Only a man in love would risk himself without any thought to his own future; as if he’d been born only to love Laurel lance. A man who couldn’t live without the woman of his dreams.

Then Oliver remembered that after Tommy died... Laurel had wanted to *try*. With him. All the things she should have been able to do - should have already done - with Tommy, she’d wanted with *him*.

And that had felt so wrong. As if the world had been twist turned inside out and dropped at a 180 degree angle. The idea was repugnant to him.

So he’d left. Unable to bear the weight of their loss and the death of a relationship he should have let stay cold.

As was the *real* he’d tried to find with Sara; a history best left alone.

Still, Sara managed to look at him at this moment with such disbelief that it made him feel like he’d
just wasted a rare instant of honesty on her - rare because honesty wasn’t second nature to him - only to have her near-scoff at it because her vision was fixed on the past.

*Always* history. It shouldn’t dictate the present, the future. And it shouldn’t be used to judge.

It was *grating*.

But he remembered that thanks to that same history, Sara was owed an explanation. And he wanted her to understand and to not bring the subject up again or to use it as a way eliciting a reaction out of him. It didn’t matter if it was for herself or for her sister. It would be off limits from now on.

Gritting his teeth, he tried. “She was the first woman I loved.” The dress Laurel was wearing now and the damp state of her hair had a quiet wave of melancholy drift through him at the memories of the better times between them. Times when she looked like that because he’d soaked her through in a fountain, when they’d been running around like fools in the Queen Mansion grounds during an annual gala. “But we’re different people now.” In every sense of the term. So different, he should have never hoped for Laurel to love the man he’d become, just as he should have realised that he, because of who he’d become, could never really love her back. “The man she loved, he doesn’t exist. Laurel…”

It was too much to be saying aloud after so long when he’d never...

The love of his life? Wasn’t the love of your life supposed to-

“I don’t think it’s about saving or changing a person. I think it’s about finding the person who’s the right fit.”

-be the right fit?

Since he’d returned home, he and Laurel had been like a round key and a square lock. It wasn’t that there wasn’t love, but sometimes love wasn’t enough. And there were all kinds of love.

He hadn’t realised it, but outside of Laurel he’d been looking for the right fit. Even when he’d told himself, when he’d told Dig, that he hadn’t been... he had. Maybe it was instinctual; that urge to try and find someone who could understand you. To see past the ugly. The monster.

He’d been soul searching.

Sara, like Helena, was the obvious choice; they each held darkness in their hearts and experiences that gave them a solid grasp of who and what he was or could be. But obviously, this wasn’t *all* he was because neither worked.

In his own way - those first 8 months - he realised he’d already been acknowledging that his future wasn’t Laurel. It had just taken a while for the rest of him to catch up. And realising that was like being hit by a freight train. Everything inside him just… blanked.

Sara, however, didn’t know this. “How do you know for sure? You said you’d tried with her, last year and that it didn’t work. But you never included her in this. I get why,” she added and it took everything inside him to concentrate on what she was telling him. “I did the same and I don’t think it’s done anything but make her feel like an outsider.”

It hadn’t been intentional: he hadn’t tried to push Laurel out of his life. But at the same time he hadn’t tried to integrate her into it. In his mind, he and Laurel were no longer simpatico. The person he’d become wasn’t a man she could either love or recognise. Again, when he’d gone to her before the Undertaking, it had been an attempt to make good on all the *bad*. To try to be the same person she’d
fallen in love with but without the old failings.

Outsider or no, Laurel had a life outside of him; one she’d created before he’d returned. A life she’d made sure to let him know he had no part in. How could she feel isolated from him when she’d expressed quite clearly that his involvement was unwanted?

Eyes tapering - his jaw tightening - he sent Sara a look, *don’t be naïve*. “Since when does Laurel need to be included in this?”

*Don’t turn this into something it’s not.*

“Since you’ve known each other all your lives Ollie.” He didn’t need the reminder.“Instead of pushing her away, maybe you could bring her in. Introduce her to the team.” Wordless, he stared at her - hearing her offer but unable to make sense of it -and wondered why she seemed oddly buoyant, “it’s a good idea.” On that he didn’t agree. “Why not tell Laurel *everything* and see what happens.” Sara leant forwards on her hands and murmured, “It might end very well for you both.”

There was a slow frown building across his brow because something about that - about her words and her voice - seemed so strange to him. “Why do you want this to happen?”

“I don’t.” She didn’t even hesitate and it made him quirk a brow. “What I want is for you both to be happy.”

And *this* was the way to go about that? Revisiting painful ground. Since they’d broken up, he and Sara had been good with each other. But this wasn’t something he could understand.

“And that’s what you think,” his tone dripped with condescension, “will make her happy; being with *me*?”

“I know that last year you both-“

“You weren’t there.” He stamped out, almost glaring at her. “You can’t just do this Sara. You can’t simply *decide* how I feel. How she feels.” He pointed at Laurel.

Eyes rigid on his own, it was as if Sara was searching for a sign of weakness in his vehemence. “But she’s still in love with you.”

Like a hand fist ed in his intestines, he jerked on the spot.

Sara nodded. “She does.”

When he spoke, his throat felt like it had been struck. “I thought she knew better than that.” Hadn’t she been the one to tell him that they should never have started anything in the first place? Hadn’t he said to her that he was done running after her?

There was no response from Sara at that; just an offbeat silence. But he still felt like she thought she was right.

Somehow it was a foreboding feeling. “Don’t push this.” He warned.

“If she shows you,” speaking so swiftly he closed his eyes in irritation - an itch he couldn’t scratch - Sara continued, “that she loves you, you won’t change your mind? You won’t even think about it?”

The constant tightness in his face was beginning to ache. “Sara-”

“Forget it.” Then she was moving to unclip Laurel’s empty IV, “it’s unfair to lay this on you right
now.”

And *later* is better?

It took everything he had to hold himself in check - keeping stiff - and he watched as she pulled the needle free from Laurel’s arm, sparking other images to flutter across his vision. In a moment of gentle clarity, he realised there was a disparity between this - Sara’s clinical way of detaching an IV and caring for her sister - and the way Felicity had done the same when Sara was on the table.

Why it hit him so strongly just then was anybody’s guess; he wasn’t sure. But at the time, it had felt like Felicity had been including him - inviting him - in the process, whereas now Oliver only felt Sara pulling away from him. It wasn’t an instant of tantalising awareness; it felt cold. Lonely… and he wanted to remove himself from it too.

Yet, looking away from Felicity’s face just hours ago had been impossible.

It was the blush on Felicity’s face - the way it flared up from her throat at his insinuation - that kept his gaze. And how she’d tried to avoid him in that endearingly nervous little way she sometimes does things - how she bites her lip and shoots him soft glances, often more hot than not - knowing that he was watching every move she made because her mouth had run away with her again. Because sometimes the things she would say would stir the senses and make it impossible to be anywhere else but right there, with her, in the moment.

Or the way she’d stretched high for the IV, unknowingly presenting a view of her that his eyes had been helpless to do anything but travel over. How her smile had turned into sound and that sound - her laughter - made him smile back. From how his suggestion regarding her *tastes* had given her face a glow he could only describe as erotic and he’d wish he hadn’t thought the word because it was distracting. The way her full mouth slowly opened, how her eyes brightened and darkened all at once, the flush across her chest that spoke of a provocation he shouldn’t be considering - and how he’d wanted to…

He’d wanted to touch her. So very, very much. Just once. To satisfy that maddening ache that had started after finding her in the Foundry that morning. To gather close her honest reaction and fall into it. To trace the softness of her cheek and feel how hot she could get. To see if he could arouse other expressions on her face and how exactly he could bring that about because he knew that whatever she did, it would affect him too.

Couldn’t he?

The idea *thrilled* him.

But...

Neck rigid, he cleared his throat.

There was nothing fair in this. Nothing.

It was all too easy to turn away from the Lance sisters then. To walk over to the computers. To sit in her chair and wait because any semblance of her was soothing, something else he’d never told her. That her presence brought him peace. That she was always the last person he went to when he was giving his team the night off, in the pathetic hope that she’d stay a while longer.

He’d tried so hard to *stop* that. For a while there, he’d succeeded.

For a while.
He knew was strong willed. He knew his self-control was peak. But even he had limits in that arena.

*Not the time.* Elbows on his knees, he dragged his palms north of his scruff and rested his face against them.

“Will you kill him?”

It rested - the weight of atonement - on his bowed back.

As quietly as it was asked, the words paved way for cannon fire. Still bent low, he peered up at Sara whose stare was as serious as her question. “Slade?” He mumbled, blinking softly as he held her there, because he absolutely knew what her reaction would be. “No.”

Not for this.

“Are you being serious?” She asked, testing him, seeing that he was. “You *are.* Ollie,” the sound that left her could only be described as animalistic - like a very frustrated carnivore - but it didn’t move him, “after all this, how could you *not*?”

*Easily.* By reminding himself that they stood for more than simple brutality. “I know he hurt Laurel,” he began carefully, because that was the crux of it wasn’t it? Laurel. “But I won’t resort to his standards. I *won’t.*”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” She sounded horrified. Horrified and scared. “We had this same discussion before the Amazo went down and look how that turned out.”

“And I was wrong.” Still quiet, his voice was firm. “I tried to kill him and failed. He just came back stronger.”

*My mistake.*

“But-”

“I’ll stop him Sara.” He cut in. “Somehow.” They had to find a way. “I should have cured him. For all we know, the way he is now is fuelled by the Mirakuru in his body. But I won’t kill him. Not unless he leaves me no choice.”

She didn’t get it; he could see it written all over her face. “It isn’t right.”

Isn’t right, or isn’t fair? “And what would you do?” He lifted his head from his hands, done with this continuous need for Sara to kill every threat in her way. “Blow him up?” Because what else could they do? “Take a couple of buildings with him because we don’t really know where he is?”

“It’s something.” Quieting his tone, he tried to explain it in a way that Sara would understand though he figured he was beating his head against a stone wall. “We’re supposed to be setting an example. We have a code, a way of working. It’s the reason your father doesn’t want to shoot me anymore. It is not okay to accept collateral damage. We can’t just turn Starling into a battle field.”

And he knew that Slade would in a heartbeat.

But it was *their* home.

“Some codes have to be broken.” Hard, so hard; *Sara.* “Slade sure isn’t following a rule book.”

“So we descend to his level?” Brows raised, lips pressed together in a thin, angry line; he shook his
head. “I will not be like him Sara.”

Taking a deep breath, he saw her jaw clench. “Until we have a plan I won’t do anything,” she turned away from him, circling her sister, “but if we can’t find a way to end this without bloodshed then he’s a dead man Ollie. I don’t care if I have to call in the League.”

At this, his back went ramrod. “You’d call assassins into my city?”

“It’s our city. And I’m going to do all in my power to stop Slade before his plans - whatever they are - come to fruition.” At that, Sara’s head turned away from him, leaving him to stare at nothing.

They’d just parted at the crossroads.

Having nothing else to focus on, it was all too easy for his mind to drift. Suddenly ‘not the time’ became the ‘perfect time’.

To think.

He wished he wouldn’t, couldn’t… almost as much as he wished they was real, his thoughts; the delicious tease they continued to return to and wonder at. He felt it down his spine; metaphorical fingers tracing the muscles there.

They’d spoken so openly about sex that morning... he’d felt normal. At home in his own skin. Finally. Like coming home after the longest, toughest climb. Or falling onto a soft bed after a week without sleep.

How much was the price for the acceptance of one’s self?

But it wasn’t the subject that captivated him; it was the ease. Haunting in how much it made him want. And remember.

It wasn’t as if it was something he does, or would do; he didn’t carelessly go out for long lunches simply to enjoy them. There was always a purpose beyond the norm, even the ones he shared with his sister; they were always a means of eliciting information. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d just... lunched. Not with women, men, not with anyone...

Not with his off-limits, IT specialist.

It was as if he’d been given permission to be himself. Fully himself. Just Oliver Queen and everything that he is. And it was enough. He was enough; enough to sit and eat a meal with, to laugh and share secrets with, to be relied on in the same ways he relied on her.

And he realised then that he could do this because she did in fact know him to his centre. Parts of him that even Sara didn’t know, barring the physical, she knew.

It brought things back.

Heavy things. Darker things. Things that were red in colour. Things he shouldn’t entertain but couldn’t help in the stillness around him. It made him realise how much he kept hidden. And about
what he’d really wanted.

It had whispered - deep inside himself - from a place he’d thought he’d buried as he’d sat across the table from her at Big Belly Burger, looking at her. Listening to her talk. Talking to her back. Leaning forwards all the while, close enough to inhale a scent...

*What did she use on her skin?* The thought had briefly penetrated. Whatever is was, he hoped she never stopped using it because it was all too easy to imagine it coating the green of his leather...

His eyes closed to that, breathing low.

A daydream it may be, but heady thoughts had formed before he could crush them as he’d sat there in front of her. His fingers had twitched - as if each image, each thought, had sent electricity coursing through him to the tips - so he’d forced them, hidden them, beneath his arms.

Even though he’d fought it, something inside him - something very natural and as such, almost irresistible - had made him want to push past and move *forwards*… to have this one moment.

To place all his attention, all his focus, on what he’d *wanted* to do at that space in time - as she’d talked about such diverting topics as love-making and fucking, as she’d smiled over the rim of her cup, looking him directly in the eye with her own beautifully blue and open - and allow himself to just lean in, *closer*… to watch as her pupils dilate and her lashes flutter over those even more achingly pretty irises, to investigate the tinge on her throat that he knew would grow the more he pushed into her personal space, to brush past her face - her cheek - and feel the way she might react to his proximity, even as he held the rest of himself in check - his forearms braced against the table - he’d use only his head…

And he’d trace the slope of her neck with his nose; feel the heat of her on his cheek.

Even now - that brief urge that had hit him - made his heart pound, like it did then.

He knew he’d drag it out. He’d do it slowly, methodically; making sure she could feel each twist and movement, in the way men try to do when they want to make a moment stretch into infinity. Hoping to God - he’d beg for it - that she would shiver or gasp or *touch* him back.

Just *something* that would let him know that it was okay to continue.

So that he could - for the first time - inhale her scent and memorise it. Own it. Discover the smoothness there in the space between her throat and shoulders. So that he could press his lips, his *teeth*, to her pulse and taste her heart.

Take a *bite*.

Leave a mark.

Everything - all of him, down to the places so deep beneath the skin he didn’t know they existed – thrummed, tensed. It hadn’t been the first time he’d had thoughts balancing on inappropriate about Felicity, but never one so visceral.

Yet, far from shocking him into action - into leaving, into *escaping* and pushing her away - he’d melted into it. Which was unlike him.

But he’d been tired - still was tired - of trying so hard to *not* react to the simple pleasures in life, to holding back his natural responses. Of pretending that he wasn’t so by himself. Of doing everything he could to keep it that way, so as to protect the ones who touched his heart.
Watching her talk… he’d treasured it, needed it. Something so normal, so taken for granted and honest. That she could do that with him was a gift. And he’d found himself telling her things too. Little things. Things she drew from him like poison from a wound. And the way she’d looked devastated by his and Sara’s break up.

_Beautiful._

She was. Even close to tears.

It wouldn’t take much… If he took a step, he’d fall. That’s all it would take: one step.

And he’d come startlingly close to letting his foot descend into unknown waters.

He’d felt it pulling at him; the flirtatious air about them. _Effortless_. The type of chemistry you drop to your knees for, the type you’d fight and _live_ for. The type you dreamed about.

It was wrong; she deserved more. But the moment she’d said it-

_Sometimes you just need to get fucked._

He’d been lost to the idea.

The things he’d do, the things he’d _wanted_ to do right then…

And God, he was never having a good night’s sleep again.

Of course there was more to it than that.

Since his return, in all the time he’d spent with different women, he couldn’t remember any occasion being as intimate as their morning eating burgers had been. He’d felt closer to Felicity then, than he’d felt with Laurel when they’d slept together the year before.

And that stung as much as it electrified. It was a realisation bordering the exquisite.

Part of the reason why he’d held her was driven by how he’d _really_ needed the contact. With her. A little bit. Or a lot. It didn’t matter. He’d just wanted to be close to her. That he’d never instigated a hug before - for an increasingly obvious reason - seemed so wrong that he’d just _had_ to.

He wasn’t in a relationship anymore.

So he was… _free._

To do… what?

He’d never shared with anyone that all he wanted was to step off the island. Knowing that he hadn’t yet, not really, added to the constant pit in his stomach. But he could so easily crush the willing hand offering to pull him into unknown waters.

Yet, what if he could-

Then Laurel woke up and he _couldn’t_ anymore.
It was sudden.

One moment there was silence. The next, Laurel was pulling in air so swiftly he flinched. In the quiet about them, it sounded genuinely agonised.

Swiftly looking up, he saw Sara do it in time to see Laurel’s eyes flutter open - like it was difficult for her to do - and the disorientated way she kept blinking made him wonder how much Slade had given her: the light in the Foundry was at its lowest.

He heard Sara gasp - a breath of relief Oliver figured she’d been carrying for ours - as she went to hover over her sister. “Laurel- no, wait- wait!”

Oliver didn’t move. Not yet.

Stubborn like Sara, Laurel’s head butted forwards once, twice until she came up - her forehead creasing in effort, her fingers stretching and reaching for something he couldn’t see - as she tried to sit up on her forearms. But her shoulders shook with each jerk - her body still waking up - and it made her wobble before her arms collapsed from under her. Almost immediately after her back hit the table, a small sob burst out of her.

He felt his eyes reflexively close at the sound.

She must be so scared.

Plus…

Physical weakness. She hated it because it meant she lacked control. In loose memories of how she liked to drink, but only one glass, in how she used to always keep within the speed limit, and in the continuous set-hours she worked, attested to this. Her addiction may have robbed her of her reserve, but the fear – however irrational – was still very much present.

Now without it… she had no block for her emotions. No choice but to feel them.

He heard it in the breaths she took, glimpsed it in the way her hands were non-stop twitching, as if looking for a hand hold.

Combined with the sweat on her brow, she looked liked she’d just been through the worst night of her life. Maybe she had: he’d seen her - the wreck of her - after they’d lost Tommy.

But this felt different.

Slade must have... Sara was right; they’d done this. They’d taken weeks in what should have only taken minutes to understand and because of it Laurel was suffering. Again. It took a lot to make Laurel Lance shake like that. Maybe his enemy had been different with her than with her sister. Or maybe Sara was simply used to fear tactics.

And speaking of Sara...

Her hands already behind Laurel’s head, “Hey,” Sara smoothed over her cheek as the woman fought for consciousness and won, “it’s me. It’s Sara.” Breathing so deeply, he wondered if she was having trouble, it took a lot for Laurel’s eyes to open again. But when they did - panicked - they flew towards her sister’s voice who said the words she obviously needed to hear, “You’re safe.”
Laurel stilled, eyes searching. “Sara?” She whispered, shaken.

Slowly, licking dry lips - bracing - Oliver stood up.

“I-I don’t,” the furrow between her brows was sharp - even from where he stood -and tainted by the fear she was obviously reliving, “I don’t understand.” She shook her head, eyes widening, still focused on Sara “He had us, he-”

“We found you.” It was simplicity at its best but it explained everything. “He let me go first,” Sara began calmly, grasping Laurel’s searching hand, “and I went to get help.”

“Help?” She sounded so confused, lying there and he knew Laurel hated not understanding everything about a situation. Even more so than she hated looking weak. Which was why she forced herself forwards once more, letting Sara help her sit up this time. “Who…?”

Still very much afraid and discombobulated, Laurel’s legs dropped over the side of the bed, her head turning carefully to look about her as her hand gripped Sara’s tighter for balance.

When her eyes fell on Oliver who was walking gradually towards the pair, she froze; the frown on her face emphasised by her surprise.

“Ollie?” Voice trembling, her eyes dropped - he was still in his leathers on the chance that she might tell him something he could work with - and he watched them light up in wonderment as she took him in.

And that’s when it hit him: he really hadn’t wanted Laurel to know.

It had taken months for him to see that he and she could and would never work and had made the decision to never bring Laurel into this area of his life. He’d gladly watch from afar as she made a new one; as she found happiness that had nothing to do with him, as she rose free from her addiction and found something new to fight for.

But now?

By the look slowly coming to life in her eyes, he knew that future was lost. Sara was right; Laurel wanted this. It seemed it didn’t matter if he did or not.

It felt hollow to acknowledge it.

Chest moving fast - she looked a little like she’d been touched by a cattle prod - Laurel spoke. “He told me but I…” She swallowed.

I didn’t believe?

He’d been right: Slade had talked to her. Telling her he was the Arrow as a way to either make her turn against him, or hinder him in future. And she hadn’t fully believed it. Understandable; in her eyes, Slade was just a lunatic who’d kidnapped her.

It didn’t help him now; it never would. But maybe he could salvage something from this mess.

When he came to a stop a step away from the medical table, her eyes fluttered back up to his face and before he could say a word she suddenly whispered, “I think I knew.”

Feeling his chest tighten - guarded - he just watched at her.

“I think I always knew you were him,” she breathed, swallowing again; her eyes shifting to and from
both of his, as if both would reveal differing secrets. “I knew it in my bones that you were hiding something.” Widening still, the light in her gaze took on a quality he wasn’t sure he wanted to see right then. Not from her. “Something wonderful.”

Wonderful?

It certainly hadn’t been wonderful when she’d actively chosen to incarcerate him. He’d understood why... but that didn’t mean it hadn’t hurt him.

Vigilante or not, he felt pain.

There were many times Laurel had spoken of and to the Arrow and most of his memories relay a very different Laurel Lance reaction. So, he had absolutely no idea what to say to that beyond, excuse me? Which he didn’t say.

He chose to just look at her.

And she seemed quite content with that. “You’re the Arrow.” Laurel didn’t have his problem with words either. “All this time.” And it was like they were thrown back to the year before, when she’d looked at him - the vigilante - with sureness, eagerness and anticipation. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

It made something rise in his throat. It wasn’t pleasant. “I didn’t want to put you in danger.” His admittance made her breath stutter, made her glance down - to take a breath - before looking back up at him through her lashes, overwhelmed. “But I thought about it; I wanted to.” That wasn’t a lie either. He really had wanted to tell her.

But things change.

And for months now, he hadn’t wanted her to know a thing.

Still, it was what she wanted to hear. “To keep me safe.” Nodding - a quiet yet impassioned set to her expression as she did so - he saw through the slight sheen on her skin that her colour had started to warm. Good. She’d be fine. “I understand.”

She smiled, her large eyes fixed on him... and she didn’t look away.

There was an expectation there that he couldn’t read. What was she thinking about?

That kind of intent - from her - would have been so welcome once upon a time. And, it meant that she couldn’t see her sister who - still holding her hand - was similarly dressed for battle.

“It wasn’t just you.” He said and it made Laurel’s smile flicker. “I didn’t-” his brow became a focused line, “I had to-”

“It was for everyone.” So soft, he’d never heard that tone in her voice before; not for him. “To keep us safe, you decided to be alone.”

His stomach contracted. “Not completely.” His eyes travelled to her sister and flickered back to catch Laurel following him...

Then she saw.

And her jaw locked.

Her eyelids lifted and closed in a rapid series of harsh blinks as she tried to take in her sister. “Sara?” Like with him, her eyes dropped over Sara’s leather corset. Unlike with him, wonderment was
nowhere to be seen. Something about the way she shook her head told him the image she’d built of her sister had just come crumbling down about her. “The woman in black, terrorizing sexual predators- that was you?” She sounded a little brittle. “I don’t understand. Why would you even do this?”

Concern and accusation warred within her tone.

“I was gone a long time.” Sara began, slowly; and to her credit she didn’t crumble under the weight of her sister’s judgement. She owned her actions. Even if she was ashamed of them. “And I’ve changed. We’ve,” she stressed, glancing at Oliver, “changed. I’ve seen things. And I’ve done things. And now I’m just trying—so hard. Her breath left her: the more she spoke, the more it sounded like she was pleading with Laurel for something the older sister couldn’t give her, “I’m trying to be better. To make a difference.”

And sometimes I fail; it was a whisper only the like-minded could hear.

Sara was barking up the wrong proverbial tree.

“But why did you have to…” Laurel’s voice shook and she swallowed again before her tone took a sharp turn towards critical. “You’re not Ollie, Sara.”

Since when had Laurel thought him capable in such a way? It was intriguing. Especially seeing her now; in every look she sent him, a certainty existed. It was... odd. And he wasn’t sure whether it was genuine concern for Sara at her risking her life or... something else that had Laurel show the silver-black edge to her fear.

“You can’t do this to dad, you-” Abruptly coming to a halt, Laurel’s eyes flew from one to the other as realisation provoked them. “Wait, have you been in this together since the beginning? It’s been almost 2 years, I-I don’t…”

Betrayal. She sounded betrayed.

“No.” Oliver assuaged; stepping in without physically moving closer. “It’s only been for a few months.”

And that seemed to mollify her somewhat, which was another odd thing to him. “A few months? You mean, since you started dating?” It couldn’t be narrowed down to simply that. She peered at her sister. “You weren’t here last year?”

Sara shook her head, the expression oddly unreadable.

“And you’re keeping each other safe?”

That wasn’t their goal – not even close – but Laurel made it sound like a must. A priority. But in this line of work, the mission itself took precedence. He didn’t expect laurel to understand that and he wasn’t going to be the one to explain it to her. “We do what we can.”

It took a moment… then Laurel visibly settled with another unsteady exhale as she clutched at Sara’s hand like a lifeline. “What happened to you Sara?” She asked her and Oliver could feel the way the question must have ripped through the strawberry blond warrior before him, “those five years? What-”

Sara stopped her in her tracks. “It’s a long story.” Which was good because he didn’t want another rendition of what happened to you Ollie?
He cleared his throat. “Laurel-”

“If you told Sara,” Laurel suddenly blurted out; her head whipping around to see him, “who else did you tell? Your mother-” with a slight jolt - as if remembering something - she gasped and he stilled, “Oh my God, Ollie, you attacked your mother.” Eyes and pupils dilating, memories must have hit her - hard - making an altogether new kind of sense now and her face tightened with it. “Oliver.”

She was chastising him.

Judging him. Like he was a child. On events - on his memories - that she neither understood nor was entitled to. Hadn’t she just approved of him keeping quiet?

Leaning back on a leg, slightly open-mouthed, he observed her as Laurel shook herself, her gaze going to the floor and thought; why am I here when I could have been elsewhere?

When he could have been there?

He was sincerely regretting his decision to stay.

“And Malcolm.” Lifting a trembling hand - as if she just couldn’t believe it - she muttered, “You killed Tommy’s father.”

Like being stabbed.

The tangent rocked him; his body literally swaying with it, like she’d shoved her fist into his chest just to squeeze his heart. “Tommy… there’s so much I haven’t seen before.” Finally, her eyes flickered back to him. “You tried to save him, didn’t you?” She whispered like it was brand new information. “I know you did. I know it.”

And for some reason, she needed him to know that she did too.

But she’d also had to ask… because she’d wondered. Briefly. That maybe he hadn’t actually tried…?

…because of their rivalry.

Yet now it seemed imperative for her to make him believe otherwise; just by seeing him as the Arrow, she’d erased her own doubts. How easy that must be; to align yourself with a conviction one minute and turn that belief upside down the next.

Or maybe, Oliver being the Arrow connected some dots for her that she’d desperately needed to aligned.

So… she was forgiving him. Even though she’d said-

“I saw you. Running away into the night. You didn’t save him. You were too busy fighting a meaningless duel with Malcolm Merlyn! And when people, people you told me you would protect needed your help, you weren’t there. I don’t think you wear that hood to hide that hood because you’re a hero. I think you wear it hide that you’re a coward; and I promise you, I will see you unmasked, prosecuted and sent to prison. Don’t ever speak to me again!”

Was he supposed to just… forget that? How it crushed him to hear; he’d lost Tommy because he hadn’t been enough. Then he lost Laurel because he would never be enough.

It was why that morning with Felicity meant so much to him.
Could Laurel forget her hate, forgive him... simply because of anonymity? Merely because of the mask; because she hadn’t known it was *him*? That just by being Oliver, made him very much redeemable? That because she knew him, it exempted him from all the wrong he’d done?

He didn’t know.

But somehow he also knew it wasn’t that simple; at some point there would be something Laurel discovered that she didn’t agree with… and she’d make sure he knows.

“All this time,” he heard her murmur, “you’ve been watching over the city. Like a guardian angel. Risking your life. A hero.”

*I think you wear it hide that you’re a coward.*

Sighing, the rigidity left his face and he closed his eyes.

He didn’t understand. He’d *never* understand.

And… he realised he didn’t care.

“Does this,” Laurel seemed to hesitate - he wasn’t looking at her so he wasn’t sure - before finishing, “have something to do with you both being shipwrecked?”

Not something. Everything.

“It doesn’t matter.” Low toned, he moved to see her again. It wasn’t the time for *more*… and there was no way he’d ever want to explain even a moment of those five years to her. “What’s important is that you’re alright.”

Staring at him, Laurel opened her mouth then closed it. Tight-lipped, she nodded, taking another deep breath. She was starting to look better already. “You’re right.” Fingers touching her forehead, she rubbed at a sore-spot. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

At that, he *did* step closer; his heart-rate kicking up a notch. “He spoke to you?”

Her eyes flickered back up to him and she stilled again; he watched them rove from his face to the green of his jacket, to his hands making fists in his gloves. And other places.

Was the drug still affecting her? She seemed… dazed.

Frowning, he spoke gently. “Laurel?” Maybe she needed some water.

Like she could read his mind, Sara set about doing just that and reached for the plastic bottle at her side as Laurel spoke again. “Sorry. I just…” Shaking her head, she gave him another smile; this one grateful and filled with something he couldn’t quite translate, “he told me that you’d come for me.” It was almost a whisper; velvety and *entrenched*. Like a caress. Intentional. He remembered that whisper. “That the Arrow would save me.” And he could imagine the way Slade might say too: an ounce of condescension mixed with a shot of bitterness. “I asked him why,” and as he watched, that same something making her smile filled her eyes, “and he said it was because the Arrow is Oliver Queen.”

Pouncing on the information, hoping to keep her talking, he moved closer. “Did he say anything else?” His eyes focused on her own rapidly blinking ones; shifting back and forth. “Anything about why he did this?”
Taking in a breathy inhale, Laurel own followed his. “W-What?”

He had to bite back a *snarl*.

“Did Slade say anything about what he wanted?” Sara pressed in his stead; her tone urgent, passing the bottle to her sister who blindly took it.

“I…” Blinking away; she looked to the space between him and Sara and took another breath. “It was all so confusing.” Forehead creasing, it was as if she were sifting through foggy memories. “I don’t-no.” It was sharper, sharper than she intended because she winced. She shook her head again, her eyes squeezing shut. “He sounded like a madman.” Anger and fear filled her face once more. “Who is he?”

Letting out a deep breath, Oliver shifted away, trying to control; the rush of heat that whipped through him, momentarily cancelling out the guilt. *This* - all of it, the waiting - *was for nothing*.

Sensing his frustration, Sara took over letting him drift a few steps away. “His name is Slade Wilson. And you’re lucky he let you go.”

“But why did he take us?” Looking to her sister in bafflement, Laurel declared, “I know his name now; it’s only a matter of time before I get an arrest warrant.”

*This* was what he was worried about.

“I need you to leave this alone.” Sara said as she rubbed at Laurel’s arm. “Please Laurel.”

And it was obviously the last thing her sister wanted to do. “He *kidnapped* us Sara. Dad can-”

“Laurel,” shaking his head, Oliver felt himself internally groan at the obstinate resolve in Laurel’s expression when her eyes flew back to him, “He’s beyond the police.”

She pressed towards him. “But I-”

“No.” Again, he shook his head. “You need to leave this to us.”

To the vigilantes.

Something biting, something *searing*, flashed through her eyes but it was gone a single moment… she breathed in and out through her nose; her lips pressed firmly together, her eyes dead set on him.

Neck taught; he watched her glance to her sister then back to him and caught her fingers tightening in a curl around the bottle that didn’t creak, surprisingly before she cleared her throat.“Alright.”

With that, he had the distinct impression that she’d just lied to him.

But he wanted to leave. To shower. To swallow his regret and forget the wasted night. So he let it go.

Taking her in, he muttered softly with a half-smile. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

When she breathed out, it sounded oddly loud - it trembled slightly -and her hand reached out to touch his arm in response. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Taking a step back - her hand didn’t drop away until the last possible moment - he strolled back into
the recesses of the Foundry feeling two sets of eyes on his back, grateful that they couldn’t see his small smile fall and his face grow hard.

He’d waited for nothing.

He’d left…

Right.

Laurel took in another deep breath. She couldn’t not. Yet no matter how many deep breaths she took, she felt robbed of her oxygen. This is amazing. Surreal.

Ollie’s the Arrow.

Like it was written in her bones, the rightness of it echoed through her. I knew it.

It fit. It was right. This is right.

Everything made sense.

That was why he’d come to me as the Arrow, because he was Ollie. And she was Laurel. His Laurel. It all made so much sense now; for the first time in so long, the way forwards was crystal clear. She just needed to take that step…

With him.

“Laurel?”

Startled, she blinked towards her sister, taking another breath - hers had been knocked out of her by the fervent appeal in Ollie’s expression - with a smaller, more grateful smile. “I’m alright.”

She actually was: she’d never seen him look like that before. It was… different. Definitely not like Ollie. It wasn’t something she’d seen in him before. It was… more.

The Arrow.

She felt goose bumps rise across her back.

He’d watched her, had been watching her since the beginning. Since he’d come back home.

She liked that, just as she liked his intensity. It was different but it was a different she could get used to, especially if he was going to use it to show he cared. It had been years since she’d felt that, since she’d felt like she was his priority.

Little did she know, she always had been.

They were special. Together.

Shaking herself, she inhaled once more; don’t rush with this. It had to be natural. And now that she knew, maybe it could be. He and her sister were broken up now; unable to keep it together in a real
relationship, just like before. Maybe it should have always been that way. Maybe in the past they should have been together - had enough of each other - first before Ollie and Laurel could get their chance.

Maybe it made more sense that way.

It would definitely explain why he’d acted like that after Tommy’s death, taking the sting out of his gesture, his ‘Dear John’…

He was the Arrow.

Sara stroked her thumb across Laurel’s knuckles, bringing her attention back. “Good.”

Laurel searched her face. “Are you okay?” Her baby sister, no matter how strong, had been taken too.

“I’m fine.” There was something shrewd in Sara’s eyes. “But you don’t seem too surprised by,” shifting on the spot, Sara gestured to the black leather, “me.”

“It’s difficult to ignore how you’ve changed Sara.” A half-cocked smile spread across her jaw. “I’ve had my suspicions about you for a while.”

But she’d never have guessed this.

Sara tilted her head. “Ollie too?”

Head quickly turning back the way he’d left, Laurel smiled again. “That was more surprising.”

“You said you knew.”

Laurel blinked, once, twice; her mouth slowly opening… “It’s still a shock.” Ollie Queen, a vigilante. Who knew? “Out of everyone I wouldn’t have pegged Ollie for the heroic type. I think that’s why I never allowed myself to think it could be him.”

It was as good of an explanation as she could hope for… because she didn’t really have one.

“Hm.” Sara jutted her chin out at Laurel’s dress. “You look like you got dragged through a sewer.”

Laurel snorted, eyeing her evening gown in distaste. “Close enough.” It had remnants of something grimy she forever wanted to wash away-

She froze when she remembered just how her dress had gotten stained.

Snapshots in the dark of a man - a goliath - towering over her, hit her mind and she gasped at the wave of dread that almost overwhelmed her. It was a confusing array of blurred images and hushed noises, of fear and confusion but the one thing she clearly remembered was how much that man frightened her.

One black eyed had seared into her.

And that last thing he’d said before she’d finally passed out…

“Look how stubborn you are.” She couldn’t quite see him; he was beyond her range of vision, in the dark. “It isn’t a quality I admire.” But she could hear him clearly where she sat, restrained. “If I didn’t need for this to happen, I’d have left for boredom long ago.”
Sweating - scared out of her mind - she felt the effects of whatever drug he’d given her start to take root. It was all she could focus on; the dizzying way the room tipped on its side. “W-what did you give me?”

“It's not of import. Not to you.”

Eyes widening and tearing, she looked for him as best she could; wishing, hoping that what he just said didn’t mean... I don’t want to die.

Vision blurring, she heard him sigh. “It won’t kill you.”

Then he came out of whatever hole she wished he’d fallen back down in. The shadows seemed to collect around him and it was too dim to really see him but... She wasn’t going to die. Deep breaths helped but those words helped far better.

“Do you understand what this is?” The man rumbled, walking towards her with such a casual air you wouldn’t think he’d committed multiple criminal offenses. “Do you know who’s done this to you?”

She squinted at him. “I don’t even know your name.” Tell me it. Now.

She’d have him in prison faster than she could say-

“No me.” He was closer now. “Felicity Smoak.”

Who?

Looking up at him she saw his one uncovered eye - black like a pit - search her face. “You have no idea who I’m talking about, do you?”

She swallowed. “I-”

“Unbelievable.” He muttered strangely. Why should she care who this Felicity Smoak is? Licking the dryness from her lips, she tried to concentrate but he continued, stepping closer; the blurred edges to his form clearing slightly. “No matter. It won’t change anything. All you need to know is that she works for Oliver Queen.”

Ollie?

Something about this was important wasn’t it?

Laurel managed to peer into his face. “At... Queen Consolidated?”

There was another pause before he rasped, “Queen Consolidated. Of course.” It sounded odd. Like he was... patronising her. Like she’d missed something and he thought less of her because of it. The insult lit up inside her veins but she didn’t know what she’d done. “I have people everywhere now, watching you all. You, your sister. Miss Smoak knows this. Just as she knew that I could take you anytime I wanted. And she did nothing to stop me.” Already, whoever this woman was, a picturing was forming in Laurel’s mind and it wasn’t a pleasant one. Whoever this person was, there was no way Laurel would let her walk around, putting her family in danger. “Your father is next in line. With Felicity keeping quiet, it’ll be all too easy...”

He let the not-so obscure threat linger in the air and she glared at him as best she could, her fingers gripping the arms of her wooden chair. “Why... are you doing this?”
At this he bent low, over her frame tied to the crooked chair. “Because I desire Oliver Queen’s unending misery and she’s close enough to help me crush him. It was why I chose her and it’s why you’re here now. Felicity Smoak… He has no idea, not about anything.” Then he sighed and there was something pitying in his features. His face moved in, closer to her own and she shied away; seeing his one eye roam her features. “Oliver should have kept a better watch over his girl.” Then - too fast for her to see the movement - touched her forehead, forcing her head back. “Take that with you into dreamland.”

Felicity Smoak.

Laurel had deliberately kept quiet about it.

There was a memory in the back of her mind of a glasses wearing, bottle blonde but the details were sketchy at best. Her face didn’t jump out at her; kind of pretty but... not much else of notice. She wouldn’t tell Ollie yet. When the time was right, when she knew more - when she understood the place this woman held in Ollie’s life - then she’d make her move.

He’d probably be so grateful; though she hated that he had to find out like this, she wouldn’t have it any other way than to be the one to tell him.

“Oliver should have kept a better watch over his girl.”

It was her place as his girl. I’m Ollie’s girl.

It had been a long while. And though it had been loathsome hearing it fall from the lips of such a lunatic, she had to admit she’d missed it, missed having that label.

Maybe now’s the time. To try once more.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Sara’s voice punched through thoughts of Oliver and the future. “You kind of drifted off there.”

Exhaling, smiling, Laurel replied with, “I’m fine. I’m just… glad to finally know.”

Yes. Now she knew. Ollie was the Arrow. And now, finally, she could help him. Maybe this way they could become paragons for a city in desperate need of them. Maybe now, he’d see her as the equal she’d always been.

“Come on.” Sara muttered, taking a step back to gave Laurel room as she slid down from the table. “You need to shower. And sleep.”

What time is it? She doubted she’d sleep. She wanted eyes on this Felicity Smoak. Her own. She wanted to start learning about this person who works at QC. “So do you.” She couldn’t help glancing towards where Ollie departed. “What about him?”

Sara’s gaze followed hers. “He’s fine. This is sort of his home too.”

And just like that, laurel wanted to stay longer… in the cold, wet sublevel of what looked like an abandoned factory… maybe not. How could Ollie even want to stay here? It wasn’t exactly inviting. She’d had enough of cold and wet to last weeks.

And for that, Felicity Smoak would soon learn to never touch Laurel Lance’s family.
No more.

Like it was brand new, this punishment – one she knew he’d taught her weeks ago – was being refreshed. Washing over other memories, other times with him...

Please…. No more.

He was teaching her a lesson. She just didn’t know which one.

“Do you know,” by now, his voice shouldn’t be making the hairs on her skin rise, “what really happens to the body when it is subjected to below sub-zero temperatures?”

This was the worst part.

The baiting.

The education.

Still… she couldn’t find it in her to care. He’d drained her dry of it for one night.

All she could do was feel. Everything that he was forcing her to physically feel was exacerbated by how emotionally closed down she was.

That and she still had water in her mouth.

Chucking it up, so sexy - the factory floor was by no means clean anyway, so splattering it with water and saliva wasn’t going to make worse what was already congregating on it - Felicity choked on a breath; it was sweet. An immense pleasure. Pressing her forehead against the sopping stone ground, which was just as chilled as his words; her mouth opened wide with a reflexive gag as if stretching it further would get her more air. They don’t teach you that at school. They don’t teach you to fear drinking water.

They don’t teach that Waterboarding was a torture still employed or that oxygen deprivation made you see and hear things that aren’t there, made you smell coffee and cinnamon and soap. Leather. Made you think you were elsewhere for a while. Anywhere else but here would be heaven.

Throat sore - hoarse - she absently thought it was odd how barrages of freezing water could make your gullet so dry.

And it really did when it was poured relentlessly over a thin piece of cloth - her gag -covering her open mouth. Retching, she made a sound she’d cringe about for days afterwards; oh, I’m going to hurl. If he tired that again, she would; all over his shiny shoes. Take that. And then what would he do? Said cloth was to her side, ripped off by her teeth. He’d probably force it back on her in a minute; her very own muzzle.

Yet having a drink was the farthest thing from her mind.

“Felicity.”

Her eyes shut tight. Stop.

She didn’t want to talk… but if she didn’t say anything he’d definitely do it again.
It was her name used to push, as a taunt. Instead of a sentence, a paragraph, a page full of meaning - an entire language known by one person - in a single word.

Oliver.

It was ridiculous but, he’d say her name and she’d warm. He’d split it into its syllable components and she’d be comforted, reassured by the familiarity. He’d whisper it - murmur it in that deeply masculine way of his that made it sound less of a whisper and more a pledge - and she’d wonder whether he knew that he made it sound special. Or if he in fact did find anything distinctive about her at all. Even when he was on edge or exasperated with her, he managed to say her name with a consistent awareness of the letters it was made up of.

...Did Oliver know that her name on his lips was a secret between the two of them?

And it was as if Slade knew about it.

The way he’d rasp it out, taking no care to ease the snap of the T, the drawl of the C... as if he’d heard Oliver say it- heard the way he stroked her name with his tongue -had witnessed her physical response to it and had deliberately copied it in the most unpleasant, the most threatening and debilitating way he could manage. Altering it - twisting it - from a beloved sensory stimulus - no one had ever said her name the way Oliver did, does - into a source of rippling fear.

Or at least it used to be. It used to be that she couldn’t hear Slade say her name without wanting to cry. Without wanting to curl up and hide.

Now she was just vaguely concerned that his treatment would leave visible signs come the morning.

Far from shivering at it, her stomach tightened; a whip of something lancing upwards. Flickers of anger flaring through her here and there; enough to form coherent thoughts. That’s not yours. Like the way he’d tilt his head... they weren’t his to take, those idiosyncratic nuances. But it was as if he’d watched them so diligently that he’d picked up on their verbal and non-verbal cues to exploit for his own caprice; using it to wring out of her every drop of fear and hopelessness he could devour.

But it wasn’t a device; he didn’t use it to blackmail, to coerce. It wasn’t about a goal.

He did it, used it, simply because he could.

His idea of a ‘good time’. A well spent night.

To make a trophy of the way she’d look at him whenever he did; as if he’d betrayed her, as if he’d stuck a knife in her. As if he’d kicked a child. As if he’d taken her years of study - her degree, her masters, her subsequent years working a manager’s job at QC with the pay of a lowly technician - and had eradicated the evidence. As if she couldn’t possibly understand how he could be so cruel to someone like her, someone so meaningless.

How he thought he knew that with each flinch in her expression, each time her fingers curled into claws, into fists, that he’d won something.

In a way, he had.

It affected her. Still. Frequently. And it would whilst part of her sought out the comfort friends provided just by being there, by standing close; friends who hadn’t noticed-

Stop it.
It wasn’t that… she was hurt that they couldn’t see it. It was natural for anyone to want to be cherished in such a way… it was more that she’d hidden it from them so well that she felt that there might be something wrong with her. That she could live with it the way she had been doing… that she could lie.

And be believed.

Not here. Not now. She had to concentrate. She knew full well the ramifications for disobedience; if she delayed too long in responding without permission to dawdle, he’d either shock her or shove water down her throat again.

Or he’d smack her back with the palm of his hand.

Not exactly the most supreme of horrors on a normal day, she knew but... have you ever been slapped - as in skin of skin - by a man with Mirakuru in his system? His hands were like bricks. And she was talking, repetitive slaps. Her back still held bruises of the last time he’d done it. His idea of a joke, probably. At least she hoped it was…

Your skin is quite lovely.

She really hoped it was a joke.

“I…I’d say,” talking hurt, “I d-don't want to know,” oh that really does hurt, she sounded so much worse than she felt and she was starting to tremble from repeated exposure; “b-but I think…” her every other word was a jumbled mess, “you’re going to tell me anyway.”

On her shins - her knees - fully bent over herself, his smooth chuckle grated down her spine from neck to coccyx. Like a hacksaw on wood. “How well you know me.”

And didn’t that just make her stomach roll. One reflexive gag later and she coughed out: “Better than I ever wanted to, I assure you.”

She didn’t lift her head. Didn’t want to. Didn’t want to see him. Really didn’t want to face what was next. Not again. No more.

Please.

“Vasoconstriction.” So abrupt was his voice so close to her, she jolted; recoiling. But there was nowhere to go. “The human body is a magnificent work of art; it reacts in ways we cannot anticipate. Believing we have dominion over our bodies is the ultimate delusion.” She felt him shift before the chair in front her - the one she’d been forced into until she’d fallen out of it -groaned in objection to his weight as he slowly sat upon it. “What you’re feeling right now is the shrinkage of your blood vessels.” Softer now, his tone made her want to retreat; it was a camouflage. The type dangerous predators employed to lure in prey and keep them entranced. “There is a battle waging beneath your skin,” creaking wood made her realise he was leaning closer to her, over her; the more he leaned the quieter his voice became, “it’s focusing any and all of its remaining resources on keeping your vital organs warm just as your trying to control the urge to pass out.”

When she felt a light tickle on her soaked scalp, her nails dug into her palms. He was playing with her hair.

Just like earlier, after the first time he’d pulled her hair back to re-secure her gag: through the white of her shirt - a shirt he made her wear - it was easy to see the shape of her breasts, her puckered nipples… he’d stared over her for several seconds before he’d both softened and hardened. Before smiling once more.
Multiple showers. Soap and water. Scrubbing brush. It would never be enough.

“The sympathetic nervous system,” he continued, seemingly wrapping several strands of her hair around one of his fingers, “goes into extreme excitation: your blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory patterns - they all speed into excess.” All but breathing that word - excess - his low tone went through her like a knife into butter. “Mental confusion can follow this, sometimes a bout of memory distortion.” He hummed this like it was a question, dropping her hair; she had the distinct impression he was evaluating her. “Frankly, I’m surprised you’re coherent. Impressive.”

And her dreams were complete.

As if sensing her silent contempuousness, a rough chuckle echoed from deep in his gullet. “No, I don’t suppose you’d appreciate my admiration for your strength.”

That pulled at her rib cage. Shut up. He was trying for a Stockholm effect between them. It wasn’t the first time. And each time it failed. Still, he was persistent.

Lifting her head, it took every last ounce of her so-called strength to sit back up: to look him in the eye.

It had been a while now since the sight of his one eye, intent on her own, ceased to make her flinch and she told him right there, without words, that he could go straight to hell and veer port at purgatory along the way.

His subsequent grin was as sharp as the sword he carried, but it was the glint in his eye that shook her.

How could he - or any human - be so thrilled with this? With putting her through this. What was he getting beyond knowing it would hurt Oliver? Beyond being a sadistic psychopath?

“It’s the same response to a partial drowning,” abruptly speaking, she blinked; it was more of a flinch and as usual, he didn’t ignore it. His grin filled out into a predatory smile as he added, “I’d like to see how far I can push your body.”

What?

She stared at him; dread making her mouth open slightly, making her heart rate shoot up a notch… wasn’t he already?

Before she could think past it - before she could take another breath - she felt large hands shove beneath her armpits from out of nowhere and yank her up; forcing her into standing when her legs weren’t ready.

Shouting out -Slade was still calmly sedentary in front of her - Felicity had roughly 2 seconds to recognise the scent of cigarette smoke and foul aftershave. Frank. Bile poured up into her throat but he pulled her backwards with enough force that, before she could swallow it, it flew out of her mouth with a glob of saliva and onto the floor. Points for a class act.

It didn’t matter; she was being dragged away.

Stopping Frank was a lesson in the impossible, one she’d learned over and over… but it didn’t mean she wouldn’t try; even knowing the results.

Yet it was futile.
Because before she could dig her feet in, jut her elbows back, fight him tooth and nail – the world tilted and she was thrown bodily sideways…

Into freezing cold water.

It hit her chest first; the rush of temperatures below the appropriate making her heart squeeze tight enough to hurt and panic made her choke on air she didn’t have. Blindly pushing against the floor, she broke the surface of the water-

Only for Slade to wind a hand into her hair and fist it, tightly; pulling her round to see his face. Expressionless, he muttered. “Hold your breath.” Looking over her pale-faced self - her hands a death grip on the metallic side of the poor excuse of a pool - several strands parted from her scalp and he would have seen her eyes water if her face wasn’t already wet through. But she couldn’t look away from him; you don’t when a killer has you in their sights. “Don’t pass out.” He ordered and this was different; this was full submersion, not partial. “I won’t resuscitate.”

It could kill her.

She spluttered out a, “W-wait-”

But he pushed her back down - effortless strength - forcing her head under water-

She came to life on a choke.

Like something had broken - something inside her crumbling into dust - her neck cracked when her back abruptly arched; up, up, up, until only the ball of her skull, her coccyx and the heels of her feet supported her weight.

Mouth wide open - eyes the exact same way - images flooded her head like a shockwave of information. All flash; no substance. None of it registered. None of it mattered. There was no ‘connect’. All instinct, no ‘mind’-

-She wasn’t breathing.

The realisation, the thought… made her think. Made her realise she could.

Breathe.

Fast - too fast - her lungs expanded; oxygen infiltrating her body and making its way into her brain.

O-oh. There was nothing more beautiful in life, in that moment, than air.

The surprise of it slammed her body back down against the... the what? Something hard. Cold-

-The bathtub?

But bathtubs weren’t flat.

Not the bathtub.

I was just in one though...

Comprehension was slow coming, but come it did.

It had an unrecognisable, primitive sound - like air forcibly suctioned through a crushed pipe and the
unwilling duct had a voice box - leaving her as her body flailed again for support. Uncontrolled. Senseless.

Blind.

Gasping -I can’t see- her eyes flew open the same time a panicked yell ripped itself out of her abused throat. The sheer nothing in her vision scared her to death. Why can’t I see?! It ricocheted around her on invisible walls, making her twist and jerk in all directions, gasping and moving. Wherever she was – some room? It felt soundproof; like she could feel the sounds waves against her.

And freezing.

Quiet.

Loud, her breaths were so loud against the silence. It made her sound inhuman. But there wasn’t enough oxygen, not enough getting in. It wasn’t enough to simply inhale and exhale, not when that gift had almost been taken from her. With one hand.

Powerless.

God, I am.

She hadn’t been able to do anything.

A chasm of misery deep in her chest had her hands clenching down on the rim of whatever was holding her up, her defensiveness - helplessness - making the howl of frustrated desperation churning to rise squeeze the light out of itself.

Sight wasn’t an option but it didn’t matter; almost fully sat up, her head dropped forwards; heavy with the weight of…

I drowned.

Curving her spine to allow a moment - just one second - to gather that tempered steel she thought she’d possessed in full not too long ago - to try to fortify herself, to try and piece together where she was and how she got there -Felicity tried to remember her yoga. Her meditation.

Not that she wasn’t gloriously thrilled to be here. Alive. I am all for life. Yay life!

The defeating drumbeat of her heart in her ears, she sucked in a breath. Let it loose. It still didn’t sound right; like she’d injured her larynx and the noise made her cringe. But she did it again. And again. And a-

You have no idea do you?

Breaths stuttering to a standstill, she gazed into the abyss.

Slade.

He’d been there. He’d said those words. He was in my... in her bathroom.

It was her space- it wasn’t supposed to be private anymore; he’d destroyed that illusion but oh god, he’d been there, in her bathroom - where people presumed to knock first. To not enter. To let her rest. To let her have her day; her Sunday.

Now… it was gone. One more thing gone.
He’d just... he’d just *taken* her. Hadn’t he?

She wasn’t at her house anymore; it didn’t smell the same; it was damp and long forgotten. *Sad.* Derelict – how a place, a room, could smell derelict she didn’t know but...

For a moment, the encroached darkness became her friend. Her shield; it covered her completely. No one else could see her. Nothing else existed. Slade didn’t exist. This whole situation and everyone in it. They. Did. **Not. Exist-**

‘*Tomorrow. You’re on the back of my bike.*’

Oliver.

And the slow, steady, uncoil of her next breath was suddenly *torturous.*

He was real; the only real that mattered. Even in the dark.

Alone in the dark.

It wrenched at something deep, something *strong* inside her.

*Say it.*

“…Oliver.”

Irrepressible.

That *weakness* in her. The *strength* of it. Her need to reach for security in a *name.* In a sigh. Whisper of a wish. One that couldn’t come true because he didn’t know that she’d almost been drowned in her bathtub-

A dry sob, stifled by her hand - eyes and brow line creasing in effort- almost made the damn break.

It meant letting it back in. All of it. Every poisonous second.

‘*I can’t start the day; I can’t do what I need to do, until I know that the people I care about are okay. That you, my Girl Wednesday-*’

But she had too; there was no choice to make. She had to *see* it now. Had to face it, to be strong enough… because all of it, everything, was for a reason.

She had to-

“*It’s still Friday.*” *She reminded him, as if she were saying ‘please remember this time’.*

-Fight.

Always fight.

No cowards here.

No hiding.

Don’t run.

“*Friday,*” *he conceded before continuing as steadily as an oncoming train, “is safe. That you’re*
with me,” lifting an arm, he pointed in her direction, “and safe. It is important.”

It was in her chest; warm where she kept it secret. Monument Point. They had to make it to Monument Point.

For that to happen… she had to let it all in.

Right. She breathed out - there’s a lot counting on me not freaking out right now, like a small boy with sandy coloured hair and a shy smile coming closer to Starling City - forcing herself to calm way the hell down.

But the dark held horrors. It hid the bad from the good.

It hid the demon of a man who’d leant over her, watching her bathe. Who pressed her down. Touching her however he liked, even if it was to drown her-

Her hands shackled into her hair, pulling at the scalp in a moment of sheer irrationality-

-Don’t you dare touch me-

Insanity.

She took a shuddering breath; he wasn’t there with her. He didn’t have his hands round her throat- No. But muscle memory was just as painful as the physical trauma itself.

Sentient memory was a cruel friend.


Hands flying up to her throat, her body jerked as the recollection of too much water entombed her, slamming into her like a punishment for trying. That something normally so inoffensive could be turned into another waking nightmare. A bath. Now, a torment. And the brain can make you believe the nonsensical. It made her throat close again, made her splutter and heave until she bucked to the side; spitting out remnants of the liquid she’d inhaled.

Then her back hit the solid surface once more. “This is so not a good way to wake up.” Tired, she sounded like she’d been smoking a pack a day since she was 12. Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Rinse, repeat. Savouring the repetitive act of living and functioning.

But he held me underwater.

It didn’t matter what she did for a living or who she knew. It didn’t matter if she was genius, if she could take undeserved punishments including being forced beneath freezing cold water, it didn’t matter if her companions were shot at on a daily basis; right now, she was just a woman who’d been held underwater by a man much stronger than she was.

It had nothing to do with egoism on her part.

The pressure behind her eyes began to climb. She hadn’t cried - because of him - in weeks. She wouldn’t start now. Yet… he hurt me.

Again. And it didn’t even faze her anymore. But this… this was different.

Sure, water boarding was something he’d introduced and re-introduced to her and from all of ways he’d found to torment her, that was her worst. It terrified her whenever he took her to that steam factory with the pipes, because there was always that possibility that she’d accidentally inhale too
much water and asphyxiate. Water in the lungs was not a good way to go.

And he wouldn’t care to help her if that happened.

There were worse things but… he’d made her think she was going to die. Head fully submerged; she’d literally thought he’d keep her under until her heart stopped. He hadn’t relented. She’d blacked out before he’d released her.

Is that why I’m shaking? She was, violently. It’s freezing. No doubt about it. Her arms and her fingers... they were almost numb. She brought them up to cross over her chest, flinching when they pressed against exposed skin—what the...

No.

Don’t tell me... Dread rising, she shivered again and the violence of it made the table beneath her creak. It was old, worn. Not. Safe.

Am I... naked?

Her arms brushed over the chilled skin at her waist; uncovered skin. Oh God.

It hit her all at once: how the air licked her uncovered self, how horror seeped into her bones, how it forced her to gradually realise - the light doth beckons - how wrong this all felt.

Her hands glided over her stomach, trailing up to her chest—

Yep. Naked.

She was sitting on some rickety table in some dark room somewhere... naked.

The very real fear that had lain dormant beneath a swell of panic, wrapped around everything else she was feeling and tightened into a painful knot about her. Immobilising her.

Why. Am. I. Naked?

One does bathe naked after all.

But why was she still naked?

Did he just leave her naked when he took her with him? Didn’t bother to cover her, didn’t show her an ounce of that same odd - slight and creepy - respect he offered when he was hurting her; he just brought her out of her house, into his car... and drove away?

For the whole world to see.

Something heated - utterly wrathful and terrified - rose up her chest, to her face and before she knew it, she was wrapping her arms around herself as she desperately tried to see into the darkness surrounding her, all the while trying hard not to think I’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m nakedI’m naked—I’m naked—

And anyone could be out there, beyond the door. There had to be a door, a way out.

A small murmur, a ripple of vulnerability, escaped her mouth. Get passed it. Her eyes closed and she breathed in and out once more; I am a leaf on the wind, before they re-opened. Her hand fell away.

There was no way she could function right now if she remained focused on what she couldn’t
control.

Like the knowledge that Slade could have killed her. Easily. Followed by knowing that he hadn’t.

Slade wasn’t the type to restrain himself partway through - what looked to be a premeditated - murder.

Had it been anger that made him find his way into her home?

Fleetingly, the thought that he’d been finally done with her had flitted through her skull as he’d drowned her. And is she was honest with herself, some relief had come from it. But she was alive so, no to that.

She could only guess that his ‘attempt’ - hilarious since she’d had no power - had been an upswing to Slade’s nightly terrors. A new torture for him to try on her. It made her wonder how he chose the ways in which to hurt her? The promise of death.

*Does he compare and contrast against how I’ve reacted before now? Is there a website detailing the many ways in which to crush someone’s spirit? Boredom? I mean, who doesn’t love being killed in their own bathtub…*

It was as if the silence about her allowed her to witness the picture more clearly.

*Oh.*

She got it.

It wasn’t about killing her. Not at all. He didn’t want her dead. It was something far simpler.

He’d taken Sara, Laurel…

Serve the best for last.

It was far from the compliment it sounded; in Felicity’s mind, there was every chance that Slade had taken the Lance sisters but hadn’t been able to hurt them like he hurt her. They were *more*: tougher than she was in so many ways. Sitting on top of the feminine pedestal of beauty and strength. And she was the weak link. The one he could play with.

He’d built up an appetite during the day and he’d wanted to satiate it. Of course.

*“Fucker.”* She whispered to herself, trying pull out of herself a little aggressive courage-

The low rolling chuckle echoed out into the gloom and obscurity surrounding her.

Her body stilled so swiftly, so determined to remain hidden, it *hurt*. Every bone taught and every muscle stretched into immobility - her mind worked at one thousand miles per hour; too fast.

But there was someone in the room with her.

Chest pulling painfully tight, her heartbeat felt like it was ricocheting off her rib cage. *I’ve been lying here, naked* - and there was someone else in the room the entire time.

A male someone.

It almost broke out from her; the moan - the sob - because *god*, she’d lain there, *exposed*, vulnerable, panting and terrified - near to crying - and a stranger had watched - *listened* - to the whole thing. A
new level of creepy she hadn’t wanted her life to touch just then. Or ever.

Mouth opening - she’d already stopped breathing - her eyes fixed on several points around her, still seeing nothing but trying to locate the origin of the vile odour of smoke, cheap aftershave and sweat all the while trembling at her mounting panic because-

*Please not Frank.* She’d beg for that, for it to not be him here. Not Frank. She brought all of herself into as tight a ball as possible-

“Don’t do that.”

It was truly painful, the relief. It was utterly sickening, knowing *he’d* been there instead.

She swallowed. “Why-” another swallow, *come-on,* the hands on her legs tightening, her fingernails digging in, “*why are we in the dark?*” She ground out, gritting her teeth, glaring into the black.

*I hate you.*

It would be more convincing if she weren’t a trembling mess. But it seemed being naked came second to being blind. And Slade had, unfortunately, seen her naked before…

*His hand moved off her neck but before she could thank the universe for small mercies, the same hand stroked across her collarbone… then down between her breasts, resting there with his fingers splayed. “The softness of your skin is exquisite.”*

Disgust - the memory - made goose bumps speckle the skin of her arms and back and a very quiet voice, one she ritually quelled in her moments with Slade, say *I want to go home.* And home wasn’t a place.

Not anymore.

But her home *now,* it wasn’t hers to call as such. So find a way to deal she must. *I am my own Yoda; there is no half-arsing this Felicity. Put up, shut up.*

Then go for a ride.

When his voice broke the fragile stillness of the room - like a crack in a pond of ice - it was with a drawl as lethal as it was confident. “Does it bother you?” Still quiet, the hoarse quality to his voice made it so each word crawled fingers of fear - fear and perversion - over her. “Being unable to see me?”

*Of course it does.* But she didn’t answer.

“Or is it the darkness?” He surmised, his tone taking a turn for reflective. “Are you afraid of the dark Miss Smoak?”

Again, she didn’t answer.

She *couldn’t.*

Her voice would tell him far too much about where her mind was at. About how she was feeling, about how scared she was right now. And she needed to see him; to be face to face with her personal bogeyman.

“Here,” he abruptly uttered, as though he were the generous type. “Let me.”
With a click on a wall - a finger flick - the room was coated with bright light - or bright compared to no light at all - and her eyes opened and shut, blinking away the sting…

*Oh*; she was in *that* room. The one where he’d caned her. The place where he’d take her if he was feeling particularly hateful. Once white washed, the grime on the walls had made her stomach shrink into itself.

And like she was being pulled towards him, her squinting - watering - eyes eventually fell on the man sitting on the only chair in the room.

Completely unmoving.

Silent.

Brown eyes touching black, they reflected the dim light from the low hanging bulb that had been a source of torment the few times she’d been here. “Sleeping beauty awakens.” The shine should have given his face the eerie mirror effect of being completely without feeling. A reflective surface. An autonomous creature with no emotion and no name.

Except, this was *Slade*. So when twisted on its head - the dirty yellow of the light shining in his eyes gave him a cover; the completely disturbing illusion that he was something of a *demon*.

And he was, in a way. *Oliver’s* demon. *Her* tormentor.

Those eyes, already on hers, almost made her turn away. She always made sure to maintain it with him. Except, today, it was one of the most difficult things she’d ever done.

Locking eyes with the man who’d drowned her.

Instinctively, she pulled herself in a little tighter. Physically, he could do what he wanted but her mind was a fortress.

“Shame.” Still so quiet, the grate of his metal against metal voice- the honest quality to it - made her think he really did find whatever he thought was shameful, shameful. But then he traced a path, without touching her, down her tightly wound body and exhaled. “I was enjoying the view.”

It smacked her in the chest making her next breath come out as a hiss. *No*. After all these weeks he could still shock her. *No this; no way*. He wasn’t doing it again. He wasn’t going to play her; she wouldn’t let him and she told him so with the defiant way she sat on the table...

Slowly, like a snake, he smiled. The barest showing of pearly white teeth. All bite; no warmth. No heart. *Nothing*.

*Damn*. She shut her eyes, feeling her stomach convulse. No matter how much she fought against him, he still terrified her.

And he knew it. “The Mirakuru,” he drawled as if he had all the time in the world; and he did, “it heightens the senses. It may have been dark in here for you, but for me, it was… clear.”

The way he said it; the undertone, the *insinuation*... that he’d enjoyed himself. That he’d kept silent so as to prolong the experience.

What could she even do with that?

Holding herself taught, still - *together-* she managed to say, “I’d rather not be seeing *you* at all.”
As if a laugh had gotten caught somewhere between his oesophagus and the back of his throat, an odd grunt escaped him. “I thought you’d say something like that. Not that it matters.” Of course. And she didn’t need to see him to hear the sharp smile in his voice when he said, “You chose this.”

Yes. She had.

She also hadn’t. He knew that too. He knew that he’d played on one of the main things that separated them: morality.

And love.

She opened her eyes and looked at him; her face carefully blank.

He stared back.

Clenching her jaw she eventually bit out, “Can I have some clothes?”

His head tilted - give me a break already - and shifted a little in his chair. “Cold?”


There was this change, a subtle alteration in his manner - nothing overtly physical or obvious - that had the air in the room feel suddenly very close. Meaner. The expression on his face lost all mirth but the light in his eyes - also without any kind of warmth - remained.

She’d seen it before, but even after all these weeks, it was still… disturbing.

“I said,” he started, and the following two words - though stated in a near whisper - were like canon fire on her chest, “are you cold?”

He didn’t say it the way it as meant. Each word was its own sentence and each sentence was a threat.

Answer me, or don’t answer me. He’d once said. I don’t care. Either way, I get what I want; an answer... or a way to pass the time.

In her moment of justifiable anger, she’d forgotten. She was completely at his mercy. And the last time he’d been feeling whimsical and irritated with her, he’d used the cane. She couldn’t go there again, not when her skin was finally starting to heal.

Lips dry, she replied just as quietly, “Yes; I’m cold,” except her voice shook when his was as steady as a rock.

For a while he didn’t do or say anything else.

Then all at once, he moved; lancing up like a spear - making her flinch - and strode purposefully over to the door. He didn’t look at her; he was turned so that his back was to her like a taunt that he knew she couldn’t take. There he bent and she was so attuned to his presence that she hadn’t seen the bundle on the floor but when he straightened once more, turning, she saw he was holding what looked like a white shift and white… shorts, her stomach dropped. No underwear. Of course not.

Those were specifically for her discomfort.

No panties offered, but she could wear a pair of white shorts that, if soaked (and it wouldn’t even
take that much liquid), would turn completely see-through, same as the shirt.

He walked closer, step by step – because that’s how he moved; one foot forwards followed by a pause – and each action was a deliberate attempt to unnerv her already unnerved self.

“I should say that you have nothing to be ashamed of,” he muttered, his eyes very much on the skin of her arms and legs and great; he was talking and very much not giving her the clothes to wear, “but I imagine that would mean less than nothing to you.”

You assume correctly. Still, she remained silent. Prey often does in the presence of their captor.

“Here.” The softness of his voice did not take away from the way his eyes tried to murder her should she try to be stubborn once more.

Immediately reaching out to take them - one hand hesitantly leaving her body - he snatched them back just as her fingers brushed the material.

His eyes bored into hers. “Stand first.” He ordered.

That’s when she felt sick - it dropped thorough her like a heavy stone - which was why she whispered, “No,” immediately, her eyes begging him.

And she never begged; verbally or otherwise.

A ‘tut’ sound rumbled free from his mouth and before she knew it, one large hand – the hand he’d drowned her with – traced around the skin of her wrist, seemingly gently, to grip it.

Then it tightened.

It didn’t stop tightening - not until her bones cracked under the pressure. And her muffled cry in response - her lips pressed together, it hurt - had him sending her a look she hated him for. It was almost tender.

He mouthed, “Up,” at her.

Already preparing the wrench herself back - she didn’t want to move, to stand and expose herself further- she opened her mouth-

“I’ve already seen you.” Naked. It was harsh - the truth usually was - in the silence of the room. “And I carried you here. Now, be a good girl and…”

Do as you’re told.

He didn’t even have to persuade her anymore. She knew from experience what he’d do next if she didn’t stand.

Probably drag her from the room just as she was and put her on display. Yeah, nope. Not happening. His men had seen her in her underwear before; but full nudity was ten steps too far.

Then again, how many actually saw him carry her in here?

Pushing aside the deeply troubling thought, Felicity clenched her teeth -the muscles around her stomach tightening so much that she almost couldn’t move her hips - she unfolded herself off the table. It was only when her feet touched the floor - her gaze steadfastly on his; you look me in the eye or not at all - that he passed her the clothes.
Though she was expecting much worse, his gaze didn’t move from hers either. “Was that so hard?” He drawled.

*You have no idea.*

She’d never known hate before. Never had such cold venom thrown at her this way… she’d never been so close to feeling like she *wanted* to hurt someone. And that was what he gave to her.

The knowledge – experience – of hatred. Of hating and being hated. *Do I hate him?*

Could she?

Unruffled and uncaring, he jutted out his chin. “Put them on.” Turning away from her, the lack of his eyes on her made her shudder in relief. “I have things that need attending too.”

*Oh goodie.* “You could just leave me here.” *Please.* Feeling the cool air all over her, she quickly shook out her makeshift outfit, muttering over her fear, desperate to cover herself up. “I’m shocked you’re actually giving me something to wear.”

She just had to push it. The shirt went up and over her head and down her chest when she heard him stop at the door.

“Miss Smoak.”

Pausing, wincing (dreading), she glanced up at him… and wasn’t prepared for what came next.

The jagged edge of his grin was no longer present. His eyes didn’t smile. He looked grim in a way that told her she had to take him for his word.

“I’m not a barbarian. I would never go that far with you.”

Her mouth opened in a soundless display of disbelief, *this isn’t funny.* She could see it: he believed that. That everything he was doing, the way he was acting, was required. All for the woman he’d lost; he’d gladly step on his own heart, be a monster, to wreck revenge on a world unjust in his eyes.

But in THIS, he drew a line? *Sure he would.*

She knew… she knew the moment he chose to; he’d break that promise too. She couldn’t push it.

But then he grabbed the handle of the door and twisted it and she all but flew into her shorts.

*Focus. Stop shaking.*

She needed to know why he’d taken her. Straightening, she found he’d held the door open, wordless waiting for her.

*This time.*
It stopped her cold.

He’d taken her down a corridor that stretched into infinity but it wasn’t until she’d walked - was forced - into the heart of the empty warehouse area adjoining the weathered building housing that room, that she started to realise the possibilities of why. Why she was there. Why he’d taken her.

And it wasn’t capriciousness on his part.

Any hope she’d of this being exactly that - a whim of Slade’s that she could navigate - was destroyed.

Every fibre of her being hated this. The trepidation, the wondering, followed by the knowing of what was going to happen, the slow comprehension that she’d been way off base – and the question she knew she had to ask because he’d make her draw it out of him like water from a sponge before he confessed voluntarily.

“Why am I here?”

She hadn’t meant to say a word at first. In fact, she was surprised her voice hadn’t fled her entirely. But she needed to do something to centre herself; she was in danger of falling to pieces as it was, trying to fend off memories of her bath tub and hands on her skin, eyes on her body and water down her throat… stop it.

She couldn’t begin to describe just how scared and alone she felt, standing there. For some reason - it being a Sunday night when she’d been taken and being wide awake, the abandoned building that she normally wore a blindfold to walk through now crystal clear before her eyes - this felt so much worse. Maybe because he was letting her see everything.

Maybe because it was daytime; Monday morning and she could see dim rays of light coming in from the dusty, high placed windows above her. How many hours was I unconscious? How long ago was her bath? And-

John.

Blood turned to ice in her veins.

What… happened to John?

He’d been there - right there - with her, in her house. And he wouldn’t… he’d have never let this go without… without a fight. Oh no. So…

So where is he?

It was ridiculous how her eyes darted to every nook and cranny, searching, as if she’d find him standing somewhere close by… but it didn’t matter. Hope was a powerful thing. But she couldn’t see him. He wasn’t there with her. And if he wasn’t there, wasn’t in the building… then what had Slade done to him?

No, he wouldn’t. He’d promised-

But he’d broken his promises before.

Whirling around – momentarily forgetting why she was even there in the first place – she opened her
mouth, fully intending on demanding Slade talk-

The way he was watching her made her just… stop.

Everything.

And suddenly she wanted to itch; scratch every surface of her, like bugs were crawling beneath her skin. that level of hate couldn’t be normal on a human face. But he also looked something else; intense in a way she really didn’t like.

Admiring.

Hate, admiration… and want.

This is not happening. Not ever. It made her feel ten times more vulnerable. She took a deep, less than reassuring breath. “Where is he?” There was this new gleam in his one eye and she felt goose bumps rise at the way he didn’t stop staring, didn’t blink. “Where’s John?”

His one eye took her in this time instead of staying riveted on her facial features, travelling as he began to move closer to her.

Palms sweaty, the bolt of fear that hit her made the wad in her chest tighten. Still, she held her ground as Slade slowly caught up to her, coming in from out of the shadows of the hallway and she refused to quell before him.

…Because off towards the right side of the room stood a cluster of men she recognised from all the other nights she’d spent in Slade’s company. The sight didn’t settle well in her stomach.

The worst part of it - the part that made her mouth dry - was that they were just standing there. Waiting.

Each of them held stun rods.

And didn’t that sight just fill her with confidence. “What is this?” She asked, voice low, quiet - so afraid - with her eyes penetrating Slade’s. There was something different about this, about the way he was watching her now-

As if Slade was seeing her for the first time. Fascinated.

I’m reading him wrong, I have to be. “Where’s John?” Voice raised an octave she waited as he came to a stop a few feet in front of her. And it was still there; the hatred and the captivation. “Where is he?”

He wasn’t saying anything, why isn’t he saying anything?

Does that mean he’s hurt him, has he hurt John? “What did you do to him?” Or was this just another game, a ploy? Was Slade playing with her, making her think he’d done something when- “Just tell me!”

Resolute – silent – he just looked down at her.

And she felt herself quake. Please. “Please just tell me.” She all but whispered; tell me you didn’t hurt my friend, “Please.”

Begging.
It was in her eyes and her heart and she knew he could see it: she didn’t care.

But then he did something strange.

No, he didn’t soften. Or bend. Nothing like that.

Instead his hand lifted, reaching out to touch her hair; his finger leafing through the somewhat damp, fly-away curls. Like the first time, that first visit to her house. When she’d felt he’d tainted her with his touch.

She was beyond used to it now and held no illusions as to what real blemishes were.

Before she could side step or dodge - smack his hand away because no thank you - he spoke.

“You broke the rule.”

Like the soft beat of a drum. It made her blink; only her blink was a flinch.

How… how did he know?

And he read her like a book. “You secured the boy.”

William.

Oh.

She got it now, she got what this was.

She hadn’t told Oliver about his son, so William was still safe. But she had made it so that Slade couldn’t get to him to ensure the legitimacy of his threat. She’d made it so that Slade lost a major bargaining tool, the same bargaining tool keeping her completely silent. It had taken her long enough to contact Lyla, long enough to map the movements of the men he’d sent to watch over the Clayton’s, long enough to earn Samantha Clayton’s trust and to bring her on board - something Felicity started, reaching out her hand, literally the day after finding out about the boy - and long enough for Felicity to facilitate the necessary action currently being taken, that it was only now that she could actually open her mouth… and tell.

Ergo, Monument Point.

Slade knew that. Knew it and was angry at her for it.

So… he’d taken her.

I guess this is my punishment. Sunday be damned: she wouldn’t get her free night any more.

She’d pay it gladly.

A little boy was safe now thanks to her and Lyla. Settling with this knowledge - shoulders slumping slightly but still standing straight - she reminded him, for all the good it was worth. “You broke it first.”

In a rare display if languid ease, his eyelid closed and opened. “I did, didn’t I.” Head tilting, he searched her over before asking, “Did I disappoint you?”

Being disappointed suggested emotional investment and just… no. “That’s a lover’s word.”
It hung in the air between them, her sarcasm, and she wondered at her own audacity. She hadn’t said it with care; she’d practically hissed it, telling him with all certainty that she’d rather take torture than listen to more of his nonsensical bullshit.

But his eye - his stare - devoured it.

Really, what the frack? Something like panic echoed deep down inside her - give me one break- and she fixed a hard gaze up at him, resolve she wasn’t fully capable of feeling just then. And normally he’d smirk at her futile defiance… but there was none of that there on his face.

Why wasn’t he doing what he always does? Why was he waiting? What was he waiting for?

“Lovers.” He muttered, as if she hadn’t spoken it the way she had, like a poison; and he whispered it, as if testing the feel of it on his tongue. “Interesting.”

No. No it is not, she thought, ignoring the hideous shudder that went through her at the way he’d stroked interesting out of his mouth. “Creepy.”

Expression unchanged, his head tilted.

She wasn’t going to engage him in this, like they were friends. “Can we just get on with this?” It was starting it make her jittery, constantly pushing down every bad feeling. “Is-”

“Mr Diggle isn’t here.” It was gruffly spoken, as if he were suddenly done with the direction this had taken.

Too bad. “Where is he?” It would have been so much more impressive – or at least, less humiliating – standing her ground wearing actual clothes and shoes instead of a shift, thin shorts and bare feet on a freezing floor. “You lose nothing by telling me.”

Slade sighed. “He’s alive.”

The relief she felt from this simple fact made her sides ache. “That’s not what I asked.” And still, her voice was a croak.

Because she knew. She knew Slade. ‘He’s alive’ came with addendums.

Dead in the eye, he uttered. “That’s what you’re getting.”

Eyes fixed on his - God did she wish she could look elsewhere - she wasn’t capable of holding in her swallow: as much as she may have grown used to his brand of fear, as much as she understood how he appreciated the many hurts he inflicted upon her, he was still terrifying. Still untouchable.

Yet it was her rule to always show him - to never stop - that it was not in her nature to bend, as a branch to a tree.

No, she was a rock – screw being a leaf on the wind. And he was the waves, crashing down over her again and again. Time was her only enemy here; his repetitive lashes of what he deemed his own pervasive punishments wore down on her. Soon, she’d be unable to escape unchanged. Untouched.

But not today.

Unmoving, he saw it; her show of weakness. And as always his eyes narrowed in on the action even if his next words focused on anything but. “But this was never about him.”

For some odd reason, her heart dropped like the stone she thought she was. Foolish to think she had
a grasp on herself. Like amber sliding over wood, unease was a thick mess ironically rising up her
throat rather than falling. “What?”

“This isn’t about Sara.” She could only frown up at him because, what is he talking about? “Or
Laurel Lance.” He added, pushing into her personal space and she had no choice but to bear it
because, again, she wouldn’t falter before him. “This isn’t about William.”

“I know.” As quiet as her voice was - he didn’t have to remind her of what this was about - it was
also firm. Steady. “It’s about Oliver-”

“No,” he interjected, “it isn’t. Not completely.”

Mouth closing, she blinked; the frown she didn’t know existed on her forehead tightening.

It was all about Oliver.

He inhaled, taking her in and she really wished he wouldn’t. “It’s about you.”

It didn’t register, the yank; the yoke shrinking around her neck. Not that it mattered. He didn’t stop
talking.

“This…” and she just knew from the way he said it, the way his eyes moved with it, that he was
referring to the past 7 weeks of hell, “has all been about you. It always was.” Breathing from his
nostrils, he looked down in thought. “It took a few weeks to understand,” like he was teaching her,
his tone was almost soothing even though his words were anything but, “to see.”

His head came back up meet her eyes.

Bad. This was bad. Very bad. But she didn’t know why. There was no comprehending his words.
She felt a chill settle deep inside, what was he saying?

“Patience has always been one of my virtues.” And suddenly it was like she wasn’t even there; his
gaze went away, elsewhere. “I have more than my own eye to see and a single set of ears to hear
with. And I have been watching him closely. More so than he realises.”

She knew that; knew that he had men and resources at his disposal that they just didn’t have - which
was why they couldn’t keep constant watch over Laurel - but the way he said it told her that she had
underestimated his tenacity. His drive.

His obsession.

Had she missed something?

Thinking about it left her wide open when his eye came back to her again. “Do you know what I
found, what I saw as I studied him?”

Even without her glasses, he was clear in her vision but, wordless - what could she possibly say - she
just stared up at him.

The silence lasted as long as he needed to peruse her once more, to push upon her the feeling of
being completely without control here.

Then he opened his mouth again. “I saw you.”

She flinched, like a gun had gone off, shaking her head. “I don’t-”
“I found you.” He clarified without really explaining anything at all, and there was something there waking up in his face. Something cruel. Something malicious and sad and god awful and she just wanted to run away. Far away. “I wasn’t fully certain until I saw you with him earlier. So taking Sara was almost a complete waste of my time, but I have enough of that so, no matter. I learned a few things from doing so. But keeping her sister…” seeing at the way she reacted to his words, to the way dread seeped into her own expression seemed to entertain him, “actually, I’d planned something different for the Miss Laurel Lance. She wasn’t supposed to be found.”

Mouth falling open, she read between the lines: I was going to kill her.

Oh my God.

They’d been right; she and Oliver. Slade leaving them a Laurel Lance untouched wasn’t a coincidence. Wasn’t planned. And if it isn’t planned then Slade went off script again and became ten times more dangerous because of it.

“Thankfully - for you - you’re little diversion put a stop to me doing that in the near future.” William. But the ‘thankfully’ part of that sentence struck her first. “For a lawyer, she’s incredibly narrow-minded. It grew tiresome.” And he looked like it had too, stress lines forming around his eyes as they tapered with a memory she couldn’t know about. Questions leaped and bounded inside of her but she was so fixated on what he was saying, a reply of any kind was out of reach. “In the end I was glad to let her go. She got what she wanted anyway, not that she realises how lucky she is.”

Heart racing, she tried. “W-what do you mean?”

It was as if she hadn’t spoken. “And you, oh…” and it was murmured, a hum of pure sympathy that sent a spike of terror through her because that look on him was never good for her, “you just became priceless in this. Oliver doesn’t know you’re missing and soon he’ll have other concerns to even realise you’re gone.” She stumbled back at that - what concerns - her hands fisting, her brow line tightening to keep what she knew were desperate tears from escaping her eyes. She wouldn’t cry in front him, not again. “Not until it’s too late.”

Too late? “Are you going to kill me?” Would he finally do what she’d been so sure he would?

But he looked appalled. “No. Death is the sure thing, the quickest route to success in this and that was never my goal.” Er… to say she was thrown by that was putting it mildly. “You aren’t here just for him; you’re here for me.”

What the hell did that mean?

“This dance of yours,” roughly pushing aside the last of his so-called softness, he practically spat out the rest, “how you’ve convinced yourselves, how the ways in which he lacks you fill in the pieces of; it is a safety net. His reassurance. Your hiding place.” She should be used to his glare by now, should have acclimatized to the way in which he continued to pull the proverbial rug from beneath her feet, but this…’Alone he makes no sense. He’s the Arrow; a mindless killing machine.”

Shaking her head - he’s crazy - she tried to step away but he followed her with one giant lunge in her direction and spoke with a finality that almost crushed her. “Together, he’s more. Together… you make him Oliver Queen. You make him want to be Oliver Queen, to understand the pieces of himself he’d locked down deep.” His face closed in on hers; leaning over her and blocking the light. “You are Oliver Queen.”

Psychopath. The Mirakuru; it’s making him worse.
“I-ah!” Her cry was pitiful but with the speed in which he’d grabbed her, the effortless way he lifted her and tossed her onto his shoulder, it was uncontrollable.

“This is no longer a game.” He threatened and he didn’t bother to shift her, to make sure she was comfortable. He simply started walking. “No more rules.” Each step bumped his shoulder painfully into her stomach as she watched the walk-way they’d come out from decrease in size. Every time she tried to look where he was going he’d jerk her again. “They were for you: I don’t need them.”

“They meant nothing to you; they were never for me.” It just came out - hoarse and so, so done - and though a voice inside her head was screaming at her to shut up, the rest of her was too far gone to care; her fingers clawed into the coat on his back. “It was just a way for you to control your precious game.”

Oliver - though not necessarily the same way - resembled him there. The way he needed to control the various elements of his life. Maybe Slade was where he’d gotten that from, maybe he’d taught him.

“Brave. So brave.” He muttered and she felt sick. “I’m going to make you see.”

There was no use in struggling; she’d tried multiple times before. Even without the Mirakuru, the strength of the man beneath her was beyond her capability to fight against. But something inside her - the child hiding in a closet - wouldn’t let her not. So she pulled up and away from his grip, she hammered down on his shoulders and yanked at his coat, kicked with her legs, but… nothing. It was like beating her palms against metal. Useless.

“If you keep doing that I’ll throw you to the floor. Hard.” She almost screamed in sheer frustration before he added, “And then you’d miss the point of this.”

She paused just long enough for him grab onto her shift and pull her upper half from its slouch. “There’s an actual point?”

One black eye impaled through hers. “Take a look.”

Then he twisted, turning so abruptly she’d have fallen sideways if is wasn’t for her death grip on his shoulders.

So close now to the three men - each equipped happily with their stun rods, though their apathetic expressions indicated they didn’t find anything remotely happy about this situation - from her new height she was able to see over their heads, something she craned her neck to do for some reason, not knowing why her heart beat kicked up a notch and straight into dangerous territory.

But then her eyes fell on the prize. And she saw… and she stopped. Her heart momentarily stopped.

Nightmares do come true, she should have known.

There, just behind them, bound to an old chair - gagged - and facing her… was Thea.

Thea.

The single moment in time stretched into eternity and it took Felicity that long to realise… she was awake.

Wide eyed - terror written across the younger girl’s features - dried tears and mascara patterned her cheeks and her very obvious tremors were visible in the way her curls vibrated as the rest of her remained stock still in her seat.
Ashen-faced.
Clearly cold.
Oliver’s baby sister.
And. She. Was. Here.
He’d taken her. He’d actually taken her. All his promises, their indecent proposal, the effort involved to keep this one precious person safe… fell sideways. A useless endeavour. Worthless. She’d failed.

He’d said… hadn’t he said that if she said yes, if he had her, he wouldn’t touch Thea, wouldn’t go to Laurel.

But he’d taken Laurel. And Sara. Why hadn’t she considered he’d take Thea too? Being tired, drawn, having too many problems floating about the air was no excuse. She’d thought she’d been saving them… she’d been very wrong.

The result of her wrong was sitting on a crappy chair, scared to death and wondering why.

No. she couldn’t be here - you can’t be, not here, not with him, not now - it wouldn’t compute; she was just a girl. A teenager. Not untouched but still innocent. Uncorrupted. There was light in her.

It’s going to kill him.

Oliver.

After everything Felicity had been through to stop this, to keep Oliver from this, it wasn’t something that could be hidden from him, even for his own welfare. This was something she had to tell him…

Thea was looking at her. And she was seeing everything.

The marks Felicity was sure were ringed about her neck, the obvious lack of a bra beneath the crappy shirt she wore, the ashen of her face - no doubt she’d also heard Felicity’s words earlier; she hadn’t kept them quiet: they were never for me. It was just a way of you to control your precious game-and the very real, vivid image this whole scene painted for the girl. That Felicity was unwillingly there, a hostage amongst a group of very large, very scary looking men, each holding weapons whilst Thea was strapped, helpless, to a chair…

She may not have understood why she was there, or who Slade was… Thea may not know that this related to her brother, but she wasn’t an idiot. She got it; she understood that this was serious -it was etched into the strain of her expression - more so than anything she’d been through the past year. That she was in a great deal of danger. That she was a small person with no power here, no friends or allies, that she could do nothing. Defenceless. Weak. Alone.

Like Felicity.

It was deliberate. He’d made her feel that way on purpose, it was something he excelled in; making people feel less than what they were, making them overly aware of their weaknesses, of how they don’t match up. Even as he told them they were more. He loved his mind screws.

But Felicity had blanked out - a piece if her dying inside -as she locked eyes with the younger Queen, everything inside her falling into a cold silence, a nothing state to drown in. Was this how Oliver felt, watching as a man forced a gun on two women he’d cared for? Being helpless as he pulled the trigger…
It stabbed into her chest and didn’t leave, she didn’t want it too: she deserved to feel this. How else could she understand her wrongdoing?

The realisation must have thrown her features into stark relief because it touched Thea, it made her react. Made her feel. Made her eyelids flutter open and closed to see Felicity’s hope - not for herself, but for Thea and the rest of the people she cared for who were now targets once more - die.

She had really and truly failed.

And she watched with tunnel vision as a helpless tear rolled down Thea’s cheek, followed by another; her eyes begging Felicity for something. Anything. They dropped soundlessly onto the lapels of her coat, disappearing into the fabric.

To Felicity, each fell with a clap of thunder. “Let her go.” Spoken through numb lips, she didn’t hear her own voice through the white noise in her ears.

Beneath his chest rumbled - like the Devil speaking from below ground - as his hands moved, loosening on her thighs. “Now, why would I do that?”

“You said you didn’t need her.”

“I changed my mind. Now, don’t you think it would be a good idea if you-”

Like the world turned red, Felicity just lost it.

A glorious quiet within her cancelling the madness in her head and in her chest, until all that registered to her, was that she was moving.

“There’s no use fighting this.” He coaxed as he squirmed down. “You’ll just-

Nails dinning into his shoulders, mouth open wide, she pushed her face into the side of his throat and bit his neck. Deep. Hard. Like how a vampire might. Except this wasn’t about blood.

I’m scared.

He froze, stunned and it gave her just enough time to lock her jaw around the flesh she’d secured, stomach churning at the taste of copper already flooding her mouth and the sick way the warm liquid coated her chin, oh god. She couldn’t stop. So she chewed; ripping away, backwards, with her teeth. I’m really scared. Taking a small piece of flesh with her. I don’t want to be here.

And spat out the tissue as she went.

But Thea’s here.

The sound that left him was more shock than pain - she’d recently discovered that the outer layer of flesh for one infected with Mirakuru was as vulnerable as it would be without the advancement; it was only when, say, a bullet or arrow penetrated into deeper muscles that the problem lay, which was why she’d been unable to dig down as much as she’d liked - but whatever it was that made that possible didn’t matter; he’d released her. Momentarily distracted, he’d let her go. Which was what she’d aimed for.

Move!

No time to wipe herself of all traces of him, she leapt up. Thea-
-Up over his shoulders, using them as a board to push off from. And he was so astonished - she caught a glimpse of his face as she did so, slack jawed and confused - that he let her.

It made no sense; she had no idea what she was doing. Or what good it could possibly do. She wasn’t like Sara; there was nothing she could succeed in doing her for Thea. But something inside her, waking with a dull roar, wouldn’t let her remain inactive. And maybe it was the weeks of punishments, maybe it was the very real way Slade had dissolved her world into needing days with Oliver in a way that honestly scared her and nights with him that were slowly killing her, maybe it was the sleep deprivation and constant unease… or maybe she was just angry. Full of rage and hurt and betrayal and fear.

Whatever it was, it had her seeing everything in ultra high definition; flashes of images she couldn’t - wouldn’t - compartmentalise because that would mean thinking. Understanding.

So she simply didn’t.

Instead, she threw herself over his shoulder and at the 3 men in front of her.

Two things. First, Felicity was physically incapable of protecting herself or others this way, but her arm strength was no joke. Propelling herself was the easy part. And second, as much of a waste of time it must surely be for someone as small as her to throw herself at three large men and hope for a miracle, she was still a human body coming in for a collision course. They did what any semi-intelligent man would do.

They scattered.

Except she caught one, slamming into him at speed and he buckled with her weight.

Dropping the rod.

She rolled with it - *keep your legs tucked in; use your shoulder*, Dig’s orders - grabbing the weapon as she went and came up on all fours to immediately plunge forwards, *riposte*, activating the side switch to make the man moving to freeze in place as an electrical current turned his body into a mess of shakes and pain.

He yelled out, body jerking and she didn’t remove the rod until he’d fallen to his knees.

She whipped around, searching for Thea and seeing her sat - wide eyed and crying- almost directly in front of her. “You-”

Of course it would fail. Of course. There wasn’t a hope in hell’s chance of her freeing Thea. Not like this.

Like something inside her mind had splintered, a wave of *black* lanced across her vision as however many watts of electricity rammed into her, tearing a scream out of her throat. She felt it in her teeth – her bones – her mouth wide open, eyes shut tight, fingers splayed in the air, rigid to the touch.

She couldn’t move with it, this paralysing pain.

It vanished as quickly as it came and the abrupt alteration- the overstimulation of her nerve endings - capsized her, making her fall sideways as up was down and down was *good*… choking on a breath. Fuzzy sounds slowly infiltrated her mind as she blinked white spots from her eyes. *Thea.*

She could hear her. Muffled sobbing behind a gag. *I-I can’t move.* No. She could. It was just difficult to do with limbs that wouldn’t work for you. *I’m so sorry Thea.*
“Did that feel good?” Managing to somehow push herself to her feet, his voice came from beside her as she rose on unsteady legs, wholly unwelcome. “Your renegade moment.”

But her little rebellion had made her feel human.

Breathing like she’d just ran flat out for a mile, her eyes made her way to his face.

“For someone so lovely, your gaze is piercing. I assure you,” he smiled then, slow and malevolent, “It was a pleasure.”

A pleasure. His neck was bleeding, even as it healed and it was still a pleasure. Right. Another reminder of where she was; that her panic was still making her heart ricochet off her ribcage. That his blood was drying on her lips. That Thea was close by, in the peripheral of her vision; still tied to a chair.

Why couldn’t I be stronger? If Sara were here…

If Sara were here, she wouldn’t be. Felicity wouldn’t be. Sara would be suffering in her place. And that wasn’t happening.

“What are you done?” He asked, literally curious – if the maddeningly familiar head tilt was anything to go by – as he circled around her. “Or…”

Tasting the remnants of metal on her tongue, ew, she opened her mouth. “Or?”

“This side to you is intriguing. You seldom show it.” Breathing out, he finally came to a stop on his stroll several yards away from her. “Is it shameful to you?”

If she had the resolve, she’d talk back. Instead she quirked a brow at him as pins and needles scattered underneath the skin of her back.

“Your violence?” He elaborated.

She frowned.

Slowly, like he had all the time on the world, Slade lifted the stun rod he’d shocked her with and pushed it sideways-

Into Thea’s collarbone.

She shrieked - her head lifting backwards in a reflexive but futile effort to escape - and only seconds into it, enough time for Felicity to move towards him, unthinking of who and what he was, it lifted.

A threat.

His voice rumbled from beyond her line of sight, mixing in with Thea’s harsh panting and whimpers. “Are you done with this inept attempt at saving your beloved’s sister?”

Your beloved’s sister.

Beloved.

The truth of it rang across her waist, the skin of her hips feeling the fleeting zing of something indescribable as her rib cage tightened with it. As the muscles at her diaphragm stood to attention. As her skin tingled and warmed so that a slow flush started to spread upwards from her chest.
Her beloved. The man she loved. The man who didn’t know, _he’d never know._

And Slade had said that _aloud._ In front of the sister of the man in question.

It was taboo. _Son of a…_

Hands closing into aching fists, she straightened and stood still. Trembling; rage and fear waging war. _Don’t hurt her again._ Only then did he lower his arm.

“Obliged.” He inclined his head. “I’d much rather be focusing on you; I’ve grown accustomed to how you sound when I have you on your knees.”

Nothing. There was _nothing_ he could say. Nothing he could do to push a response from her now.

“Or when you standing.”

She was far past the point of no return.

“Sitting.”

He just didn’t know it.

“Lying down.”

Fucker.

“Thank you,” he murmured, finally moving from Thea’s line of sight - the girl’s eyes instantly connected with Felicity’s and it took the breath from her chest seeing the scream, the pleading questions in each of them, the way Thea struggled with her bonds and she tried to send her a message, _not now,_ with her own - and stepping before her once more, “for this.”

Eyes flying back to his face, she watched as he briefly touched his throat, lingering there as he continued. “I feel better now.”

She stared at him. _What?_

Then he casually brought up the rod and shoved it into her thigh.

“Ah!” _Ow, OW! That is genuinely painful._ Stumbling backwards as she gasped with the shock of it, she caught him moving towards her; his two steps overtaking her five, “w-wait.” ignoring her, he touched the rod to her shoulder. “Ngh! I-”

Then again near her spine as she turned. Then at her side. The next, just above her backside. Her shoulder blade. Her stomach-

Sucking in what felt like an empty breath, she bent over forwards; cradling the area - feeling the residual tendrils of sharp pain echo through her until they dwindled into sparks - and blinking out the lights flashing behind the lids of her eyes, hearing Thea’s cries and indistinguishable pleas and trying as hard as she could to focus on them.

Another strike didn’t come.

Blearily, with trepidation, she looked back up; catching Slade giving the men a signal. A jut of his chin. An order to continue where he’d left off…

_Good._ If it meant they were away from Thea then good. She could take it. She had to.
Then her hip line flared, white hot and she wondered for how long.

Crying out, she had the space of a single second to glimpse one of the men circle her back as another stepped in close and-

Electricity flared down both her arms, pushing her side to side in a ridiculous display of imbalance. She heard Thea scream and absently considered how bad this might look to someone who wasn’t her. As it was, Felicity was having difficulty seeing a foot in front of her, her eyes as watery and blurry as they were…

Then agony flashed across her skull, from her ear and further inwards sending her spiralling to the floor.

Her heart beat – a thud of defiance – once. Twice. Three times-

Rolled over onto her spine, his blurred form standing over her was the last thing she saw before giving into the dark…

It wasn’t what he’d wanted.

It also wasn’t what he’d ordered.

Don’t mark her face.

He’d made it quite clear. Did they need an illustration? Perhaps a demonstration.

So the back of his fist slamming into the side of the face owned by the man who’d decided it was a good idea to press a stun rod behind her ear, sending him catapulting to the floor, had a certain… poetry to it.

He hadn’t held back. And the man wasn’t moving.

A small price, he thought as he straightened the sleeves of his coat, stepping over the busted skull at his ankle. He had other men to replace him.

But no one could replace her in this. So the lesson needed to stick.

Feeling the collective fear of the other two of his new hires fill the air, he moved over to the pawn on her chair. Seeing the rigidity of her spine, the terror clear in the tears at her eyes he felt a shimmer - just a touch really - of discomfort.

It was easily pushed aside.

“Now,” smoothly lowering to a crouch - he wanted eye contact - Slade murmured to young Thea Queen as the rod dangled in his fingers, “what am I going to do with you?”

The way she shifted, the way her breath caught and sped up with his words, the way her eyes flew to the stick and then over to the other body unconscious on the floor made him say, “Relax Miss Queen.”
She froze, gazing at him, hardly daring to hope.

“I wouldn’t do to you what I will do to her.”

Being a good girl deep down, being someone who cared about the hurts of others, this only served to heighten her fear.

It made him smile. Didn’t mean he enjoyed it. But he smiled nonetheless because here was another person who just didn’t understand.

“She’s special.” He confessed, seeing the utter mess he’d reduced this girl to in the hours since he’d taken her. “But you’re… a distraction.” To a degree. Her other use lay in how she’d affect her brother with her reaction to the knowledge he would offer to her now. “No sense in unnecessary violence, wouldn’t you agree?”

She didn’t say anything; couldn’t with the gag around her mouth. That wouldn’t do.

Reaching forwards, he ignored her flinch to untie it. “Once you’ve served your purpose I’ll let you go.”

“What do you want with me?” The bite in her immediate answer, her courage - even as her voice wobbled precariously - surprised him but maybe it shouldn’t have. She was Oliver’s sister. “Why did you hurt her?”

“Like I said; she’s special. My special friend.”

Obviously, she’d disagree. “You’re sick.” He didn’t blame her.

But he did sigh. “She’s only here because of your brother.”

That knocked her off her entitled block, he could tell, as she whispered. “Ollie?”

He hummed his affirmation.

“W-what do you want with my brother?”

“Well, he’s special too.” He let the words hang in the air between them before adding. “A true sinner.”

“A sinner?” She didn’t understand, but the curiosity bleeding into her pale face told him her brother had pushed her away more than once since his return. “You’re not-”

“He killed the love of my life.” The words stopped her completely, as they should; in breath and in speech. “And then he killed me.” Watching her blink at him, as if in a daze, he caught the disbelief there. But he also caught the possibility that she thought otherwise. This is what you get Oliver, for the way you treat the ones you claim to love. It’s poison. “Your brother has a secret he’s kept from you Thea. Would you like-”

“I won’t play your game.” She forced out through clenched teeth, still frightened but emboldened with the love she held for her brother.

Brave. And so foolish. He isn’t deserving of that love. Not yet. “If your brother could have shown such courage.” When a gun was forced against Shado’s head.

When he hadn’t chosen to die instead her.
He deserves this.

There she was. In the peripheral of his eye, her voice in his ears… she’d been absent for hours. Too long.

Not long enough.

He deserves this, to have his secrets become his grave. She whispered as always and he cherished the echo of each word. Just as he wondered why…

Why Felicity Smoak shut her out.

Looking behind him, he found the undefeated woman in question sprawled where he’d left her. “Take her back.” He quietly ordered, already lost to the world around him; already exactly where his Shado had left him.

His men went to her, each taking her arms and legs and he watched them walk out with her, knowing they knew not to touch her in any other way than this.

There were punishments.

Then he forced himself to look at the sister, to see her too. “Your brother has kept more than one secret from you. Secrets that would change your life if you were to discover them.” He let that digest, let her eyes fall away as memories he could guess involved Oliver and his ways of dismissing the truth, infiltrated them. “Don’t you want to know what he’s been hiding since his return? I mean,” cautiously, her eyes lifted again and he knew he had her, “what could possibly be so bad that he’d keep it from you? His sister.”

She remained silent, her face a page of written words than translated into tears.

“Didn’t he miss you, those five years he was away?”

Her mouth, lips, wobbled and shook.

“He’ll never tell you.” He pushed, knowing it wouldn’t take much for this fragile girl - for she was exactly that - to give into temptation, for all women were not Felicity Smoak. “He can’t trust you because he doesn’t think you have the strength to bear them. He’ll never let you in. You’ll die knowing you never really knew him.”

And because she loved her brother, because she was lonely and his attempts to keep her at arm’s reach had hurt her, she crumpled; a sadness he understood all too well surging into her features.

“Don’t you want to know?”

Whispered the serpent to the fawn.

She just needed to see. Then she’d take it from there. She’d do the right thing. She’d see justice done.
It had been easy getting into his office: all she had to do was give her name. Miss Laurel lance to see the CEO, Mr Oliver Queen.

CEO Queen. The Arrow. Her past, her present and, just maybe, her future. She had to treat this carefully, with respect.

But first she had to see… Because the receptionist had thrown her a little.

“Mr Queen’s in a meeting right now, but I’m sure Miss Smoak will be up there to show you in.”

Laurel backtracked. “Miss Smoak?”

“Yes. His EA.”

Executive Assistant.

The woman Slade Wilson had stated was helping him hurt the people Oliver cares about was his EA. Oh my God. She was in a prime position to do exactly that.

That stops today. It has to. She could ruin him.

Initially, she’d considered asking whether he was free for lunch. She’d texted him earlier in the morning, asking him to call her back, to talk. To give him the chance to say something to her, anything would do at this point. But he hadn’t responded. Sara had warned her; that with QC and the hunt for Slade, Oliver was supremely busy. She got that. She understood.

It was nice to see; Ollie, the serious - mature - CEO.

He’s changed so much… Tommy would have been proud. It still shocked her that they’d been able to move forwards, to change, to grow, to become more after his death. They’d been able to take the positive from the negative: Ollie had become a hero. And she was becoming the lawyer she’d always aspired to become.

Despite the night gone past, her life was improving.

But Ollie had a snake in his midst. Time to take care of the trash. Felicity Smoak had to go. But first, she needed to know why. Why anyone would turn on him for whatever reason. If there were skeletons in his closet that needed protecting. And she needed to know how close they were so that she could handle this with as much care as she dared.

She needed to see where they worked. So really, Miss Smoak being his EA helped her a lot.

The elevator stopped at the 40th floor and the first thing that welcomed her in - bag in hand, head held high - when she strode out of it, turning to her right, were the sun’s rays grazing a perfectly situated desk beside some glass doors. The windows were large by far, stealing the eye, but the placement of the desk before it made her wonder. As if Ollie had needed someone there to warn him of who stepped onto the floor. The mark of a man who liked to be prepared and of his trust in his secretary.

First perception.

Okay. Taking a deep breath, Laurel walked towards it, glancing to the side to see into Oliver’s office. He isn’t there. So he really was at a meeting. That worked for her.

It gave her time. But not much; he’d be back in about ten minutes, or so the lobby had receptionist
Half running forwards, Laurel tip toed - *I'm being ridiculous* - around to the front of his EA’s desk, running her fingers over the wood, noting the lack of dust on it. The lack of dust on *anything* there; Miss Smoak kept a clean work place. *Of course she did: Miss Perfectionist fooling the charming CEO.*

But there was also a certain care to the way everything was placed: the notepad to the side of her desk and away from the screen, the post-it notes with scribbles on them stuck to a small side-board of meeting dates and official guest invitations, the way the monitor was angled just so that she could always see her boss and meet his needs… maybe she was just… maybe…

Maybe she was just very good at playing a part and anticipating her target.

Second perception.

But there was nothing there to really explain how Felicity Smoak and Ollie interacted with each other or how close they were; anything that could tell her how big of a bomb it would be to drop on Oliver, to tell him the woman he saw everyday was- then her eyes caught sight of something.

There were drawers.

Two of them to the left of the desk… and there was a key in the key hole at the top.

Laurel straightened, frowning at them.

There comes a point where doing the right thing takes a turn for ethically ambiguous. The road to hell was paved with good intentions after all. If she touched that key, if she turned it in the lock and opened the drawer, she’d be intruding. In a court of law such a violation would make anything she gleamed null and void. Unusable.

But…

She had to know.

It was for Ollie; she’d be forgiven. *He'll understand.*

He always did.

With some trepidation, as if she’d be caught if she sped up, Laurel turned the key and pulled open the drawer… to find nothing. *Great.* Or at least, nothing resembling incriminating evidence or a nudge towards something that would help her. Not even the smallest sign that the woman was secretly in cahoots with a criminal who’d kidnapped her and-

*Wait, is that a… a journal?*

A regular, run of the mill office journal, probably given to her when she’d first gotten the job. But that wasn’t what made it stand out.

There were bits of paper sticking out from various angle - some of the pages seemingly thicker than other - with colourful spots in a sea of grey and blue… it was puffier than it should have been, as if it were filled with scribbles and add-ons.

It was personal.

Laurel stared at it.
If she did this... *this woman is trying to bring Ollie down. My father, my sister, we’ve been targeted because of her involvement.* If it meant stepping past a line - ignoring the sick feeling in her stomach - to find out the truth, then shouldn’t she? For the people she loved? *It’s for them.*

There were secrets in there, possibly clues. *About Ollie.* About more maybe... Didn’t that make it her responsibility to bring it into the light? *What does it say about him?* What if there were things in there about *all* of them?

The longer she stared, the less her conscience seemed to matter.

*She’d never know.* Felicity Smoak would never know it was gone, *I’ll bring it back.*

When she was done reading it.

Her hands were already sliding over its surface and it was open before her next thought came-

*What is this?*

The very first page… a picture.

It wasn’t stuck to the page; rather it was clipped haphazardly into the crevice between the sheet and the cover.

It looked like… like they were in a bar. ‘They’ being Oliver… and who Laurel could only assume was Felicity Smoak.

Ollie was the focus but he wasn’t staring at the camera. He was looking at his EA as the woman smiled - mid laugh - with her eyes closed. They each had a partially consumed cocktail in front of them, plus two empty glasses of something else and by the slight reddening of her cheeks; Miss Smoak was more than a little tipsy. It looked like she’d just said something… Ollie was frowning, but there was this bemused - slow to come - smile on his face that told her whatever it was - though confusing - was typical and clearly endearing of the woman to his side.

Whoever took the picture captured plainly that their professional relationship *wasn’t* professional. At all.

Her heart pulled and sank in one fell swoop.

*You’ve got to be kidding me.* She chewed on the inside of her cheek: *of course.* Wasn’t there even one woman alive who could resist him? Oliver sleeping with the enemy. Somehow she wasn’t surprised. Or maybe…

An idea came to her, making her swallow. *What if she got close to him specifically for information?*

It made more sense than whatever *this* was; this façade of a relationship she was looking down at. It was a non-entity; he’d never even mentioned this woman to her before - and they’d been talking for weeks now, trusting each other again - beyond the short version of ‘she’s here to fix my router’-

*Wait.* Her eyes cleared: Verdant. *She was at Verdant that day, that’s where I remember her from.*

*What was she doing there?*

Did she know that Oliver was the Arrow? Had she been in the basement? And if she had, *why* had she? What was her role down there? *You can’t tell me she fights with them.* Then again, people could surprise you.
Maybe she’d infiltrated. It could literally be anything and Laurel knew she didn’t know enough about that kind of thing to make such a rash judgement. But if Felicity Smoak was working for Slade Wilson, chances were high that she knew a lot about Oliver Queen and his night time activities.

And now Laurel had confirmation of intimacy.

But there was something else too, something that puzzled her.

The post-its.

Green and pink post-its were littered throughout the journal. On the green she glimpsed Oliver’s oddly neat scrawl. And on the pink – there were less of them – held… she was guessing they were Miss Smoak’s handwriting.

But why would she have kept these?

Looking at them, she couldn’t see anything of relevance; couldn’t see any significance in meeting times, lunch dates or reminder. Most were innocuous. But she hadn’t looked far inside...

The ping of the lobby elevator make her start; her head moving up, eyes darting down the hall even as she instinctively shoved the journal into her handbag, slid the drawer closed and tripped passed the desk just in time to see-

“Laurel.”

Ollie.

Wearing a grey suit, one that oddly brought out the blue of his eyes the closer he got to her - though he’d briefly hesitated when he’d seen her - made her see the CEO in him. He looks good. And he did; he wore that suit well. She preferred him in a tux - he and Tommy had been quite the pair in their tuxes - but this was a refreshing contrast.

It helped her forget about the small… not crime, per se, but definite intrusion that she’d just committed (even if it was for a greater purpose).

Stopping a few paces in front of her, Oliver adjusted the button of his shirt sleeves and asked with a slight frown, “What are you doing here?” He yanked down the sleeves, stretching them down his muscular arms.

The Arrow’s arms.

Yes. It helped a lot.

“I’m here to see you.” He blinked, cocking a brow; confused. Well, she understood some of that. They didn’t do ‘lunch’ anymore. They didn’t visit at each other’s work place either. I mean, he has. To mine. But she never had. She was making up for it.

And after last night, well… avoidance was no longer possible. “I thought we could get a bite to eat.”

Again, he blinked at her. “Lunch?”

“Yes Oliver,” she affected a small laugh, liking that she’d surprised him - but her pulse skyrocketing and the attempted shot of confidence didn’t help - as her hand pressed against the side of her bag in reminder, “lunch. With me.” Being deliberately obtuse, she searched behind him. “Where’s your secretary?” Please tell me you-
“Executive assistant.”

His quick response - the clarification - brought her gaze swiftly back to his. “Executive…”

“My EA.” He clarified with an easy nod.

Her mouth closed. Why? Why was that important to him? And it was, obviously. And there was nothing in his expression to indicate that he thought his simple illumination was anything but.

Oliver never brought a woman up like that in conversation. Never made absolutely sure that the person he was speaking to understood the significance of the woman they were referring to or discussing. At least, not in her experience. Maybe she’d missed this, the growth. It hurt a little.

But this was the start of something new. It was time it put that behind her, to get to know him again. She owed them both that much. And she wanted to connect. To remember what that unassuming happiness between them had felt like.

“She’s secretly in cahoots with the enemy, Ollie.”

Silently, she begged him to just know. Even as she knew it was futile.

But his eyes had drifted behind her, even before she’d finished talking and they didn’t lift off the desk she was sure he was looking at. “Oh.” No, he was gazing. Like he thought if he looked hard enough, his secretary would pop magically out from under it. “Felicity.” Felicity. Like smoke. A whisper. Did he always say her name like that? Like, she was answer? “She’s taking the day off.” And he licked his lips, clearing his throat, his eyes flickering away and back to Laurel because midway between ‘she’ and ‘day’ his voice - ever so slightly - wobbled.

Wobbled.

“She needed it.” He added unnecessarily - she didn’t care if ‘Miss Smoak was the Virgin Mary - as he lifted his phone for her to see for some reason. “Texted me earlier.” And he didn’t like that for some reason, she could tell. Not if the small swallow was anything it go by. “I’ll see her tonight.”

As if he’d needed to hear her voice instead of read her words.

She didn’t like this either, for various different reasons. This is bad. He was hooked. He cared. It would hurt him to know the truth no matter how gentle she was with it.

And since when did he answer his assistant’s texts but not her calls? “I called you earlier Oliver,” 3 times; she reminded him, nodding at the mobile, “didn’t you get my messages?”

Caught.

His mouth opened then closed, his eyes moving to back to the phone. “I’m sorry, I…” he shook his head. “I’ve been distracted.” He looked at her again. “And I’ve been in a meeting most of the morning. I couldn’t have answered.”

But you could answer a text from your employee slash booty call?

“You can talk to me.” She said, waiting; needing him to know that if he was lonely, tens he was too: and there were other - healthier – options to his deceitful EA. “I know now. About you. And I’m here. I’m your friend.” Tell me you need.
He breathed through his nostrils as he eyed her face. “I’m more worried about you. You had a rough night.”

She really had. “But you saved me. So I’m alright.”

But his next words sent her mind tumbling. “Actually it was, ah, Felicity who saved you.” Shrugging, his hands lifting in silent apology, he side-stepped her, making his way over to the set of glass leading to his office. “I did what she asked me to do.”

And if he glanced for a moment too long at the desk beside his office before stepping inside, neither he nor she mentioned it.

But he’d just said...

A furrow creased the bridge of her nose in confusion as she followed him in. “Are you being serious right now?” Miss felicity Smoak had that much control in his life? “She works for you underneath Verdant too?”

“With me.”

She came to a halt a few paces in. “What?”

“Felicity doesn’t work for me.” He told her over his shoulder.

“Oliver, she’s your EA. Of course she does.”

Deadly serious, he just said. “No. She doesn’t.” It was firm. Authoritative. “I asked her to be my EA to help me run Queen Consolidated.” Striding behind his desk and opening a drawer (making her internally wince at the memory of the drawers she’d just been looking through). “She works with me.” He glanced back at her briefly. “She’s my partner.”

And it got worse.

Tell me you aren’t that stupid. “Your EA,” she gestured behind her at the abandoned desk, “is your partner?” And what did ‘partner’ imply beyond the physical? “I thought you said Sara was your partner?”

He looked at her... it was odd, but the expression on his face - the quizzical slant to his brow line, the way his eyes tapered and the crystal clear set to his mouth that indicated disagreement - told her what he thought of that idea. His incredulity wasn’t exactly on her list of things Oliver could or would feel in relation to her sister.

Or herself.

“Sara? I never said she was my partner.” An adamantly denial also wasn’t what she’d expected to see or hear from him either, but - as he looked away at the papers in his hands - it became apparent that she knew next to nothing. Not about him. Or his life choices. “Sara wouldn’t either. Felicity’s been with me since... almost since the beginning.” And it softened, his voice making something hot and unwanted slide slowly into her stomach. “The way I used to work, it was... different. At least before she agreed to help us.” He wasn’t even looking at her anymore yet she could feel the gratitude and pride that he obviously felt about that.

She needed to bring him back. “Us?”

When he glanced at her again, it took him a moment before he spoke again, sighing. “You might as
well know. John Diggle is the other member of my team.”

Who? “John?”

He gave her a half smile. “You may recall seeing him as my driver.”

The surprise made her smile back. “Good cover.” His head inclined in acknowledgment. “So you just decided to recruit him to be your other partner?”

”He…” And for some reason, he stopped there - his mouth still open - but his eyes left her, flickering, looking off to the side. “He’s my friend.”

Faltering, Laurel hesitated for a moment. “Alright.”

There was a difference between partner and friend?

“He has a lot of experience, military mostly.” he explained quietly - as if he were talking to himself - his gaze still stolen elsewhere. “And he’s invaluable in the field. But mainly, he’s my friend. I needed him after… after Tommy.”

The atmosphere - the shy but sweet air they’d developed about them - seemed to freeze in place as an abject cold came in from nowhere. It still hurt them both, Tommy’s death and maybe it always would. But the ache she felt now lay more in guilt than grief. Would it ever go away?

She brushed passed it. Strength Laurel. “So she isn’t your friend? Felicity Smoak?”

Again, there was a pause from him; except this time it wasn’t disbelieving or revealing.

He just stilled; he was looking at her but his face was a blank canvass, except for the slight crease between his eyes.

Then a small smile drifted momentarily to his lips as he muttered, “Deja Vu.” The smile left his face completely. “You know,” he started, “I had a conversation like this with your sister last week. I didn’t know why she needed to know.” As though ruminating, Oliver waited for a moment whilst Laurel tried to understand where this was going. “Why do you, Laurel?”

Taken aback, her head jerked. “Excuse me?”

“Why the questions about her?”

“I’m just,” I’m trying to save you, “I’ve missed so much. Almost two years of memories Ollie.” She shrugged, a helpless smile coating her jaw because this was all true, “I want to get to know you again. To know my sister and the lives you’ve been living.”

It seemed simple enough to her.

Slowly - his eyes clearing - he nodded. “I understand.” Looking down as he shuffled his papers, putting them in some sort of order that she didn’t understand, he opened his mouth. “Felicity-”

“Is where exactly?”

Turning around at the pointed voice, Laurel caught sight of who she thought might be Isabel Rochev: the co-owner of QC. Her picture had been in the paper months ago, exacerbating her legendary success over seas and the hope that she’d help return the family business to its former glory.
Lips pursed, the woman considered Laurel like she would an opponent in a boxing ring; as if she was already considering ways to destroy her and they hadn’t even been introduced. “Am I interrupting something?”

In that moment, Laurel was sure of two things. First, Isabel Rochev was as cold hearted as her eyes and second; she liked him. Liked Oliver. But not in the way that spelt romance. In a way that said she’d love to eat him whole, leaving nothing left for anyone else.

“Isabel.” The stack of papers in his hand returned to the table as he took his seat. “Didn’t we just have a meeting?”

The way he spoke – quiet, calm, emotionless – took Laurel by surprise again. His entire demeanour had shifted. And she didn’t know how to read this man.

“A meeting at which your EA was conspicuously absent, I might add.” With her brown locks and modelesque figure, with the way her eyes calculated every nuance in Oliver’s expression - dismissing Laurel altogether as she strode past her without a second glance - Isabel Rochev screamed dangerous.

This wasn’t Laurel’s battle ground: she didn’t know the rules. But she did know that she didn’t like her already. How many femme fatales was Oliver going to surround himself with?

“I’ll just go.” She said, loudly, before Isabel could say anything else. “Leave you to your work?” It was an offer; ‘I’ll stay if you want me to’.

One Oliver declined. “Probably for the best.”

Still, she had to make sure he got the message. So as she backed away, she threw, “I’ll see you later, over her shoulder, “At Verdant?”

*In your base of operations.*

And before he could respond, she was already leaving his office, walking double time – in a calm and orderly fashion – towards the elevators.

With the journal burning a hole in her bag.

She needed to find someplace quiet...

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*Up. Get up.*

Back braced against the wall, Felicity pushed up from the floor. *Steady. No hurling.* Unless it was on Slade’s shoes.

A few minutes ago, she’d woken to darkness again - *how long was I unconscious* - but this time it wasn’t pitch black. There was light beyond the door and by the overall shape of where they’d put her, she was back in the *room.*

Every inch of her felt like one giant, trembling bruise. *How many painkillers will it take to make me*
comatose? He’d used the cattle prod. Stun rod, electrical stick- whatever! He’d used it against her. Him and 3 other guys who could easily take her without them.

Just to teach her another lesson. To express in his own sick way that she was special to him.

Ugh, gag me with a spoon. Preferably with ice cream on it. It was the last thing in the world that she wanted. Please and thank you. And it almost made her shrink into herself, knowing that he would be coming back, which could be at any time. Movement is good. All the movement. She had to get out of here.

It wasn’t just about her anymore.

Was the room actually spinning? Or is it just me? Which was fine. She. Was. Fine.

I’m going to be alright. She was.

…Right?

It doesn’t matter right now.

Thea did, does.

Even though she’d initially cowed away, towards the light – that brief flash of terror stabbing her right between the ribs when she pictured him there in the dark with her–and had sucked in a shout, she’d remembered.

That she’d decided what she was going to do - looking up at him - before she’d fallen unconscious.

Get. Up.

And how long it would take her. Come on, getting on her feet was simple compared to the task of stretching towards the crevice in the wall. Need to build more muscle.

She needed not be tortured for a few days. That would be nice too.

Hands tied overhead, she’d been so relieved to see rope binding her to the thin pipe above instead of cuffs. Or chains. Thank you! Weeks ago, she’d hidden a rusted nail - one she’d found at the docks when she’d been plastered a wall in the hopeless attempt to avoid his feral dogs - knowing that he’d never look for it, that he’d never suspect it was even there.

It had taken an embarrassing 8 days to manoeuvre in the short moments between consciousness and sleep, between being left alone for mere minutes - a few glorious moments where he’d tether her somewhere in there, more often than not, too far from the hole in the wall and walk away - even as the chances that he’d bring her here weren’t high.

She hadn’t done it, plotting for her eventual escape to freedom. It was simply her plan F. A very crappy plan F, but plan F’s were usually the last choice for that reason.

And she hadn’t thought that Slade would take Thea. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

So, it was worth everything terrifying second.

When her fingers touched the edge of metal she almost whooped for joy, carefully pinning it between her fingers to bring out of the crack and towards her binds.

Rusty though it was; the sucker was sharp. And big.
Still, even with this it would take a while for her to get loose.

*Please don’t come back.* Not yet.

She had a feeling about that to. It couldn’t be a coincidence that it was the electoral debate that afternoon. That, the day Slade decides to flip his second switch – he was already crazy – and take Thea is the same day that a later afternoon examination of the pros and cons of both mayoral parties takes place…

Publicity.

It was all for show.

Slade was diverting eyes and ears, sending a message to Oliver; that he was without power. But that couldn’t be all he was doing. *He’d had Sara and Laurel;* if that was all he was after, he wouldn’t need Thea.

*Don’t think about it.* She was decidedly not thinking about a lot of things… because if she gave into that impulse, the urge to run through and dissect her memories of the previous night, the morning and the past 7 weeks, she’d never move again. And right now, that was all she needed to do.

With the nail in hand, she began tearing it across the coarse rope, forcing everything out of head except the task at hand.

*Get to work.*

Ten minutes standing there, plus the repeated check of his watch - his phone - and Oliver was done.

*Where are they?*

Not even hours: the *entire* day. Night was falling… and nothing.

Eyes searching the auditorium - a slow sweep from where he’d wandered in at the back - he felt the stiffness in his spine pull against his shoulders like restraints, felt the dig of his nails against the palms of his hands and the creeping anxiety crawl against the underside of his abdomen when he realised he couldn’t spot them anywhere.

They were supposed to be there. He’d waited. *Something isn’t right.* It settled in his stomach, adding to the churn. *They should be here by now.* He resisted an eleventh check of his watch, balancing on the balls on his feet, as if readying to run.

And since they weren’t there, he couldn’t be. He didn’t *want* to be. But where he wanted to be was unavailable to him… for the moment.

The deep breath he took did absolutely nothing to help him remain calm as his eyes searched again, tapering in distaste at the banners citing ‘Queen for Mayor’.

He’d made a promise to his mother before he learned of her duplicity and while he may no longer be obligated to keep it, he’d also promised Thea that he’d sit by her side through this… *sham.* Thea hadn’t arrived yet either.

It was creeping on him. The most important people in the world to him weren’t where he could see
them. Touch them. Keep them close, keep them safe. Know that at least, for the moment, everything was as well as it could be. He was so close to just... If they didn’t show up in the next ten minutes, he was leaving in the interim to find them. The mayoral advisor who’d near begged him to remain vigilant by his mother’s side through ‘these trying times within the electoral process’ or so he’d put it, could go to hell. Or get another mascot.

So could his mother.

This wasn’t about her anyway.

Behind closed lips, he ground his teeth. Where the hell is John?

It had been a long day. Too long.

Having had his fair share of long days in the years since the Queen’s Gambit sank; it said something that he considered this day to be one of the longest he’d ever had to live through. But in a very real way, it was, because he hadn’t been able to act. On anything. Still - because he’d been hoping standing metaphorically still instead of rushing in like the proverbial bull the exact way he wanted to would have a mitigating affect on Slade’s morning after decision - nothing had gone the way it was supposed to.

And no one noticed but him.

Dig hadn’t texted him back.

After Laurel’s surprise visit - and it was a surprise to find her there, seeing as how she’d made it her mission since his return to avoid any place she associated with him or his name - Isabel hadn’t left after her, like he’d wanted her to. She’d stayed, determined to make sure he heard her; to make sure her easy comfort and hopes for the future of his family was carried across to him.

But it fell on deaf ears, not a dumb ones.

Isabel.

Seeing her, he had to wonder at how. How he had he missed it?

The long day had been made more so with every moment he’d had to look at her, talk to her. Knowing she was working with Slade; it made everything clearer. And a lot of other things more difficult.

Part of him still couldn’t believe it. That a woman - one he’d since decided wasn’t necessarily evil incarnate, as Felicity had put it - could be so malicious anyway. Felicity had been right, as she usually is.

He hadn’t paid attention. He should be used to suffering the consequences of his actions by now.

And his fathers.

Every breath he took in her presence was one clotted with the unwelcome scent of her perfume, with the way her eyes attempted to play mischief with his own and the slight trace of her hand on his arm, offering a reassurance that he questioned she possessed the capacity to actually feel.

It had sung deep in his bones to pull away from her. But is head told him to keep smart.

At the office, she’d behaved as though they were friends, not acquaintances. As though they were
allies and comrades instead of business competitors. As though they hadn’t fucked once in Russia; that they’d instead spent a long night in each other’s arms and hadn’t sped up that brief moment in time. Neither hadn’t even considered making it romantic because, why fake the existence of something they could ever create with each other?

Now he got it, crystal clear; she’d been playing him for her own caprice and he’d been-

“So you slept with her... So you had a moment of weakness. It happens. It’s allowed to happen.”

-Lonely.

...Right.

It’s allowed.

It was a mistake, one that was over and done with.

But the need to wrap a hand around her throat and squeeze until she told him everything became a morbid fixation as the day wore on. It wasn’t the time to question her, not so soon after Slade’s successful kidnaps… yet it was another way that it had been genuinely painful to be inactive in this.

Not because he hated her. Not even because of his father’s affair, though it definitely made him uncomfortable.

But because she was a constant reminder of a mistake he’d made months ago, when it had taken days – weeks – before understanding he even had.

He’d made Felicity his EA.

The way he’d denigrated the role of a dear friend - selfishly placing her as deep in his orbit as he could, because he’d needed her, I’ll always need her, as close to him as he could allow her to be - by making her his executive assistant; a job he could confess to never wondering about, to never caring about how other people might view and perceive such a transfer.

At least, not until he’d heard for it himself; the innuendo’s. The debasing comments. The looks.

Men in the restrooms tossing comments around like they were pieces of tissue paper, like they didn’t sound like animals - like he had once upon a shipwreck ago - all focusing on the new CEO and his dedicated secretarial assistant.

He’d heard and had done nothing.

But not for lack of trying.

He’d seen red. But, having known for a while about the rumour mill working overtime, Felicity had cautioned him against it.

“Though I’m touched that you want to defend my honour Oliver, think of the message you’ll be sending if you do... well, that!”

That being, beating them half to death in the stalls of the bathroom when they next inside. It was this or firing them in front of an audience. Part of him - the part he normally quelled in the daylight - wanted the former, the rest - the decidedly male area of his brain - would have loved carrying out the latter, just to show them who’s boss; to punish them for treating somehow he cared about like she was a toy, someone who deserved the world handed to her on a gold platter but instead,
received him as a gift lacking.

The former almost won.

“I honestly don’t care Felicity; they can’t just-”

“Actually, they can.” The smile she gave him held more kindness in it - even if it was indulgent - than he’d ever deserved. “You made it easy for them.” And this look was more of an ‘I told you so’ and he wasn’t sure he was a fan of this one either. “Now it’s up to me to change their perceptions about... well, us.”

Us.

They’d thought… the whole building; rumours circulating 42 floors about the nature of their relationship and the most popular one had been that she’d risen undeservedly fast through the ranks - as though the promotion wasn’t an insult to her intelligence - on her knees.

Reflexively closing his eyes - swallowing - he allowed his memories to take over, to bring him back.

They’d thought he and Felicity were having sex. Periodically. Frequently or sporadically, it didn’t matter. It was insulting.

But it had made him think things at the time; the kind of things you just don’t say, things he’d decided to never entertain and yet, had found easy to explore.

It was thrilling.

And it was wrong.

But as livid as it had made him - and as much as admitting this made hate himself - the image it conjured - the picture it still brought forth - made for the most vivid dream he’d ever had of her that night. The kind of dream you dread having because it’s just... too good to lose. The type you hate to leave because it makes you see.

That his life will never be as good as the brief moments he’d create as he slept.

He’d woken up disgusted with himself. Disgusted and aching lonely. It left him wanting. And it made the next few weeks, seeing Felicity through the window of his office, close to unbearable.

And it was something he decided he’d never admit; not to himself. So he’d forgone sleeping for more than a few ours here and there until he was sure it was out of his system. And when it finally was, he’d mourned the loss of it. Of the warmth and the beauty of it.

It wasn’t meant for him.

Now, after the night before, he had inkling about who may have fanned the flames of those stories. And Isabel, who hadn’t let him out of her sight for hours, making sure he showed up to an afternoon meeting he couldn’t have cared less about, fit the bill. Sadistically.

Pettily.

Last but not least, because of her, he’d been unable to find out why Dig hadn’t responded to his text after lunch.

You’re late: what’s going on?
It was simple enough. *So why hadn’t he answered?* Every second it went unanswered, was second that added to the discomfort he hadn’t been able to shake all day. Like a splinter in the back of his mind. And it put him on edge.

The worry – the need to see them both, to see *her* – spread out from his gut in a wave of dread and heat, reaching out to his extremities.

One hand loosened and began tapping a rhythm of fingers flying over a keyboard against his thigh.

He needed to see her. It wasn’t even an option at this point. Friends, comrades, partners: labels didn’t matter.

It was eating at him: he hadn’t taken lunch or breakfast, hadn’t slept even though he’d near-to ordered Sara and Laurel to do so and he’d been unable - when left alone, which had been a few and far occurrence for the day - to sit or stand still for more than one moment at a time.

_Felicity._

Hadhed slept? Eaten? Was she okay after everything the day before? He needed her safe, to know that she _was_ safe. He knew she was, he _did_… but he also didn’t.

He _didn’t._

He trusted Dig; trusted him with everything. But he couldn’t _see_ her. He needed that, to see her. In the early hours of the morning, he’d had all the patience in the world. But when they didn’t arrive by 1pm, 2pm...

It wouldn’t be enough to just hear her. Only with his own eyes could he trust – verify – that she was in fact fine. And it wasn’t just about that, about making sure she’d slept the way he hadn’t.

He wanted to _talk_ to her. It was ridiculous. It a *comfort.* Security; something he shouldn’t need from a woman half his size. A woman with ten times his heart. One thousand times the brain.

And still, he wanted that ride with her. He wanted dinner and talking. *Let her mouth run away with her again.* Touching.

Learning.

But she _wasn’t_ there.

The tapping increased in frequency. *Dig wouldn’t stay silent like this.*

Something was wrong. _Had_ to be.

He was moving before the thought registered. *I can’t stay here.* Political nightmare or not, the Mayoral candidate’s son was leaving before the debate. Another minute in that place and he’d do something he’d regret, because the option to drive over to Felicity’s house was too tempting. It left open avenues with labels that had titles: ‘let’s stay in and order Chinese’, ‘wear comfortable clothes; we’re going for that ride’, ‘trust me’, and ‘can I stay the night’?

Pace quickening, he strolled through the open area leading to the auditorium where TV crews were positioned, waiting for the contenders to arrive and scanned automatically for Thea’s form, not finding her anywhere.

_Is she with Roy?* Brow tightening, he unfastened his suit jacket and made his way towards the side
door, his hand reaching into his pocket for his phone-

“Ollie?”

It took everything inside him, every ounce of strength he had to spare, to halt mid-stride instead of obeying the very real need that was starting to burn him alive. His eyes closed. Sara.

“Oliver?”

And Laurel.

Why? He’d seen them today, more than once. What needed to be said that already hadn’t been? He knew they were okay. So he didn’t want to do this right now, whatever ‘talk’ they needed with him… it could wait. Till tomorrow.

Taking a deep breath - a reach for calm that shouldn’t have felt like a climb up Mt. Everest - he dropped his arm that had been reaching for the handle and turned, fully intending to tell them he couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Won’t-

But then he caught the genuinely troubled look on Sara’s face and his insides started to slowly ice over. “What is it?” Taking a step towards them, Oliver whispered under the nosey eyes and ears of the camera man several meters aft of the Lance sisters. “Has something happened?”

Mouth pursing - like she was tempted to worry her lip - Sara spoke in a hushed murmur. “No, everything’s fine.”

“Then what-”

“I think you need to hear what Laurel just told me.” It came out in a rush, like Sara was working against a clock he couldn’t hear the ticking of. “About Slade.” Bluntly, the name smacked him in the chest. “He talked to her.”

This wasn’t news. “We already know that.” His eyes moved to Laurel. “You said you couldn’t remember so-”

“It’s been coming to me in bits and pieces.” Laurel cut in as if she’d been waiting for an opening and couldn’t hold in the words any longer, “he told me that he has someone working with him. Someone you’re close to. A mole.”

Completely still, he couldn’t find a response beyond silence. What is she talking about? A mole? It was someone close to him? There was no one who fit that description.

“It’s someone you care about.” She added pointedly, revealing that she and Slade had quite the tete-a-tete. “It had to be, for him to learn more about you.”

Breathing in slow, rolling rhythms - a mediation that wasn’t working - was his miserable attempt at controlling the rising dread that started to mount up behind his eyes; he was sure they could see it on his face. The thread on his control thinning.

It was - all of it - just beginning, wasn’t it?

But he was leaping ahead, as wound up as he was, to conclusions possibly unfounded. So he waited for Laurel to finish...

Except she paused long enough to make Oliver want to take her by the arms and shake her, but as
usual, she was unrelenting in her perception of the truth and what she thought it was. He knew better. There were many truths.

“He also said that he’s been watching us, each of us.” Laurel uttered to him. “That he has people everywhere. They’ve been following me, following my father and…”

She continued to speak but he couldn’t hear a thing beyond the rushing sound in his ears.

Each of them. Slade had been watching each of them? Not just Sara like he’d assumed. Or Laurel, because he’d told Slade about her on the island. Each.

That included Diggle. And Roy. His mother.

Felicity.

What have I been doing all this time? Felicity had been right 7 weeks prior; there was nothing he could have done to stop this, stop Slade from slowly sliding into his life like a disease only to start picking away at his flesh at his loved ones.

Where’s Thea.

“Ollie?”

Pulled back - damn it - he shook himself; it wasn’t the time to lose himself to fear. Lifting both hands, his palms slid against his face - over roughened cheeks - until they were at the base of his skull, automatically bowing his head in response. “We need a plan.” He muttered, his mind already concocting numerous scenarios-

“There was something else.” Sara chimed in, making him peer up at her. “Something more… personal.”

And it was odd because Laurel, who hadn’t blushed in his presence in almost 7 years, came very close to doing just that - if the way her eyes lit up were any indication - to flushing bright red instead of the tiny smattering of pink high on her cheekbones. “Sara, not now.”

Her strawberry blonde hair waving as she moved, Sara firmly said. “He needs to hear this.”

“He needs to know about the mole first.” Laurel pressed, pointing at him as he watched them in turn, head still bent, waiting with a rising sense of impatience.

“But I don’t…” collecting herself for a second, Sara fully turned to her sister. Bracing for impact. “I don’t think it necessarily means what you think it does Laurel.” The words - ones he didn’t understand - slowly spoken - gently intoned - made Laurel stiffen for some reason. The affect thinned her lips as her gaze on her sister took on a shade of something that told him she felt like she’d just been metaphorically slapped in the face. “I’m not discounting it; I’m just saying I need to hear Oliver’s opinion on it.”

My opinion on what?

The furrow between Laurel’s brows spoke exquisitely of buried emotion. “Why can’t it be exactly what I think it means?” She asked; voice just as low. It was like both of them had forgotten he was there, which would have been fine if he’d been able to leave. “He said it to me, to my face. Yes; it was an insinuation,” her voice rose an octave, “but it was directed at me. Why would he say it if he didn’t mean-”
“I don’t know.” A placatory tone and a hand on Laurel’s arm from Sara’s hand had Laurel taking a deep breath; her eyes skirting away from her sister to flicker towards him for a moment. The shyness of it was odd. Laurel was anything but shy. “But everything Slade says has a purpose to it. Why those words? Why say them that way?”

“You think Slade-” suddenly realising how loud she was being, Laurel looked about her furtively before leaning closer to her sister. “You think there might have been an ulterior motive behind it?”

“Yeah.” Sara nodded. “Something only Oliver would know. I think he expected you tell him. Why else would he have let you go?”

“But what about-”

Enough. “Stop.” He said quietly, making them blink at him in turn. He really didn’t care. “The mole?” Brows raised high in question, his hands fell to his sides and he sought out Laurel who’d been the most insistent of the pair and almost shrugged at her. “Who is it?”

To this, her mouth opened… then closed. “Maybe you ought to sit down; this might be difficult to hear.”

Was she joking? “I don’t have the time for this.” Watching her stare at him with increased intensity and surprise. A if she didn’t expect this from him, he whispered. “One of you needs to tell me what’s going on right now or I’m going to go find out where Thea is, pick up Felicity-”

He paused midway because the subsequent jolt Laurel gave was both obvious and confusing. It made her press her lips together like she was a still desperate to get something off her chest and yet at the same time, was scared of doing so.

The furrow at his brow depended. “Laurel, just-”

“It’s her.” She blurted out.

Next to her, he saw Sara briefly close her eyes as she gave the smallest of headshakes before speaking a warning in a name. “Laurel.”

“No.” Shaking her head, Laurel sent her sister another look. “I won’t lie to him.”

What? He was done with this. “Won’t lie to me about what?” The question would have thundered out of him if he’d been speaking in more than an undertone.

“It’s your EA: Felicity Smoak.” Swallowing, Laurel continued softly. “She’s the mole; she’s working with him, with Slade.”

The words came out of her in a rush - like she might lose her nerve if she didn’t - but she might as well have been speaking Swahili for all the good it did. It was about as anticlimactic as it could get. Because, there was just no way.

“Felicity.” Unbelievable. He just… looked at her. At Laurel. At the way she nodded at him, like she was guiding him through the process, as if he was beginning to see the light and she was there for him. There was no other way to describe it other than to say, he just looked at her. Staggered. “Felicity Smoak.” He repeated, making sure he had in fact not been hearing voices because the insinuation alone was just… absurd.

Cruel.
“I know it’s her.” And she spoke with such certainty; he started to feel sorry for her. In fact, he was about to give a thorough explanation as to the whys of the ridiculousness of her claim when she said. “I have proof Ollie.”

That stopped him.

Stilling, his eyes flying to Sara in confusion, the younger sister held his gaze… it was confirmation. Of proof. That Laurel apparently had something that said Felicity Smoak - his girl - had betrayed him. Them.

It was insane.

As he took them in, the light in his eyes - the spark of curiosity and annoyance both - died.


He’d said that. Had told them there were places he needed to be, people he needed to see. And they gave him nonsense.

The effort to care may have abandoned him, but his voice didn’t. “Excuse me?”

“Proof Ollie.” Laurel repeated, slightly breathless but then again, he was practically glaring at her. At them both. “I have proof.”

“You have lies.” It was that simple; whatever Laurel had found, or thought she’d found were obviously things she’d been fed. Where she got them from was another matter and his next concern. “If the evidence was substantial, you’d have sent off for an arrest warrant by now.” he knew her well enough for that considering she’d spent months hunting him. When the memories hit her, she quelled slightly, by which time he shaking his head - utterly disbelieving - and exhaled with it, “Whatever you think you have, it’s circumstantial. You can’t use it in a court of law.”

Whatever it was though, he had to get his hands on it.

Incredulity transformed her features from uncompromisingly compassionate to insulted and defiant. It didn’t surprise him. “You can’t just dismiss me like that.”

“I’m not dismissing you.” The line of his jaw, leading to his cheekbones - to the corners of his eyes - flexed. “I’m denying your evidence.” Moving around her, presenting his back to prying eyes, he spoke as quiet as he could. “I don’t believe it.” He shrugged. “There’s nothing to it.”

“How can you be so blind?” She sounded just as harassed as she had when they’d argued in the hallway after the debacle of a dinner. “You decided, just like that?” She snapped her fingers. “Is crime so simple a thing in your world now Ollie that you can and will ignore it at your leisure?”

“Is this where it starts?” He threw at her and, baffled, her eyes narrowed; rising insecurities making them flutter in the light of the auditorium. “The judgments? The quick presumptions? The ‘yes’ now and ‘no’ later?”

“Oh, get over yourself.”

“I have done.” The low snap made her ramrod. “I had to.” And he saw her gentle at that. “I’m not that kid that went off on a pleasure cruise anymore Laurel.”

Nodding - accepting - held up her hands in surrender. “I know. I’m just- I’m not used to seeing this side of you.”
“What side?”

“The side that cares enough about people that you would risk your reputation - your family’s reputation - and your life on the belief that someone you trust isn’t a bad person, even when evidence suggests-”

“Stop it. Just... don’t.” His tone alone should have been enough to ignite the primitive kind of fear prey does to a predator. But she still stood there, raring to go. This time, Oliver made sure she could see him. Hear him. “You don’t know Felicity Smoak.” It was impossible to stop now; the way he said her name. Christ, he needed to see her. And that need was reflected in the tone he now used. In the hushed quality to the words, in the way he felt his eyes change with it. “You don’t. If you did,” he continued when he saw Laurel open her mouth to object, “you wouldn’t even think of saying these things. Not to me or to anyone else.”

“He’s right.” Sara acknowledged softly, standing back some; giving them room. “Felicity…” she shook her head and there was this little smile on her face and she figured images of nervous hand gestures and caring blue eyes had probably infiltrated her vision. “She doesn’t work like that. Up here.” She tapped her skull. “It’s not in her.”

“But you wouldn’t know.” Looking genuinely puzzled by the way they denied her truths, Laurel shrugged off her sister’s hand. “You can never really know a person. That’s what people like her do. Ollie,” people like her; as if she was referencing a vile criminal elite. “They make you believe,” eyes going to him, her soothing tone did nothing but exacerbate the precarious nature of his control, “they entrap their targets. They’re pros at this! They make them give into them, trust them.”

It burst out of him then, the laugh. It was as harsh as sandpaper against wood and utterly without humour, shocking the women in front of him.

Felicity made him trust her. Right.

Felicity Smoak hadn’t done a thing except exist. That was it. That’s all it took. She’d just been herself. The idea that it was a façade - her grace, her beauty, her light, her humour, her words, her - didn’t make any sense to him. And it didn’t because he knew in his heart that every memory between them was genuine. That every moment in time had been accidental and all the more precious for it.

“You’re saying,” he began - traces of the chuckle still lingering on his mouth - with the intention of making this stop right here, right now because he really didn’t. Want. To. Be. Here. “When I first met her, almost two years ago,” he emphasised and something in Laurel’s eyes flickered: doubt, “are you telling me that was when she started playing me? That she’s been working for Slade since the very beginning?”

“That isn’t-” catching herself, Laurel took a breath. “It didn’t have to be from the beginning. They would have only had to meet recently.” At his scoff - the way he turned his head from her in the exact way he knew would annoy her - Laurel chose a different thread to pluck. “He could even be coercing her or something.”

“No.” It was firm. Final. And as he took one step towards her, catching the way her lashes fell and lifted, he made sure she knew that. “No.”

She scowled up at him. “You’re being irrational.”

“I don’t believe it.” He stated simply, unblinking. Repeatedly. “I’ll never believe it.”

Seeing her jaw clench, he waited for some corroboration from her that this was over. Done with.
Instead, she said something that threatened to undo him.

“There are sixteen cameras.” Every word she pronounced with zealous pride, not knowing what they cost him. “Not twelve like she told you.”

He froze.

Coffee, a car drive, a conversation.

And the cameras.

“I need to go out there and place my transmitters at specific points. I’ll need…” Biting on her bottom lip, he waited as she mentally tallied. Patiently. Mostly. “Twelve. At least.” His grimace had her wincing because, yeah, that could take hours. “Sorry, but Oliver if I can’t find him, chances are the Bratva won’t be able to. That isn’t my ego talking either. And don’t you think,” she added at his sigh, “that Slade would make it his priority to target your resources?”

...Had she added more?

It was their secret; their spontaneous, off the hip plan - like they’d formed a resistance, a collusion of 2 - that had allowed him to sleep at night.

So how did Laurel know about it?

Staring into her face, feeling every muscle in his own start to tighten, he didn’t say a word. He didn’t need to.

She was doing it all for him. “Felicity Smoak put up four extra cameras in the last three weeks. One of those cameras?” Jaw clenched, stubborn - needing to sell her point - her tone was closer to derisive than his had been a minute ago. “It rests on the road leading up to the factory where you said she found me last night.”

His heart thudded in his chest. Still, he said nothing.

“Now,” squaring up to him, Laurel’s face drew closer to his and her voice quietened, “how did she know about that road Ollie?”

But his gaze was already drifting up over her face, over head, to the wall behind her.

How did she know about that road Ollie?

How did she know? Well...

He felt himself smile.

“She’s Felicity Smoak.” He breathed. “She makes the impossible, possible.” It wasn’t an answer, he knew that much. But the questions he needed to ask weren’t for Laurel’s ears. Nor would the answers he wanted come from her.

Which meant this whole thing was already in his rear-view. It was passed time to pick her up.

Unexpectedly looking back down to Laurel, he asked. “Are we done now?” Mouth open, eyes wide - disbelieving - he seemed to have finally rendered her mute. He nodded. “Were done.” And he made to turn but Sara’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Ollie, wait.”
This time the impatience in his voice broke through; he couldn’t help it. “Why?”

It didn’t faze her. “You need to hear the rest of it.”

“No.” His head shook left to right once. Sharply. “I don’t.”

Arms folding, Laurel muttered to herself. “Maybe he’s right.”

“No, he’s not.”

There was something to Sara right then. Something he couldn’t read and his eyes squinted trying hard to do so anyway. “You’re not saying you believe this, are you?”

“Look,” that wasn’t the tone he wanted to hear. “I don’t know what’s going on. But I do know that Felicity would never betray you.” It was gratifying to hear until Sara followed it with, “But she also isn’t here and that’s another problem.” She peered at him. “Has she ever kept you waiting before?”

He didn’t even have to think. “No.” And the implications scared him.

“Right.” Sara exhaled.

Again, he felt it. “Something’s wrong.”

“Yes.” Her mouth popped.

Shit. Having someone else thinking the same as him suddenly made it real. “I’m going to call Dig, get an update.”

“Good idea, but I need to say this before it starts.” In his peripheral, he saw her gesture to where the camera man was finally setting up.

He nodded, his phone already pressed to his ear as he muttered without any bite. “Make it quick.”

And he waited, tensing further with each ring left unanswered…

“Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl.”

Everything stopped.

His head turned - as though the air was thickening about him, he felt like he was moving through sludge - to see Sara watching him and mouthed one word, because his voice had left him.

“What?”

“It was the last thing Laurel remembers Slade saying to her.” She explained, intensely focused on his reaction, on the utter lack of movement from him - his phone was still pressed against his ear though the call had since been declined - the frozen expression on his face, and the way he didn’t blink as he listened with rapt attentiveness, “He said: ‘Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl’.”

Each word rang like a gong through his head.

“He was trying to scare me.” Laurel added softly, not quite looking at him. “To make me turn against you for not preventing him from kidnapping us.”

He didn’t hear her.
“It could be something else too.” Sara told Laurel who sent her a stony stare back and an arched a brow.

“How?”

Sara answered but he didn’t hear it. Any of it; their words, the continued exchange of disagreements, the logic in Sara’s tone, the irritation in Laurel’s… none of it.

He heard him. His voice.

**Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl.**

**No.**

It wasn’t, isn’t possible. Slade wouldn’t- he’d made sure. Oliver had made damn sure that Slade would never be given reason to see her as…

**As my girl.**

**Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl.**

Like the earth - his world - was tilting, his vision swam; filling with images of blonde hair, of glasses that begged to be taken off her nose just the way he’d always wanted to, of a smile that made the sun look dim… of denials and refusals on lips he sometimes found himself staring at and wondered if she ever noticed.

Of the way she’d started to change. To tire, when he knew she was - not so secretly - a bundle of energy and unshakable faith.

“You look pale.”

*Her lips pressed together. “It’s nothing.”*

Of the way she’d made clear that she didn’t need his help…

“The truth.” He licked his lips. “I want you to tell me the truth.”

“Oliver; it’s not like you can do anything about it.”

*He flinched, feeling that blow ring everywhere. “…Right.”*

But, did she not need his help or did she not want it? There was a difference. And in that difference laid the truth.

And it wasn’t that she was lying; he didn’t care about that. He lied all the time.

It was that he knew she was lying to keep him from worrying. From wondering. From-

From delving deeper.

And he’d let her.

**Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl.**

What the hell had he been thinking? Why hadn’t he pressed her?
“I didn’t believe you.” Even though he had reason enough to shout, he was murmuring. “Earlier. But I let it go because I wanted you to trust me. I wanted to wait until you were ready to tell me. But now, with this,” he gestured, without looking, to Sara, “it can’t wait.”

Why hadn’t he made her? He knew best of all that sometimes, you just didn’t get the time you needed to tell the one you care about how much they mean to you. Of making sure the ones you love know that they matter, that they’re in your thoughts.

The forefront of them.

“Don’t stop.” The undertone he used - short - was imploring. “Please. Don’t ever lose that faith in me. Don’t go to somewhere I can’t reach.”

Until he realised this - that he couldn’t leave the important things in life till the end of any day - his words were less than useless.

He shouldn’t have let her go.

But I did.

The phone slowly coming down from his ear, he stared into nothing. The weight of it in his hand sent a burning shot of adrenaline down his arm, to his heart; flooding it. Each beat – each expansion and contraction – was near painful.

And Dig wasn’t answering his calls, his texts- even Sara thought there was something wrong.

Fuck.

Then a gasp to his right made him whip around - beyond hyperaware - to look at Laurel; wondering at the way she backed up a step, at how her hands gripped her bag like a lifeline, at the way her face paled, at her normally narrowed eyes widening, stunned - afraid - at something behind them…

At someone.

It felt like he was moving in slow motion as he turned with Sara towards the foyer, knowing instinctively who it was that shook her. There, stood in the main entrance talking to his mother... was Slade Wilson.

And suddenly it was crystal clear. And Oliver didn’t know why it hit him so vividly right there. The whole day had been one long stall to this. Isabel keeping him focused at QC: her way of stopping him from leaving when it was all he’d wanted to do, practically throwing him into the a limo to get him to the rally...

Again, thinking everything was fine, he’d let her.

Now shaking his mother’s hand - his mother smiling the kind of smile that said he’d charmed her - Slade let her go; watching her stride away. And like he’d known their eyes were on him - he had - Slade’s head turned to them.

And he sent them a smile.

If a smile was what you would call the way his jaw stretched into a mask of malice to match his cold, solitary eye. Then he was moving, following Oliver’s mother back into the auditorium... a woman who Oliver cared for - loved - despite their rift.
He was moving before he realised it.

“No wait-” Sara hissed from behind him. “Ollie, stop!”

He didn’t. His tenuous grip on himself was starting to shake at the seams. Slade was there with them. He had no choice.

He was back inside the grand hall before Sara could catch up and absently it was relieving to hear that they hadn’t followed him.

He only had eyes for one man.

“Oh, hello kid.”

Kid.

Something in his stomach pulled. “Slade.” Coming to stand beside him, oddly at the back wall - as if Slade had wanted a Birdseye view of everyone in there - Oliver spoke with a huge amount of emotional restraint. “What are you doing here?”

“What a question to ask an old friend.” The husky tenor did nothing to soften the edge of the blade beneath the words. “I’m here for your mother. She asked me to come.” He added, probably seeing the same kind of horror that children make when a parent is in danger and they are helpless to protect them shoot through Oliver’s face. He matched it with one of supreme disinterest. “We’ve been getting acquainted, she and I.”

“Don’t,” it came out more hoarse than threatening, “touch my mother.”

That one eye pinned him to the side. “And what would you do if I already had?”

The feeling in Oliver’s stomach lurched, his eyes searching the face before him.

But then Slade sighed, like he was already bored with this, with Oliver. “Relax. She isn’t my type, as you already know.”

Remember?

A shallow exhale left him. “Then what are you doing?”

“Learning.”

You.

“This isn’t the place to start something.” Eyes flickering towards the front of the auditorium - they’d already started - Oliver watched his mother debate with Sebastian for the crowd. “Not here.” Please.

“When did your theatricality die?” Hands reaching up to straighten the lapels of his coat, Slade roughly muttered the very last thing Oliver wanted to hear. “This is the perfect place.”

Opening his mouth, shifting about - to ask him what he meant when he spoke to Laurel - the presenter on stage spoke into the microphone, cutting him off before he could start.

“Alright, that’s time. I’ll remind the candidates to please refrain from interrupting.” The man eyed both his mother and Sebastian respectively. “Now we have a series of video questions submitting by Starling City voters and- oh.” Frowning, the presenter side-eyed Mrs Queen. “This one comes from Thea Queen, there must be mistake. I-“
The large screen behind the stage switched to the video message and as white noise briefly blared, Oliver waited to see his sister there, wondering why she was-

And then there she was.

“Help.”

Like he’d been shot, he stared openmouthed: chest aching, eyes unable to look away from... this.

“Somebody help me, please!”

He’ll never forget that look of terror on her face; the way her eyes - wet with tears - were rimmed black with the smudges of her mascara, how the curls in her hair lay damp with sweat and plastered to her neck, of the ropes around her wrists and at the way she was gasping like the frightened child she was...

He’ll never forget the sight of an impersonator in a black and orange mask, stepping into the frame. Putting a hand around her mouth...

And pulling her in close before words appeared across the screen:

**HOW MUCH IS THEA QUEEN’S LIFE WORTH TO YOU?**

“See kid,” and the sound of that voice, now, made his stomach drop, “it’s not *always* about you.”

Slowly, feeling like the earth had been removed from under his feet, Oliver turned to see him. See through him.

For once, Slade wasn’t smiling. “Except this time it is, isn’t it?”

He couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move.

Even as he watched Slade talk – unehearing – he was powerless to push past the dread now assaulting him from the inside out.

*Why?*

*Why do this? Why not just come after me?*

Because too would be too easy. And quick.

It was strange how slow his mind had become. He was normally the first to respond, the first to see the attack coming. It was a skill Slade had helped hone in him and it had kept him alive.

So when his old mentor suddenly turned back to the screen – seeing the slight flicker of something in his expression that spoke of surprise and disbelief – Oliver somehow managed to do the same.

And felt *agony.*

She dressed in white. A blur on screen. The sound now muted. But she was there.

With Thea.

And *not* Diggle-

And she was beating the man who’d grabbed Thea with what he was sure was a stun rod.
The camera having been knocked on its side - she must have rammed into whoever it was, Oliver
didn’t care - cast a side image that jumped every other second, depicting one very scared Thea
Queen giving Felicity Smoak an open mouthed stare as she-

As his IT girl. His Girl Wednesday. His Girl Friday. His Girl Every day. His Girl.

His *Felicity*-

He saw her straighten, obviously winded and turn to his sister.

The image flickered dangerously and his heart jumped, needing to see more, to see where they were-

He could just make out as Felicity’s mouth moved; as her lips formed rapid words, as she rushed to
Thea’s side, sawing apart her binds, as she answered whatever was tumbling out of Thea’s mouth, as
she saved his sister’s life in a pair of shorts and dirtied t-shirt he knew weren’t hers.

He started to tremble.

Thea.

Felicity.

But it was Slade’s voice next to him that turned his world red.

“Clever girl.”

It was hushed murmur. A *caress*.

Oliver looked at him.

Slade did the same in return. “You should have kept a better watch of her.”

The vacuum of sound in his ears became a dull din of shouts ringing through the auditorium as the
people there cried out in an uproar when Oliver Queen slammed Slade bodily - loudly - into the wall
and hand wrapped around his throat.
Phew! It's done. (It killed me a little: I'm just a little bit dead) Hope you guys like this but PLEASE don't skip to the end (looking at you Genie). It's a little different from previous chapters but this one has to be. There's some language in this one that may leave much to be desired.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He has them.

It slid in, slipped deep, before he could stop it.

After seeing them on the muted camera, the seconds between then and right now turned into suffocating minutes, into incomprehensible hours as he slowly came to understand that the people who he’d been waiting to see, weren’t coming.

It was… it was hell. A hell that was the departure of a certain sound, of an unquantifiable presence abruptly taken from his life. The kind that could weigh him into the ground – that could kill a man like him.

During the first few weeks of his return, he’d have given anything for quiet. To be left alone. After
five years of running, standing still as others crowded you in wasn’t optional.

Over time, not having her voice in his ear - most days - became oddly unbalancing. He’d never needed that. Not before the island, on or after. But eventually he’d considered that maybe he’d just never recognised that he had. And he’d learned to adapt in the moments he didn’t have that cornerstone, learned to not need it during his hours playing CEO.

Knowing that if he called her, now, she wouldn’t answer because she was gone - gone; she was gone - had his world making no sense at all.

Suddenly it was something he couldn’t lose; one of the many things he’d thought would always be right there for him to take comfort in when it came to her.

Her voice in his ear. Her words in his head. Her fingers raining answers down across her keyboard. Her smile in his eyes. Her light touching his dark.

Thinking about how that beauty could be destroyed, felt like the death of everything precious. Like the world had abruptly gone wrong in a way that marked Time for the cruel, capricious devil that it was. And he was the only one who noticed in that split moment. As if the entirety of his focus narrowed down to that absence…

Madness.

For it all to come down to one. But sometimes you only get one-

One coffee. One hug. One whisper of a word… one instance in time to make it right. Only to make it wrong again.

It didn’t feel real. A jagged wound with no name; one he’d almost forgotten existed inside him, one she’d effortlessly filled a while ago; and it deepened at each tug his once comrade, his friend, made to him with every taunt, every reminder. Every look. Every action.

Right then he’d have given anything to hear her voice.

Anything.

She wasn’t supposed to be seen by him. He’d tried so hard…

“Clever girl.”

But he heard Slade’s voice instead. (And there was something in that - clever girl - something Oliver didn’t understand, something that shot through him - something he knew he’d detest.)

He didn’t so much look as silently scream at him - his blue eyes held imprisoned by one black hollow - feeling numb in so many ways as words to undo him continued to come.

Slade sighed. “You should have kept a better watch of her.”

You should have-

“It was the last thing Laurel remembers Slade saying to her.” Sara explained, intensely focused on his reaction. “He said: ‘Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl’.”

But he hadn’t.

Phantom fingers stole inside his chest, wrapping around his heart and twisting; lungs paralysed, his
rib cage constricted painfully in a futile bid to control the wave of heat that stemmed from his core. Like the blood in his body had started to *burn*; flooding through his veins with a different kind of desire, replacing it with liquid fire.

**With Red.**

He saw red. *Felt* it. As if it was an actual physical sensation. *Red.*

Like her lips, her pen. Her heart... Her.

*F.*

It ripped out; noiseless rage spreading through him like a wave, forcing him to move, to act, before he could think, before he could *breathe* - it was too much and not enough all at once - to strike forwards.

Grabbing onto Slade, both hands clamping down on his arms, Oliver shoved him bodily, roughly, into the wall behind him-

*He has them.*

-One hand latched fast without telling it to around his throat, even knowing that Slade free himself any time he wanted.

But they didn’t break their stare.

And he didn’t hear the shouts about him, didn’t see the expanse of the room they stood in or the way Sara was reaching for him in his peripheral... There was nothing.


That he’d do it; that he’d go so far. *They were innocent.*

When were they taken? How many hours ago? Because he’d been right: it had all been a stall. The whole day - one successful attempt at keeping him unaware after another. And he’d fallen for each one; his back turned in the wrong direction the entire time, facilitated by the ones who were meant to love him most.

Being held up by Sara and Laurel more than twice.

Spending the day incommunicado at board meetings that meant *nothing* to him - for all he tried, he couldn’t remember the debriefings - at Isabel’s insistence.

His mother *insisting* they meet to discuss the Mayoral Debate, which ended up being a ploy for her to elicit aid from QC for her proposed time in office, one that he’d fled as soon as he’d been able and had returned - dutiful - to his office, thinking about what Felicity would say should he further neglect his duties as CEO.

Thinking he had nothing better to do with his time than to wait.

*I was everywhere except where I was needed.* Except where he was supposed to be, where he’d *wanted* to be. Where he had to be.

He hadn’t seen it, hadn’t checked-*why hadn’t I? Why hadn’t I made sure?*

It was never supposed to happen.
Thea was never meant to be touched by his world; never meant to see the dark in Starling city - in life in general - that could house the type of monsters that lived there beneath her focus, like the one in her brother. Like the one in Slade.

And Felicity-

_Felicity._

Like claws - feeling every inch the monster he’d found in Russia - Oliver’s fingers dug deep into Armani and flesh. It made no difference to the cool composure lining Slade’s face, a face Oliver wanted to rip off because-

_Not her._


_“We can protect her.”_ 

He’d made that promise to John. They - _he_ - would keep her out of danger, out of sight; untouched, unseen and unheard by the criminal element. They’d never know her face or her name, never understand that the reason The Arrow could be so effective was because of an IT girl in 2 inch heels with a smile and loose tongue that explained exactly why a vigilante might want to keep her close. Always.

She’d never be a target. Never have a reason to lose that genuine goodness she possessed in spades.

_Not her. Not her. Not her, not her, not her, not her, not her, not her._

Teeth grinding against the torrent, Oliver leaned into the hold he had on Slade - feeling like if he let him go something worse would happen - and shrugging off Sara when she tried to rein him in.

_“Laurel,” he absently heard her order, quickly - quietly, “call dad. Now.”_ 

But he was falling.

They were out there. Experiencing what was possibly the worst minutes, hours, or _day_ of their lives. But all he could think was if they had been waiting for someone to notice? Waiting to be rescued? _Waiting for me?_ 

Felicity would; knowing him as she does. That there would be no choice to make. _She knows that; she has to._ She would have waited. She had faith in him - _she has faith in me_, in their partnership, _in what we do._ Except he’d just seen her save his sister in a way she should never have had to… alone.

_Reacting_, just as he was right now, because she’d had to. _Because of me._

It was written on Slade’s face, his twisted logic; an entitlement that somehow justified his taking of a teenage girl; the _hate_ there, the desire to see Oliver _hurt_...

He was making it a reality.

And even after everything he’d seen, Oliver couldn’t fathom that. The reason he’d tried to do this alone almost 2 months ago, the reason he’d wanted to push them all away, the same reason Felicity showed him an alternative to… it came back now; too fast and too strong to make sense of.
“How could you?” It was unintentional, the whisper. “It’s Thea.” Panic lanced through him. *Thea.* His baby sister.

If Oliver succumbed, if he considered the ramifications, if he took that breath, if he let it all in... he’d *lose* it.

Yet he could see Thea’s face; a sea of disappointment held in hazel as he - once more with feeling - walked away from her. It was a very brief thing because the way blonde locks and a bright gaze took its place so sinuously - as if he’d always seen her inside himself - felt like an explosion of memory.

He’d see her stood there sometimes in dreams too, just as she’d been yesterday. Responding the way she did to the simple things he’d say, making him feel *more* than just a man; a man who could make her smile and laugh like that if she needed to. The way she’d gaped at his hair and the honest pain she’d felt for the presence of his own. How she’d pressed her warmth into his back, holding him in her arms on his bike as they’d rode; as if he wasn’t this dangerous creature, as if he was deserving of tenderness, and it was such a stark contrast to how he’d felt with Sara at his spine - normal, comfortable, the *same* - that he didn’t know what to do with it.

But he knew two things: first, he was the safest place on earth for Felicity Smoak. A veritable fact. Unquestionable. Second, it was starting to dawn in him that he was also the most dangerous and not for the reasons normally listed in his head.

And it only touched him, *now,* that she was his too; his safe place. And a touch could be deadlier - more powerful - than a thousand knives. The magic in it could shift worlds…

Or alter perspectives.

He needed to do something that took him away from the crushing weight of this: how it dragged its fingers under his skin and over the bones of his face, how it made him want to feel nothing else but that seductive *red* because it helped when he did. And it didn’t matter.

*I want her here.*

That mattered. That was everything he couldn’t say. Everything he *should* have said but hadn’t before Slade had taken her. *He took my girl.*

**You should have kept a better watch of her**

She may have gone home the night before but he’d *told* her to go; *he’d left* her. *I let her go.*

And he was damned for it.

He’d just wanted her to sleep. To rest. To help her in some very small way. That was all. She’d needed it, more than he’d needed her.

But what if *she’d needed him,* more than she’d needed sleep and more than he’d needed her and she just... hadn’t said a word? She would, wouldn’t she? She’d keep quiet.

“Mr Queen, Sir, I’m going to have to ask you take a step back!”

He heard them, the security personnel, but they didn’t penetrate.

…If he’d just done what his gut had been *screaming* at him to do from the moment she’d left the night before- no, even then; if he’d *kept* her there. If he’d asked her - pleaded with her, gone down on his knees and begged her the way she deserved (to be thought of) - to stay. Think up any excuse,
any lie - he’d do it.

*I need you here.* He’d say the words. *Don’t leave. You don’t need to go. You can stay here.*

*Stay with me.*

Felicity, please.

Any objections could have been annulled: there was safety in numbers. In them all being together; that’s all he’d have needed to say. It seemed so obvious now. She could have slept on his cot where he would have watched over her, where he could have properly breathed with her there and felt some of that peace he’d missed - had been missing - all through the day.

But he hadn’t and now *both were-*

His fingers tightened against the strong pulse beneath them.

If she didn’t fill that place inside him the way she did - that void he’d thought was his resting place - if she hadn’t said ‘if you’re not leaving, I’m not leaving’, if she didn’t demand life to grant him the same happiness she saw him covet in others, if she didn’t look at him the way she did - like she thought him capable of flight, even as he constantly showed her his *mess* - if she didn’t believe in him with a tenacity that made him want to stop her mouth or prove her wrong, if she didn’t show such loyalty, if she didn’t remind him of his light, if she didn’t care for him with every word and look and-

If Felicity *didn’t.*

If he’d felt less, he might have found some control.

If he didn’t love his sister the way he did - absolute and unconditional - then it might have occurred to him that it wasn’t the best course of action to do this in the middle of the filled auditorium where his mother, roughly one hundred civilians and the press where watching as he - a prospective mayor’s son - attacked one of her more charitable of funders for no apparent reason. As his right hand joined his left around the man’s throat.

But it didn’t, didn’t even register. *I don’t care.* There was too much left to lose.

And Slade knew that.

“Why now?” The rush in his veins took precedence; he wasn’t fully present with his words. “What does this even do for you?”

He was present with his *hands* that pushed forwards, counteracting the buzzing pressure in his ears, the fear thrumming to life in his bones and the red score of anger that he couldn’t make sense of.

“Come on kid.” The way Slade spoke was enticing in the worst way; as if this - Oliver’s physical threat - meant nothing, *was* nothing. “What are you trying to do?”

Every part of him focused like a shark to blood on stopping Slade from taking another breath-

“Ollie, you need to stop!”

And he squeezed. It was the furthest thing from a sin he could think of.

But instead of turning puce, instead of the mottled affect that should have occurred across Slade’s skin, it was as if nothing was happening to him. As if he didn’t even feel it.
You should have kept a better watch of her.

He wanted to scream.

You don’t touch them. He should have made it clear, as if saying it might create an illusion of truth - that they were safe - that the people he loved couldn’t be touched or harmed by this man.

For just one second, even if it’s a lie.

“You took her.” It just tumbled out, hushed between clenched teeth and almost spat into Slade’s face. “You took them, you fuck.” Why? “They’ve done nothing to you.”

It cost him to talk but he needed to vent some of what was making him shake. The urge to tear open the man before him, groin to throat and find an answer, any answer, was too tempting and too indescribable to take any logic from, even though he knew-

“You’re right: they haven’t.” Slade said and Oliver searched for a sign of weakness, anything, knowing it was pointless. “But you care for them the most.” That fractured through Oliver: veins stretched deep in the white of his eyes. “Any innocence your sister may have possessed before this became collateral the moment you decided to return home and wage your honourable war in your father’s name.”

Inside Oliver, something was breaking.

“And Felicity? Her life was forfeit the moment you found her in your family’s IT department. How lucky you were.” He let that float between them. “I wonder how much of that was chance?” None of it. But how deep had Slade looked? “Free loyalty. Your very own go-to. Someone you could use and disregard whenever you pleased.”

Where there was a will, there was a way and he threw himself into Slade, ramming him into the wall; the blow of bone against concrete bluntly cracking through the air when he did.

“Oliver, you can’t- not here!”

Don’t Oliver; not for me.

It hit too hard not to jolt at her voice, at the memory.

She’d said that, would have said it now; think that she wasn’t worth it, worth this, when she was worth more.

Though he knew that no amount of intent could cause Slade the type of physical pain others would scream at, Oliver had never lost control like this before. Not once- not even in Russia. He couldn’t remember ever wanting to hurt someone this much; the type of hurt that would irrevocably destroy. And he did. He wanted to.

So badly.

It was in his eyes as he stared into Slade’s, as his body dug into his.

I want to hurt you.

Wanted so much to commit to the violence his core was demanding of him that he was unseeing of the Press and the clicking of cameras, of the way his mother was quietly breaking as she gazed - frozen - up at the screen, or of the hands on him-
And he didn’t care. He wanted to and he didn’t care.

“Mr Queen, put your hands where we-”

“Ollie- you need to calm down.”

I don’t. He didn’t. What he needed to do, he should have done the night before.

I should have watched over my girl.

A shallow sound tore from him - agony thrown at Slade as a muddled attempt at a question - and he barely recognised his voice for the wrecked thing it was. Barely recognised the boy who’d killed a man those first few weeks on the island.

That black eye didn’t blink; the tether around Slade’s neck nothing more than a nuisance. “Has this actually broken you?” Expressionless, disappointment rang in his tone. “Even after the hours I’ve spent with her, Felicity still hasn’t.”

Still.

“What did you do?” Quickly yanking Slade’s head back, Oliver crashed it into the solid surface behind him. “What did you do?!”

“Stop it, Oliver!”

Oliver shoved his face into Slade’s. “You wouldn’t have put her up there,” he indicated at the screen behind them without turning away, “if you didn’t want a show, an audience.” If he didn’t want Oliver to do something. “Where. Are. They?”

It was part of whatever game Slade was playing.

Slade’s hands - his arms - didn’t move. “Careful Oliver,” he muttered; watching the cracks begin show behind Oliver’s eyes, “your green is showing.”

“Tell me where are they are.” His hands left Slade’s neck to grip the man’s entire face - as if to push his fingers through his remaining eye. “Tell me!”

It was every emotion he felt condensed into one rough breath… an order, a question and a plea of mercy that Slade only smiled at.

Smiled.

It was a dead thing - as if his soul had died long ago - but the malice glittering in his gaze told the truth.

“They’ll be found.” Slade promised, lowly as the smile dropped. Quietly, as the ringing in Oliver’s ears heightened. “You’ll see them eventually, when I’m done. In what condition, is another matter.”

Son of a-

With a thud - another sound leaving him just shy of human - he forced Slade as hard and as high into the wall as he could.

“You need to step back, sir!”

He needed to not. Without realising he’d even moved, his elbow shot back into the person who’d
been trying to exert pressure on him. A muffled shout had everyone taking one step back from him, creating a semi-circle around the two of them.

He’d spent the entire day doing what he’d been told to do; pushing aside instincts that had screamed at him all day, begging him, in favour of doing what he’d always done. In favour of control. Doing that had caused this. This happened because of me, because he’d not seen it. So he let the dark inside take over, just for a moment and. He. Didn’t. Care.

His fingers flexed. Everything I’ve been doing - everything he’d tried to do for months, the way he’d chosen to behave since Slade had revealed himself - it was futile. All of it, for nothing.

What was the point in trying now?

“This is your final warning Mr Queen.” The ignition of tazers and the cool slick of a pistol’s safety being taken off sounded around him. “If you don’t step back, we will use force against you.”

Use. Them. The only thing in the world that would stop him right then-

“Oliver.”

Mom.

His mother who needed him. His mother who’d just watched her daughter being held captive on the screen by a menace. He shut his eyes; lips pressing together, fingers so tightly held they strained the muscles in his arms, one deep breath following another-

But a gasp from the audience - then a multitude of shouts - had him jerking sideways, searching for the new threat, the new-

His throat closed.

They were still on the screen - Thea and felicity - still muted, still in danger - it hadn’t switched off - and... they were running. Why were they running?

Unblinking, he watched them move fast in the opposite direction of where Thea had been facing before, towards a door that he’d been too stunned to notice earlier at the back of the building they were in.

Then right there, abruptly turning - too far away for him to discern her features - Felicity’s arm brought up a pistol he hadn’t seen her take, to shoot three times at-

At whomever who was firing back.

They were being fired at.

He felt Sara still beside him. “Oh God.”

The security personnel surrounding him let their weapons drop and he heard them mutter, what do we do? Are the police on their way?

He felt himself stumble slightly, the ground falling away as Felicity ducked, sparks flaring over her head as bullets ricocheted off the metal casing on the door and it must have shocked her because she tripped into the path beyond the threshold-

“No.” Mumbled too soft to discern, his eyes were painfully wide and raw as he watched them vanish from sight.
Come back. He needed to see them, to know what-

The camera - the side angle it was filming from on the floor - shuddered as if it had been prodded.

Then the screen went black as, presumably, whoever had been firing at them, shut the feed down.

For several seconds, no one made a sound. Not the now-silent Press - they were getting their footage but the cameramen were too stunned by the screen to look at it - not Sara or Laurel, not his mother who was honestly crying with both hands over her mouth, standing close to the sisters from where she’d called out to him, needing him…

He knew who he needed and she wasn’t there.

Dazed, he looked back to Slade; there was nothing else he could do.

“I keep my promises kid.” The man rasped. “I keep my promises.”

_You cannot die until you have suffered the same way I have suffered. Until you have known complete despair. And you will — I promise._

Whoever Slade had once been - the man before the Mirakuru took the pain of losing Shado, the love he felt her for and the anger, the betrayal he felt for him and twisted it - he hadn’t fought against this. Hadn’t resisted the pull of its insidiousness, the ease of malice, the vengeance however just it may be.

“You know, you could do some real good in this city. Beyond saving stock portfolios and savings accounts.”

Not like this. Not like Slade. He couldn’t be like that too; to just coast by on fuels born of the past.

But the revelation, as real and as bright as it was, made that thing that had broken in Oliver just now, die.

_He isn’t going to tell me._

He could beg and shout and vent on Slade as much as he liked. It wouldn’t do a thing. It didn’t matter that Oliver no longer cared about how others saw him. It wouldn’t sway Slade if Oliver showed him that he’d changed from the selfish boy who’d washed up on the shores of Lian Yu, the boy Slade had helped turn into a weapon…

Nothing would work here.

_He isn’t going to tell me. He isn’t going to let them go. He isn’t—_

_I should have—_

He didn’t-

_I should have taken her home._

Last night.

It wouldn’t have taken much to give John the night off and let him go back to Lyla, let him resume their long weekend before calling his sister, instead of avoiding her questions and her disappointment. It wouldn’t have taken long.

After all, he’d have had all night to… to hold her. To stay close for once. Keep her where she was
safe. With him.

“Don’t stop.” He’d implored. “Please. Don’t ever lose that faith in me. Don’t go… to somewhere I can’t reach.”

To prove that her faith would be rewarded and show her that she would always be able to depend on it; that he had the ability to keep her from harm, from-

**Felicity still hasn’t**

-Like he’d been stabbed.

Lips dry, his mouth wavered as they finally took in a full breath… but it came out as her name and he almost crumbled with it. “Felicity.”

He hadn’t protected her.

The unidentifiable expression on Slade’s face - the odd softening of his brow contradicting the disdainful slant of his jawline - told Oliver he’d heard it. “Exactly.”

A name that had turned his world from dark grey to bright Technicolor.

A name that had both settled the constant anxiety he’d felt the past 2 months and yet had also simultaneously made it climb a step past fear and into genuine horror because *please don’t come for her.* That had his heart - an organ he’d once considered inconsequential - feel like it had expanded to three times its size. That made his sides ache. That made him-

That made him loosen his hold on Slade right now; even as all him demanded he continue, to stop him somehow. Even as Sara made a noise; something small but sharp at the back of her throat as she watched his hands fall away… he still did it.

*I asked her to never lose her faith in me.* And here he was; failing her.

The least he could do was try to gain it back. Right now. Starting here…

A deep breath leaving him, Slade straightened. “There, you see.” His hands smoothed down the front of his suit jacket. “You’re learning.”

*Go fuck yourself.*

A rasping chuckle told Oliver that Slade had read him like a book. “It’s odd, how alike you both are.” *Felicity.* “You both say so much with the expressions on your face… It makes a surreal sort of sense, I suppose.” His eye searching over him, Slade seemed to come to a quiet conclusion. “If you weren’t I don’t think you’d have brought her so far into your world, do you?”

Oliver’s voice was hoarse when he spoke. “You think you know me?”

“I know exactly the type of man you are.”

“It’s been years since the Amazo; I’m not the same person who-”

“Struck an arrow through my eye?” Said so matter of fact, it made Oliver look away; his gut contracting. “Chose to kill me instead of cure me? Picked a woman you liked to fuck once upon a time - a woman you’d never love - over the one who’d saved your life?”

He felt sick. “That’s not what happened.” He whispered, praying; for what, he didn’t know. “I loved
Shado.”

“You don’t know what love is. For a man to truly love a woman. You haven’t got a clue.”

His heart ached.

Put that way, there was something inside of Oliver that couldn’t deny the truth in those words. The way he’d loved women, Laurel especially, wasn’t meant to be seen or heard because why would he ever want to showcase how much of a dog he’d been? Or that he’d never known - how badly he didn’t understand - what it meant to really be with someone.

He’d kept as much of it out of the spotlight as he could, had shared as little as possible with Felicity and Diggle because he hadn’t wanted them to see just how much his fear - his darkness - eclipsed every decision he made.

But love, real love; the kind described in the fairy tales his sister had enjoyed as a kid, the type movies sang songs about - the love he and Tommy used to avoid like the plague - had evaded him with good reason. What right did he have to even want someone to love him the way he craved to be loved when he was this person?

And yet… and yet, recently-

This,” Slade continued, unaware of Oliver internal struggle as his eye flickered to the screen and back, “could have all been thwarted if you weren’t the monster you are.”

Stop it. Oliver swallowed. Not here, not where there were people he loved who would hear him if Slade’s voice rose an octave.

“But you’re right,” Oliver jerked on the spot; so ready for the next verbal blow that those 3 words were stunning, “You aren’t the same man you once were.” He let that settle in before adding, “In many ways, you’re worse.”

Oliver’s eyes closed. “Please just tell me where they are.”

“You don’t deserve that small mercy Oliver.”

“Small mercy…” Disbelief - revulsion - flooding through him, it left him in a rush of air, because how could he think that it was any kind of mercy? “My sister and my-”

“Our what?” Stilling, Oliver’s eyes reopened and standing there, forcing secrets to the surface, Slade’s tone beckoned. “Your what, Oliver?”

His…

He drew blank, came up short, because what word was the appropriate one? What word could his brain make sense of here, now?

“Why?” He breathed instead. “Why her?”

He’d had Laurel and Sara at his mercy, why Felicity too? It wasn’t necessary; he’d learned his lesson. Slade could come at them, for them, whenever he pleased and Oliver would be powerless. He got it. Unless he was doing this simply to gloat, why give them back at all only to take someone else?

For a moment, he thought Slade wouldn’t talk. Hands in his pockets, the man just watched him.
And then-

“I met her.”

As if it was that simple: a given.

And… it was. It hadn’t taken more than a second when Oliver had first seen her four years ago for-

_I met her._

He backed up.

Slade… had met her, met Felicity? _Before_ he’d kidnapped her?

_“Have you seen him recently?”_

_Her eyes flickered left to right, like huh? “Him who?”_  

_It took more than he cared to admit to force the name out of his own mouth. “Slade.”_  

The world could have stopped – he wouldn’t have noticed.

_“I haven’t seen him anywhere near me.”_  

Had she… lied? _To me?_ To all of them; Dig, Sara, Roy – he knew she probably had because they would have told him immediately if she’d said anything.

_“You’re sure?”_  

_She arched a brow at him. “Yes Oliver; I’m sure.”_  

_“Promise me.”_  

All he’d heard from her for weeks was ‘I’m fine’. Her… her go-to.

_“I promise.”_  

He sucked in a breath.

She’d _promised_. That she was alright. She’d looked him in the eye, she’d made him… she’d made him feel better. Feel safer. More secure. She’d met his gaze and she’d lied to his face. That wasn’t… that wasn’t her, that wasn’t how she was with him. That wasn’t what they had: a genuine, explicit trust. In fact, the only time he’d remembered her being remotely hesitant with the truth was the bomb she’d dropped about his sister and that was understandable-

_Oh._

Not to hurt him. She was only ever slow with honesty when she didn’t want him hurt. But she’d still been honest; and that secret had destroyed his relationship with his mother. She’d known it would; he’d seen it in her face. But she’d told him anyway because it was the _right_ thing to do.

But on this - THIS - she holds back?

He allowed himself to feel it, to remember. To try to understand. To think _why._

Why she might have decided to lie…
He placed his cup on the table. “You were awake at 4?”

“God, yes.”

What came with the lie? She hadn’t been sleeping well, but when had that started? How many weeks ago? Three? Four?

“If you’re awake at 3am, I want you down there.”

He’d said that yesterday. Sunday.

What use was that? No use. None. He’d waited… why had he waited?

And because he waited, she’d deflected.

At every attempt to understand, at his small pushes - because he’d never force her to reveal truths he may never have the rights to - she’d asked for time. She’d change the subject. She’d focus on him.

She’d tried to make him think it didn’t matter.

He’d fought her on it, he’d done that much at least - letting her get away with it so many times before - thinking he’d accomplished something in getting her to see that she mattered, always. But maybe he’d all he done was drive her into a metaphorical corner.

It was irrational of her but he knew she worried about being an added source of stress in his life; the way she’d told him about his mother’s secret proved this. And he’d facilitated this fear by avoiding her and sleeping with Sara.

It was only now that he was beginning to see what that must have done.

Yet, for the exact same reason, he didn’t understand why she’d keep it to herself that she wasn’t fine.

Unless, something else had happened too; something she was sure would do nothing for him if he found out, something she thought wouldn’t influence his life, even if it hurt him, because that’s what Felicity did. She told him everything. She never kept secrets. She weighed the pros and cons of information and made use of them to their fullest extent. If something was unnecessary to him, she’d deem it unnecessary to her. Superfluous. Something he wouldn’t be concerned over.

A thing that wasn’t worth his worry, that she might as well keep to herself.

Wasn’t worth his worry.

Wasn’t worth it.

Worthless.

She had no idea.

Not of her place in the world - in his life - or what she meant to the people around her, what she meant to him.

“I rely on you.”

She knew that. But she didn’t know that he needed her too. There was a difference.

Don’t be true. Don’t let this be the reason for her not saying anything. Not this. Not just to keep him
from worrying about her.

He deserved to worry.

His affirmations of his suspicions, all the things it had taken weeks for him to say, the things that should have been said minutes into his first notice - seconds after he’d looked twice at her when she’d had to catch herself before walking into a Foundry Pillar - were for nothing if this was true.

He thought he’d been showing that he cared by staying away - by giving her space since he took so much of her time at QC and the Foundry - keeping her safe through distance but all he’d really revealed was that he’d been slow in seeing the problem for what it was, if this was actually what it was.

If Slade had spoken to her.

Once would be enough, enough to… to change her. Affect her.

To make her afraid of her own shadow.

Shake her.

Force her to lie.

Make her fear the dark places Oliver normally made secure for her.

Rend her asunder.

If.

“When-” it clogged at the back of his throat, the possibility; the dread that it might be exactly that. “When the hell did you meet her?” And it was a snarl because things - lots of things he’d decidedly not mentioned but had noticed - were starting to make a terrifying sense and he couldn’t stop the way his heart thudded with it.

“It was a big deal.” Gentle but firm, it silenced her. “You not eating is a big deal. Whatever the reason - you obviously don’t want to share it - I wanted to make sure you ate something substantial. With me.”

What had he thought he’d been achieving?

A quick fix?

That as long as she was close he could make sure she ate and slept and took care of herself and everything would be alright?

And it crept in; the image of Felicity smiling and wearing her colours on those distracting dresses, turning around the face someone, only it isn’t him. It’s Slade Wilson. And she’s alone.

Slade would see it in her eyes, that she knew.

And he’d tear down her coat of arms - her regalia of short skirts, enticing lipsticks and ever present witticisms because those too had been dying a slow death that he’d never come back from - effortlessly destroying the natural shield that made her who and what she was. That made her shine.

It hurt.
“You’ve lost weight. Weight you didn’t need to lose… I need you to eat something more than a salad.”

She barely ate. Functioned only on the level required of her, on a level that people wouldn’t notice a problem and had given herself unto that purpose completely.

Facilitating his work.

Tell me this isn’t true. That this wasn’t what he thought it was. That it was anything but because she’d stopped. Stopped thinking of herself, stopped living for herself, she-

She’s doing it for me.

“I admit, I didn’t see it.” Slade crooned. “Not at first.” It was as if Oliver hadn’t spoken at all. “Everything about her is soft, Oliver.”

Soft. The way it was said - so unbelievably threatening - had the word sliding into Oliver’s gut, making it tighten. Wielded like a weapon.

Yes, she was soft; a beautiful, all-encompassing warmth few people - if any - honestly possessed, the type to cure.

And, split down the centre, the way Oliver spoke was soft too: the deadliest kind of whisper thin.

The edge of a blade sliding into skin.

The promise in a kiss. “Did you-” His jaw - mouth and chin - flexed. “Did you touch her?”

Beyond the touch required to take her. Had. Slade. Touched. Her?

When he wasn’t there to protect her, had Slade risen even a finger against her?

The affirmation in Slade’s silence was deafening.

“What did you do?” Eyes shooting from each of his, Oliver licked his lips; feeling his tenuous grasp on control slip between his fingers. “What-”

“I broke past the soft and found steel.” Slade grated out and Oliver knew he’d take those words with him to sleep for weeks, months, afterwards.

I broke past the soft.

Broke-

His fist struck fast across Slade’s jaw, oblivious to how his knuckles cracked and bruised at the force of it. Enraged. Worried. In pain.

Scared to death.

He broke past the soft. The soft.

Felicity’s skin. Her heart. Her touch. Her soul-

Shouts from behind him were white noise but and he just heard Laurel’s exasperation. “Jesus Ollie.”

But this time no one pulled and tugged at him; the poor little rich boy losing it because he loved his
Unharmed and blasé, Slade - who’d barely moved an inch with the blow - spoke as Oliver bore down on him. “You understood that when you first saw her.” It was too quiet for anyone to hear, but every word felt like poison. “The half man that you are, kept her close. Not knowing why. Or at least,” Slade’s eye didn’t rove, “not then.” He just stood there as Oliver felt like a live wire; exposed. “But a half man can do no more than that.”

The tendons in his neck bunching - hitting him once hadn’t been near enough - Oliver tried to find his composure but the aggression swimming through him felt like a forest fire.

**What has he done?** What had Slade done to her?

“Did you make that face when you killed the Count? He was one of mine, you know.” It was slight; the flicker in Oliver’s expression, but Slade caught it nonetheless. “I was surprised you took him down so quickly. And for whom.” He glanced briefly to the guards who, after the video, seemed a little lost as to what to do next. “Wasn’t Laurel supposed to be the one you’d kill for?”

“Is this what you do now?” Oliver ground out, barely able to speak past the tide. “You play these games?”

Slade’s head tilted and at any other moment in time, it would have struck Oliver as peculiar. “Is it your sister that drives you… or her?”

Both.

Oliver’s head shook side to side beseeching him with his eyes. “Just tell me what you want.” And there was emotion there, in Slade. A weight Oliver didn’t want to touch. But he had to. “She’s my little sister.” He continued; trying to reach that speck of humanity the man before him must still possess. “Neither of them should know the world like we do.”

“You underestimate them.” The words were immediate. “Still,” stepping closer, Slade brought his lips to Oliver’s ear; knowing Oliver was internally hanging himself, “it’s your name they said in the dark.”

*Ollie.*

*Oliver…*

Red.

Again, his punch slammed into Slade’s cheek; his hands clenched hard enough to feel the force of it reverberate up his arm and down his spine – and revel in how good that felt. To hit hard. To fight back in some way, no matter how useless.

Pulling back, his knuckles rammed into the mouth that continued to spew pain and again into the eye-patch; a reminder of what he’d do over and over if he had to. He’d take his other eye, he’d take his tongue – *I would.* Oliver’s fist reigned over Slade’s nose, the side of his face, letting white noise filled his ears as he did it again and again because he couldn’t, wouldn’t, stop-

Arms larger than his - than any of the others close by - wrapped bodily around him from behind, pulling him back. He didn’t make it easy; but they were still able to exert enough strength that at any other time would make Oliver wonder who could even-

“Oliver, man; not here!”
Dig.

He came back to himself.

As if someone had thrown a bucket of water over everything. John. Deep down, he’d connected that if Felicity had been taken then Dig had too but he hadn’t been able to face it.

“Come on, breathe.” It was only when John muttered it that Oliver realised he wasn’t, which might have been why everything was tipping on its side. A gasping inhale immediately shuddered through him. “That’s it. Get it together.” John added in his ear. “We’ve got problems.”

Anywhere else, the understatement would have made Oliver laugh.

Trying to pull the torn pieces of himself together, he saw a flicker of confusion flash across Slade’s barely bloodied face, dammit. “You surprise me Mr Diggle.”

John’s arms loosened their hold. “And I live for that, I really do.”

But Slade’s gruff chuckle made the hair on the back of Oliver’s neck stand on end in a way it never used to. “I thought I’d put you in capable hands.”

“How capable is capable to you?”

Yes, the little back and forth was - on the outside - nothing more than that. But Dig’s voice…

“I’m just getting started.” John stated. Solid. Lethal. “We will find her.”

Felicity.

Dig didn’t know about Thea.

“Them.” Slade corrected. “Miss Queen has been a guest of mine since, oh,” deliberately ruminating, Slade hummed, “roughly 5 hours before I took Felicity.”

5 hours.

5 hours after he’d taken Thea, he’d gone for Felicity. But how long ago was 5 hours after he took Thea? And why the time difference? As if something had occurred to make Slade react. But it answered one question: Slade had taken Thea first. He’d meant to take her; Oliver could feel that.

But… had he meant to take Felicity?

If looks could kill, Dig’s would have incinerated Slade. “You son of a bitch.”

Straightening, gaze piercing, Oliver inhaled again... watching. Thinking.

As if Dig was a peculiar kind of bird, Slade’s eyes measured as such. As quaint. “That’s my mother you’re talking about.”

“We’re going to find them.” Oliver finally managed.

Cocking his head to the side, his own personal nightmare asked the question that mattered most. “Without her?”

Resolve made every inch of Oliver harden but he didn’t respond.
He was right: their system, the way they worked, it was all based on the heart. On her. On the assumption that she would be right there to be their eyes and ears; to guide them into unknown waters. Their oracle. Their over-watch.

*I’ll bring her back.* Before they could see the lights go out - their lighthouse home - and feel the loss, he’d get her home.

He turned, grasping John - so differently from the way he’d grabbed Slade - and moving quickly out of the hall in long strides.

The moment Slade was out of sight, Oliver started. “What happened?”

“They took me by surprise.” Low toned Dig marched with him through the reception area. “He has someone with him who knows Israeli martial arts.” Each word from his was a rebuke at himself. “Laid me out.”

“It doesn’t matter.” *It’s not your fault.* They were both too close to the edge for platitudes. “Give me something to work with.”

“I have better than that.”

The words made Oliver glance at him as they hit the doors, but he slowed at what he saw: the abrasion above Dig’s brow, the dried blood stuck to his cheeks, his bruised jaw-

“I’m fine.” And there was something in his tone that told Oliver he really was fine. And angry. Very. But the way his brown eyes flickered everywhere with something close to panic, made Oliver’s chest tighten again. “It isn’t me I’m worried about. Come on.” He pointed to his car parked haphazardly: half on the sidewalk, half on the road. “Get in.”

Without question - it was *something* - Oliver slid into the vehicle and they were tearing up Main Street in seconds.

“Laurel,” Sara touched Laurel’s arm, making her look back at her. “I need to go with them.”

*Right.* Sara was a vigilante. Oddly enough it was easy to get used to with how strong she knew her sister to be.

“Alright.” Nodding, taking a breath - the whole scene had shaken her - Laurel rubbed her hands down Moira’s arms once again. “I’ve got this.”

She had Moira.

They needed to talk.

Sara must have seen the tenacity set in her features: something she’d never been able to hide before. “Don’t do anything without telling me ok?” The reminder of the talk between them and Oliver just minutes ago - it felt like it had been hours - was unwelcome but she nodded again anyway. *I hear you.* “We need to work together in this.”
Didn’t mean she’d listen.

“Go.” Jutting her chin towards where Oliver had left with his- with Mr Diggle, Laurel pulled Moira closer, hugging her. Remembering how this used to be a daily gift between them. “I’ll catch up.”

Like the bird she was, Sara flew away; moving swiftly out of the auditorium before anyone could blink.

The moment she was out of sight, Laurel felt Moira pull back. “What’s going on?” The woman who could bring state nationals to their knees had tears stuck to her face with mascara mixed in. “Oliver, he… he left.” She sounded so shaken, so lost and weak and scared.

So disbelieving that her son would leave her at a time like this.

And Laurel was right there to comfort her. “Ollie’s going to do everything he can to bring Thea back to you.”

Thea. Slade Wilson had taken Thea.

Remembering her growing up made this all the more difficult but it was almost impossible for her brain to stay routed in the present.

And now Oliver was The Arrow. He’ll save you sweetie. No… I will.

She had information. And in a game of life and death like this, a game where rules were non-existent, information was power.

“But why was he-” throat croaking, Moira’s voice left her and she took a shallow breath to get it back. “Why was he hurting Mr Wilson? What don’t I know?”

Smoothing a hand once more over shoulders she’d remembered having more iron in them, Laurel hushed her. “You don’t need to worry about that.” It was all in hand. “What matters now-”

“Don’t patronise me.” It was soft but the meaning behind it - the authority - made Laurel freeze. “I know you well enough Miss Lance and you are a terrible liar.”

Miss Lance. Not Laurel. Laurel dear.

Old hurts still ached.

That had changed this year, after Moira’s trial. Laurel had known it would, but there hadn’t been a thing she could do about it. New to the industry, at being a full DA, there hadn’t been any possible way she could have said no to the opportunity of a lifetime. Not to the head honcho in her office, the man who she knew would make it his career to skewer Mrs Queen on her bad choices.

Choices that had gotten a lot people killed.

Knowing this strengthened Laurel’s will. “I don’t know what you mean Mrs Queen.”

The title had Moira’s lips quirking: it was completely without humour and more than a little eerie. To have that thrown at her. It wasn’t an expression she’d known Moira to possess. “Come now. Do you honestly think that after this year I wouldn’t recognise that look on your face?”

Eyes darting to and from both of hers, Laurel’s brow furrowed. What look?

“Like a cat that got its cream. The canary without a cage.” Allowing another tear to fall - Thea -
Moira made no move to erase the humanity in her features. “You know something. As a mother who has just watched her daughter plead for her life,” deliberately elevating her voice - pushing Laurel into a metaphorical corner - threateningly close to being overheard, Moira pushed into Laurel’s personal space, “I demand that you tell me what you know.” It was as if there wasn’t a height distance between them.

The journal. She could share it. Share the few secrets it held, the obsession Oliver’s EA had for him… but it would take away her element of surprise.

Yet if she did, Moira would be an ally because she had to admit, the idea of Oliver’s mother being overtly disapproving of her this way, tore holes in her stomach. It wasn’t right: we should be allies, not enemies. It needed to be rectified.

Before she could say a word however, Moira decided for her.

“I know my son. He would never attack a man without reason.” A mere murmur, the mother’s voice wobbled but all Laurel could think was that Moira really had no idea who her son was or what he could do. She needed to protect that, his identity. And she needed to protect Moira who, at this moment, was fragile. “Is Slade Wilson involved in this?”

The same Slade Wilson who’d watched Oliver leave, expressionless. Who’d then walked clear of the room himself, pulling out his phone without a glance at anyone. Like he hadn’t even recognised her. As if he could simply do as he pleased.

Well, he couldn’t. She wouldn’t let him just walk around, threaten Ollie and not pay for it. Seeing Moira Queen’s tears just made her more adamant to do the very thing her brain was already planning at speed.

She opened her mouth. “I can’t-”

“Don’t tell me you can’t.” Tone thin - made of ice - Moira stared into Laurel’s eyes and dared her to speak another lie, because she really wouldn’t like the consequences. “What don’t I know?”

Keep her close.

Eyes searching around then, Laurel leaned as close as possible. “I don’t know the specifics but from what I gather, Oliver and Slade know each other.”

Unimpressed, “Evidentially,” and sniffing back the wetness in her eyes, Moira said. “Yes: they met at the mansion-”

“From the island.” Laurel forced out, watching the way Moira silenced completely, “from his time away.”

Mouth open, Moira’s eyes stared into Laurel’s and she didn’t say a word.

Give her more. “Mr Wilson told me that he and Oliver have an old history.” Laurel continued. “It makes sense that it was from that time.” The likeliest scenario… because she didn’t really know, did she?

But it makes sense. She’d bet on it.

“Slade Wilson,” Moira whispered, “knew my son? And never told me?”

Laurel nodded, I’m so sorry. “I think so.”
“He was with him on the island… That’s why this is happening?” The older woman breathed, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Why he took my daughter.”

“This isn’t Oliver’s fault,” Laurel immediately interjected, shielding him; *he’ll need the people he loves now more than ever*, Moira couldn’t see her son in the negative light that many others would, “he didn’t-”

“I know full well who my son is.” The words, how they’d been spoken, made Laurel’s mouth close. “And I will never put him at fault for the sins of others. Something a lot of people forgot to do when he returned home.” The pointed statement was lost on Laurel. *What is she talking about? “What did you mean when you said Mr Wilson told you”*

Steadying herself - the memory of that factory cut through her - Laurel admitted. “He took us: me and Sara. It was all a ploy to hurt Ollie.”

To take the ones he cared for most.

And now he had Thea.

It all made so much sense. And if done right, this could all end with them safe, together.

“My God.” A breath shuddered through Mrs Queen; her arms coming about her in a bid for security she couldn’t reach. “W-what about-”

“It’s being taken care of.” As soothing as she could make her tone, Laurel took one of Moira’s hands into hers. “There are some things Ollie can only do if he isn’t here.”

Eyes, so like Thea’s – so unlike Ollie’s because his could never be that piercing, that cold – came back to hers like a slap.

Laurel braved through it because she’d never needed to fear her: Moira Queen had always been on her side. She could still remember the woman who’d sat her down once, during a much more innocent time in her life, to tell her how much she’d adore being her mother in law. How much pleasure it would give her to one day call Laurel Lance, Laurel Queen: a daughter.

“And there are things I need to do to. My dad; he’s on his way.” Laurel smiled at her. “He’ll look after you.”

“I don’t need looking after. I need my daughter. My son.” The break in composure had her pulling away from Laurel completely, turning from curious eyes; needing a moment to collect herself. A moment they didn’t have.

Wanting to leave, to get started, Laurel started bouncing on the spot. *Come on dad*. She wouldn’t go until she knew Moira Had someone with her.

But then she saw her still. “Why was she there too?” Tone composed - poised - even as it was throaty from tears, Moira turned back around; keen eyes hitting Laurel. “Miss Smoak; she was up there with….” Voice trailing off, Laurel saw her swallow; “she was there. Why? Did he take her too?”

The nail on the head.

Trust Mrs Queen to not beat around the bush. “No.” Laurel replied decisively. “I don’t think what we saw is what’s actually going on.”
Felicity Smoak. Either she’d had a change of heart or this was all a ruse. Regardless, she had been with Slade when he took Thea. And judging by her state of dress, they’re both either cruelly cunning… or she’d been with him in every sense of the word prior to his arrival at the auditorium.

“I know she’s important to Oliver.” The words were like a punch in the gut because it was all a lie and no one knew but her. “It would make sense if he took her to use against him.”

But there was something in that: a thread Laurel latched onto. “How do you know her?”

Pulled back from whatever musing she was entertaining, Moira blinked. “What do you mean?”

“How do you know her?”

If she was about to find out that she’d been to the Queen Mansion for a family brunch or something, Laurel might actually feel the need to throw up.

But Moira’s response struck her unusual. “She’s very smart. Maybe too smart for her own good.” Seeing Laurel’s unquenchable interest and mistaking it for curiosity, Moira added. “She came between me and Oliver not too long ago. Discovered something she had no business investigating.”

Laurel took hasty strides towards her. “Did she blackmail you Mrs Queen?”

Briefly closing her eyes, as if whatever memory the question had stirred up caused her pain - all of it fuel on Miss Smoak’s funeral pyre - Mrs Queen’s hand rubbed across her forehead. “She was doing what she thought was right.”

Sure she was.

But this was perfect.

Miss Smoak, Miss Perfect EA – Miss I’m Sleeping With My Boss To Keep Him Exactly Where I Want Him – had threatened Moira Queen with something. It didn’t matter what the threat was; blackmail was blackmail.

Material she could use. “Would you be willing to testify to that Mrs Queen?” Laurel asked; eager to be backed by something she knew would be like candy to the media. Billionaire Tycoon coerced by Lofty IT Girl.

And Moira Queen was someone Ollie listened to. Someone he trusted, loved and respected.

Deep in thought, she missed the utter bafflement that fluttered across Moira’s features but managed to see her dad running through the doors; the swirling lights of a few cop cars flashing with him, reflected on the windows…

Slade Wilson’s form clearly silhouetted against the glass. Her eyes narrowed.

It was time to get to work.

Mr Wilson and Miss Smoak were going to feel the type of justice they couldn’t run from.

Me.
“Why are we here?”

His voice was trembling.

Rough - white hot, as if his throat was raw after screaming his lungs out - it was a testament to every second he’d spent forcing himself to reconcile the knowledge that while he was safe, they were not. That while he was in a car being escorted by a friend, they were running for their lives.

And… he couldn’t. He couldn’t do that, couldn’t accept it. Even though it was real. And it showed on his face whenever he glanced into the rear-view mirror: violence etched into the pale lines.

Why the hell were they stopping after being in the car only minutes?

“Accountability.” Dig’s response was as gruff as his own as he parked in the secluded dark of an almost empty garage. “And privacy.”

He unlocked the doors.

Oliver was out of the car in seconds, already moving fast towards the elevator doors at the back of whichever building they were under, trusting that Dig was leading him somewhere specific since he couldn’t keep from thinking of the millions of tiny details - the little things - that made both Felicity and his sister exactly who they were - things that could be broken - even as this made every instant more painful.

He couldn’t stop the way his heart pounded, the way that every breath was a fight against the stillness of the world, didn’t know how to stop his hands - his fingers - from squeezing together; fisting in a bid to stop the trembling.

It didn’t do anything but break the skin of his palms and stretch the scrape across his knuckles.

Those texts you think you’ve been getting from me all day? I didn’t send them."

It was the first thing Dig had said after he’d started the car.

Reeling and utterly destructive, Oliver had stared at him; praying like a fool that Dig had chosen now to develop an uncharacteristically cruel sense of humour.

But then his friend had sent him a glance in the few seconds between watching the road and turning a corner, one which told him everything words couldn’t.

Still in his grasp from before - before Sara and Laurel and Slade - his phone had cracked under the pressure of his grip. Overwhelmed, he’d been unable to voice one of the multitudes of questions he’d had and as if Dig knew this, he hadn’t added to the strain. But there was more; he could tell.

Then he’d pulled them in at this... wherever this was.

Lips thin, jaw tight as he walked, Oliver made himself face the full repercussions of Dig’s reveal.

Every text - every single one - a ruse.

The words he’d read over and over and over again - the text he’d repeated in his head until he’d memorised it - thinking that at the very least she would be safe, allowing that small comfort, that she would be sleeping and taking care of herself…
What was he supposed to do with that? With knowing that he’d allowed himself to be reassured that was the whole day. To be taken in like that. How could he ever trust that what he might read in a text was real now? Like a thousand needles of fear were piercing his body, he focused on keeping one foot in front of the other, which was why he missed Dig behind him coming to a stop beside the back of the car.

Not until he called out. “Oliver.”

Stilling, staring into the murky grey interior of the lot, he just… he didn’t know what to do.

She wasn’t here to tell him how to find her.

“We’re going to find them.” Oliver finally managed.

*Cocking his head to the side, his own personal nightmare asked the question that mattered most.*

“Without her?”

He swallowed, eyes closing, feeling useless - feeling *every* ounce of anger marring his forehead - for not knowing anything beyond what he’d been told. He turned before they re-opened, seeing John who despite the kind of day he’d obviously endured, didn’t look close to being done either.

*Good.*

“I didn’t want any witnesses.” Dig’s baritone voice - the message in it - carried throughout the area.

It made something in Oliver settle.

Glancing down to the prize - the rear of Dig’s car - the fierceness he’d pushed down sizzled back into play. The focus. He was too close to the situation to know what to do next and Dig was providing him an out, a vent, a path.

Dangerous and unbelievably self-assured that he was going to cause some pain this night, Oliver realised he knew *exactly* why Dig had brought them here.

He had a lead they could pick to the bone.

*Yes.*

He was marching back before the thought had been fully processed; long strides pounding the pavement as his voice echoed about them. “Who?”

“A lackey.” Bending, Dig unlocked the lid. “I doubt he has any credibility or influence. But he knows *something*.”

Lid lifting, Oliver took mental snap shots of the body curled up on the immaculate floor of the car. Baseball cap, blooded nose; the man was stocky but short in height and the sores on his fingers and chin indicated a sniffers addiction.

That told him something about him. Depending on the duration between fixes…

Jittery.

But even with this weakness, he was more than big enough to hold down and overpower a woman of Felicity’s weight and size.

He felt himself tighten. “His name?”
“Stan.” Stood beside him, he felt the tension roll off Dig and onto him. That was fine: he could take
it. He wanted it. “But I only know that because another stooge yelled it out before I got out of the
restraints.”

Restraints.

Gaze absent of emotion save that cold pit inside his core - he knew how he looked, how he felt in
that way he hadn’t since Russia - he side-eyed John, evaluating.

More than one man. The wound on his face. The time spent tied up.

Ok then.

Leg lifting, Diggle’s foot prodded this Stan. “Time to wake up.”

It took a moment…

Then, stirring - face creasing - the man blearily blinked up at them. “W-what-”

Oliver had him out of the trunk in seconds; his fists wrapped in the lapels of a jean jacket that had
seen better days, as he hauled him down to the cold tarmac beside the car.

He wasn’t interested in giving him an inch. Any chances of this man being seen by him as a human
worthy of mercy went out the metaphorical window the moment his brain put together that he’d
helped take his partner.

“You don’t know me.” Oliver started; everything about him fixed on making sure this guy knew that
he was not a man with whom to play with. “You don’t know who I am or-”

“Y-you’re Oliver Queen.” Understanding dawning, murky brown eyes slowly widened as the
realisation that he was in deeper shit than where he was five minutes ago, began to sink in. “Mr
Wilson; he told us… about… you.”

You could see it on his face: the oh fuck.

But…

“I know who you are!” She announced in her nervousness; endearingly flustered. “You’re Mr
Queen.”

Tugging him closer, Oliver held his face to within a centimetre of the broken nose. “Then I guess he
also told you about the type of person I am,” he paused, lowering his voice so that only the hood and
bow were missing, “and what I’m capable of.”

Gulping, Stan didn’t answer. Couldn’t. But he did nod, a quick jerk of his head; as if careful of the
man before him.

He should be. “Now tell me where they are and I won’t hurt you.”

He didn’t even have to specify what and who he meant by ‘they’. “I-I have orders! I can’t-”

The coiled creature inside him unfurled.

“Wrong answer.” Forehead ramming into Stan’s very broken nose, the subsequent squeal echoed
shrilly about them. Oliver leaned back from it, watching Stan twitch. “Want to try again?”
“I-it’s n-not that simple.” Stan gasped with one eye closed.

“Make it simple.” John ordered, standing behind them and Oliver could imagine the sight to Stan. Oliver in his direct line of sight with an unbending Dig, towering over them both.

But the fear he had for them was completely outweighed with the knowledge he had on his boss. “I can’t just-”

“I don’t think you understood me.” Still crouched, Oliver let him drop to the ground and couldn’t feel an ounce of remorse as Stan’s hands cradled his face. “You have orders.” He mocked in an undertone. “To what? To keep me from the people I care about?” He’d yet to blink and he caught Stan’s wide eyes peek through the gap between his fingers. “Knowing the lengths I will go to get what I want; do you think that’s wise?” This man had no idea what Oliver would do or break to get his sister and his partner back. “Tell me your orders.”

His tone left zero room for argument and yet…

Hands leaving his face, Stan lifted them in what Oliver figured he thought was in an appeasing sort of way. “I can’t tell you that man.” But his voice was hoarse. “He’ll kill me.”

“There are worse things than dying.” There really were: he’d been through some of them and he let that sink in before adding, “You will tell me what I want to know,” he said softly, lethally; leaning into Stan’s personal space as the man tried to cower away, “or I am going to hurt you.”

It should have troubled him how quickly – how easily – the word ‘hurt’ had almost been ‘kill’.

“I don’t even know who you’re looking for!”

He wanted it the hard way. Fine. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking me an idiot.” He shook his head. “Thea Queen and Felicity Smoak. Where are they?”

The first name did nothing to Stan’s expression except generate confusion, but the second… oh, the second name made him freeze; all but his head unmoving, his eyes enlarging more than they already were.

There.

Gaze flickering away for the first time since Oliver had forced them to his, Stan licked his lips; his exhale shaky. “W-who?”

“Are you an idiot?” Dig asked, incredulous. “You remember I was there, right?”

Oliver just looked at the man as he fumbled over words drowned out by the sudden wave of nothingness in Oliver’s mind. He looked at him long enough that Stan noticed. That he started to tremble - his eyes swiftly averting to and from him and the floor - and drew as far back into the earth as he could.

Because he knew.

He knew about Felicity at the very least and he had at least an inkling of how important the information was to Oliver… and how little Stan meant to him in the grand scheme of things.

And he could see it on Oliver’s face; that he knew he knew too. Eyes fixed on Stan’s, Oliver wondered what expression he wore as he stood.
Did you make that face when you killed the Count?

“I appreciate how difficult memory can be to recall.” There was a seeping cold in bones – one he remembered well and welcomed like an old friend. “Let me help you there.”

As hard as he could - but not fast, never that - he rammed the heel of his shoe down into Stan’s shin bone.

“Ngh-”

Crack.

A howl wrenched free from deep inside Stan’s chest, as if it had taken him a moment to understand the pain coursing through him; eyes shut tight, his hands flew down to his leg, bodily curling round it.

Oliver didn’t care.

“Or maybe,” he conjected against the sounds as he loomed over him, “you’re just hard of hearing. I can help with that too.”

Hands shooting out to grip the edge of the open trunk for leverage, he put as much force as he could into a kick that sent Stan flying up into the back of the car. The sound of his body hitting metal before flumping to the floor didn’t cancel the broken retch as he tried to suck in air.

It wasn’t enough.

Oliver inhaled, “I’ll ask again,” pulling once more the metal of the car-

Stan’s hand twitched, trying to raise it as he gasped out, “W-wait-”

-Oliver’s foot shoved deep into the soft flesh beneath Stan’s rib cage and as the man’s eyes bulged, Oliver opened his mouth to ask again… but what was supposed to be a question tore free from him as a shout.

“Where-” kicking him this time against his side, it reverberated through Oliver’s body, “is Felicity-” and he sent another powerful blow to Stan’s abdomen, “Smoak?!” His foot came down on Stan’s hand, twisting at the last second, making the man writhe. “Where is she?!”

Aggression. Controlled and uncontrolled.

He was good with it.

That Dig wasn’t stopping him told him everything he needed to know about this person. This reprobate. God knew he’d done things he could never atone for but Oliver also hadn’t helped kidnap a woman; to scare, threaten and harm the last person on the planet who deserved it, and It told him everything about what he hadn’t witnessed during the day passed, about what had happened to both Dig and Felicity… and how far he could go now.

Completely unable to form words - saliva and blood coating his chin - Stan’s mouth opened and closed like a fish on dry land.

A few seconds without oxygen wouldn’t kill him.

Oliver crouched again, pulling the man – ready or not, willing or not – into an upright position and not giving a damn about his newly cracked shin bone. “Thea Queen.” The proclamation - part of his
heart - was spat into Stan’s face as his hands hefted him forwards, lifting him fully onto his toes.  
“Your boss took her and you are going to tell me where she is.”

*Or I am going to kill you.*

…Tears.

Streaming down Stan’s face, mixing in with the sweat and general hygiene dysfunction that made him stand out, but Oliver wasn’t moved. There was too much at stake. Yet the man seemed too overcome with fear and pain to say anything beyond the whimpers coming out of his mouth.

*I don’t have time for this.*

Gritting his teeth, Oliver dragged him over to the closest pillar and threw him against it, making him cough and gasp. “Come on Stan!” He shook him. “I don’t want to keep hurting you. But I will. I will break every single bone in your body if I have to.” It was a promise as dark as his eyes that watched Stan shrink. “Are you listening? Stan.” Each word was a bite into time he felt he didn’t have. “Pay attention.”

Wretchedly, Stan’s voice was about 3 times as pitched with the pain and his face turned away; as if he were ashamed of the way he was crying. “You don’t know what he’s like.”

“I know exactly who Slade Wilson is.” *I created him.*

Stan shook his head. “You don’t. He does things.” And it was chilling, the way he spoke a paragraph in a word; the way eh and Dig could read that paragraph like writing on a page. “And he has people working for him. People who will know if I talk.” And he sounded so small, so afraid of his boss, that Oliver felt the traitorous stirrings of pity. “But he has money.” The pity left him as fast as it came at the want in Stan’s voice. “He can do anything, go anywhere.”

It made his stomach churn to offer this but, “I have money. I can give you anything you want.”

However, he was so ridiculously involved with himself, Stan simply shook his head again with his eyes closed. He looked like he was in hell already, snivelling *I can’t* and whispering *please* very other second.

He had no idea what real pain was.

It would take too long to teach him. After a slow blink - one, pause, two – Oliver spoke through an exhale, husky and deadly. “Everything in me is telling me to rip into you.” Stan’s eyes flew open to gape at him. “But I won’t if you just tell me.” He’d double - triple - whatever Slade was paying him if he had to. *Or*, he’d beat him to death.

Whichever was faster.

He just wished - as he coolly observed the destroyed expression on Stan’s face - that he cared about as much as he pretended he didn’t.

Or that the face he currently wore was as easy to take off as it was to slip on.

Still, he has to try… One last time.

“He has my little sister.” It was soft and slowly spoken, the plea, as he appealed to the man beneath the boy before him. “Thea; she’s only 19.” That he had to beseech to save her, save them, wasn’t helping him keep control but for some reason, Stan had deeply a visceral reaction to his words: lips
thinning, they pressed together and Oliver latched onto it instinctively. “She’s done nothing wrong. Do you have family, a sibling?” Stan closed his eyes. Bingo. “Wouldn’t you fight for them too? What would you do if they were taken?”

Would he do this?

Stan’s head bowed against the wave of whatever emotion – guilt, disgrace or terror – hit him first.

Maybe he wouldn’t. Couldn’t.

To his right, Dig breathed. “We don’t have time for this.”

Feeling apprehension cloud about him, Oliver glanced at him. “What do you mean?”

“The woman,” it was a croak that made Oliver halt, made him look back again. “I thought it was just about her. He wouldn’t let us touch her.”

“He wouldn’t let us touch her.”

Oliver’s breathing sped up. “What do you mean?”

Head turning on an angle against the wall, Stan gestured wearily at John. “We were there just to get in your way.”

With a broken nose, it was easy to see he’d failed, but…

Mouth barely open enough to speak - like the splinter in his mind had driven through to the core, his expression spoke every word required - Oliver sought out Dig, somehow managing to ground out, “Slade wouldn’t let them touch her?”

The question wasn’t a question.

It was slight but Oliver caught it; the way John withdrew.

How he turned to stone. “Slade showed up in person.” Each word smacked into the stillness of the evening. Like he was a light touch away from snapping. “Took her himself.”

“Slade showed up in person.”

“Slade… came for her?” He had to force past the C in ‘came’ - his words breathed because he honestly couldn’t talk with the rapid void in his gut and the absence of his voice box - and he mouthed the rest. “To her home?”

Personally. Intentionally.

Premeditated.

“I thought it was just about her.”

Just about Felicity.

How would a grunt have gotten that idea?

It gave leave for Oliver’s mind to fly through possibilities at speed: connecting dots. That maybe…

Slade had talked about her. He’d brought her up. Had said her name, before stepping into her home.
He’d taken her. He’d been there for that purpose alone. John was simply… collateral.

“Took her himself.”

It was one thing to consider Stan breaking into her home: even if he was strong enough to overpower her - a fact that had Oliver needing to teach him, in explicit detail, true physical strength and how far it could take a man - he was unimpressive. An obvious stereotype. And easy to break.

But Slade entering her home…

Stalking towards her like the predator he’d always known him to be - he wouldn’t need speed or stealth to overtake her, something she’d know the moment she laid eyes on him because if Felicity Smoak was anything she was outrageously smart and quick to connect patterns like points on a star chart - intent on taking her, on hurting her, wishing Felicity Smoak of all people harm or ill will of any kind because of-

Because of me.

Even though it was only inside his mind, seeing Slade there, in her home; a place she should have been safe - where she should have been able to shed the marks of the day like he’d wanted her to; and he could see that, see her shedding her clothes like a second skin - and have him go straight for her and for her know that she could do nothing. That Oliver wasn’t-

That Oliver wasn’t coming for her.

Like he’d gone for Laurel.

Laurel… who’d tried to vilify her.

His stomach twisted as he remembered…

“You can never really know a person. That’s what people like her do. Ollie,” people like her; as if she was referencing a vile criminal elite. “They make you believe,” eyes going to him, her soothing tone did nothing but exacerbate the precarious nature of his control, “they entrap their targets. They’re pros at this! They make them give into them, trust them.”

Laurel didn’t know.

The same Laurel who’d had more than her sister to fear for her safety, her absence - who couldn’t seem to grasp that they’d found her only due to Felicity’s ingenuity.

“There are sixteen cameras.” Every word Laurel pronounced was filled with zealous pride, not knowing what they cost him. “Not twelve like she told you. Felicity Smoak put up four extra cameras in the last three weeks. One of those cameras?” Jaw clenched, stubborn - needing to sell her point - her tone was closer to derisive than his had been a minute ago. “It rests on the road leading up to the factory where you said she found me last night. Now,” squaring up to him, her face drew closer to his and her voice quietened, “how did she know about that road Ollie?”

That Felicity had made use of the small amount of information she’d gleamed from the time she’d met Slade - something that winded Oliver to even fathom - to find her, because no one should have to suffer… the way she might have suffered when their backs had been turned.

“She’s Felicity Smoak.” He breathed. “She makes the impossible, possible.”

The way Slade had stared at her appearance on the screen at the auditorium, the surprise there. It was
only Thea he’d meant to show. Felicity had gotten free somehow. Slade had underestimated her; the one person Oliver learned from the first second he’d spoken to her that no one should ever misjudge.

Still, Slade had asked them not to touch her.

Taking Felicity… that had been something else, a different _something_ from why he’d taken Thea or Sara and Laurel.

It was nothing compared to the many moments she must have gone through, but he forced himself to feel the terror _she_ must have felt. When she’d realised what was happening and why, being one of the few people to know the idiosyncrasies of Slade Wilson and how the Mirakuru had changed his nature, the futility of fighting - though he knew she would have fought, tooth and nail.

_Did she have to fight him off?_

His eyes shut tight.

He couldn’t go there.

Not yet.

“I didn’t know he took your sister.” Stan implored and a stab of frustration brought Oliver’s sharp gaze swiftly back to him. “He was hell bent on the woman.” The _woman_. The man couldn’t stop his mouth. “She was just a job man, just a job.”

_She was just a job man._

_Just a job man._

Just a job.

“Just a job.” Oliver reiterated in a whisper; his eyes flickering between Stan’s, seeing a confused frown begin to furrow there.

Seeing… nothing at all.

“H-he said it wouldn’t be her you’d go after.” The man explained, as if the words helped. “He said I’d be safe.”

It made things so much easier.

Felicity Smoak. Just a job.

And he felt his face - every line and crescent; the expression he wore - and his heart, shut down as he tilted his head to scrutinise the man before him.

“So you know how long it takes to skin a man?”

This refuse of humanity - it didn’t matter if he loved his own kid-sibling - had helped take the woman who’d made it her mission to help him, against her will - _had she screamed? Did they hurt her as they took her?_ - and hand her off to a man who wouldn’t care about the light she was so generous with. He’d crush it beneath his heel before it could touch him, if he could.

Knowing this, that he’d been in her home - had invaded her - allowed Oliver to consider quite calmly, how long it might take to remove Stan’s outer layer.
And whether he had the right tools at hand to do it quickly.

“W-what?!”

Chin wobbling, voice shaking, open mouthed; Stan’s expression turned into something that, on any other day, would have made Oliver take ten steps back.

Instead he took a literal step forward. “Have you ever seen it done?"

Even as it reminded him of the monster he’d been.

And when Stan saw it - the significance hidden in Oliver’s question - he quickly looked to John. “He’s fucking with me, right?”

…but maybe John had a blade handy.

“No.” He heard Dig say… and it was just shy of surprised. Almost curious. “He isn’t ‘fucking’ with you.”

Cautious.

*Semantics.*

“But it- it was just a job!” He shouted and Oliver pressed him into the pillar, letting him rest on his own weight as each word out of his mouth made this a whole lot easier. “We didn’t even touch her! That was all Mr Wilson!”

‘Mr Wilson’ touched her.

“I’ll start at your shoulder.” And his candidness shut him up. “Any time you want to share with me their location,” cruelly pulling off Stan’s jacket, Oliver looked at him like he was a piece of meat instead of a human with a soul, “feel free to yell.”

“W-wait-”

Walking away, feeling two sets of eyes drill holes into him from the front and the back - one terrified, the other questioning - Oliver delved a hand into the trunk, peeling back the top layer to reveal a sleek case beneath. 1.5 metres by 98 centimetres. Just large enough for two handguns, the parts to a machine rifle and-

“It requires a steady hand.” He spoke as passive as he would if he were discussing the weather. “And,” he pulled out the serrated edge he was looking for, “a good blade.” A black handle overlooking 6 inches of steel, he balanced it on the tip of his finger; taking in the sheen. Dig kept up maintenance of his toys. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this but,” he jerked his head in a non-committal manner, “I think I remember the gist of it.”

It wasn’t something easily forgotten.

Flipping it with a twitch of his finger, he caught the grip of the knife as he strolled back.

“Y-you can’t do this.” Stan started, breathing hard as Oliver drew closer. “You’re the soon-to-be Mayor’s son! If this gets out-”

“If I cared at all about my mother’s political debut, I’d have taken you to the police.” Oliver paused a few feet in front of him. “You understand that you won’t survive this?” No, his heart would stop within minutes. Pointedly lifting the knife, Oliver tilted it towards him. “Your point is mute.”
If terror could be sound, then Stan just gave it a voice: and in the darkest recess of his self, Oliver wanted it. “I was just following him. I-I didn’t…” He ripped Stan’s shirt from his shoulders. “Fuck!” Shaking, Stan looked desperately from one man to the other. “W-we’ve all done worse, you know?” His voice was elevated passed recognisable. “This was nothing! Go into the house, take the woman: I m-mean, there’s so much bad shit going on in the world, that doesn’t seem so bad, right? It was just some woman!”

Some woman.

**Semantics.**

“You’re digging your grave.” Dig’s warning felt like permission - even though he knew it really wasn’t - and in Oliver’s peripheral, he saw him looking down at his reddened wrists. “Best talk before he starts.”

Whether Dig thought this was a bluff or not, Oliver was a stone as his hand gripped onto Stan’s naked shoulder, making him blabber. “I’m sorry!” Probably thinking that if he showed an ounce of remorse, they’d show him some latitude. “Alright?! I’m sorry. I’m sorry! But I-”

“Usually an apology that ends with a caveat is anything but.” Stan flinched when Oliver’s thumb pressed into his collarbone, holding him steady there… and he could feel the man’s heart jack hammer beneath the skin as he all but surrendered to fear. *Fear of me.*

Feeling himself slip on that all too familiar mask; the detached façade, because he would do what it took - whatever it takes - to save them.

“Now,” eyes finally locking with Stan’s petrified gaze, he decided he didn’t feel a thing, “this is going to hurt.”

Understatement.

Pressing the tip of the blade in to the skin between shoulder and collarbone - it took less than a pound of pressure to pierce skin - Oliver dragged the knife as forcefully and slowly as he could across the area towards his armpit.

Like riding a bike.

The scream it wrought - making the air about them vibrate - brought back memories too.

“No one’s coming.” A rivulet of blood rolled from the line; thick over his thumb and down Stan’s heaving chest. “Be as loud as you want.”

“**FUCK!!**”

Twisting the blade ever so slightly, he *stroked* it inwards and down to slip under the layers of skin-

“STOP!” The cry was more *sound* - a high pitched, fragmented wail - than word but Oliver caught the supplication. “Please!” And for all the man had or hadn’t done, it would take the truly heartless not to pause, to take a moment to consider. “Stop.” The word dragged; its one syllable torn into 3 as sobs began to wrack Stan’s frame.

He obviously hadn’t expected the pain to be so much. Nor had he expected Oliver to be a man of his word. The combination of promised pain and unforeseen handling was what made the Arrow so successful.
Not Oliver Queen. Not the same Oliver Queen who’d helped fill Tommy Merlyn’s pool with beer. Or the same Oliver who betrayed one sister for another. The same Oliver Queen turned reformed CEO of a major corporate company who had an image to protect.

Back straightening, his exhale long and shallow, blue eyes - long since turned to ice - focused on Stan’s as he forced his hands not to fist at the picture of the person before him made, the person he’d almost skinned.

“You’re a good man Oliver Queen.”

No, he wasn’t.

But she wasn’t done.

“You’re a good man.” The words were slow, as was the soft compassion she offered in her face, her smile. “No matter what you might think.”

No matter what he thought he knew, Felicity Smoak didn’t think the same. He’d long since learned that she was right about a lot of things, so if he didn’t have faith, then he’d let her do that for him.

“I see it. Every day.” She swallowed, but it wasn’t from nerves. “And the least you deserve in life is to know that, to know that you’re good.”

He’d fall into it - that dark place he knew so well - and let it eat him whole. He’d do it. For her. For both of them. He would.

“Thank you.”

Because she believed he could come back from it.

She believed.

And he clung to that now; to her faith given without want of a return.

“You’re hired.” He whispered, lingering on the way her face - her tired eyes wide and expressive; tell me what I can do to help you Felicity - froze and lit up. “You’ve signed the contract.” He paused to shake his head. Once. “I’m never letting you go.”

And if she could accept him once this was all over, knowing this, what he could do… then he could take this, bear the weight of it.

Bear the less than human sounds Stan was making. More a wounded animal than a man.

“I…” like he’d been deprived of oxygen, “I’ll tell you.” The ‘you’ was silent his voice having fled and Oliver watched dispassionately as Stan swallowed once, twice to get it back. “The boss – he has more than one place.” Pale faced, Stan’s body convulsed and flinched with each breath. There was a chance he’d go into shock. “You don’t have a lot of time.”

That wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear. “What do you mean?” He ground out.

“You weren’t supposed to know about the woman.” Felicity. “But I heard him say that… that he’d taken someone else to distract you.” Thea. “He’s planning something.”

“Yeah, I heard that too.” John interjected. When Oliver spared him a glance, he caught a range of conflicting emotions flickering one at a time across Dig’s face: reassurance, utter disbelief, the what the hell man, resolve and the slow hardening of a man on a mission. “Slade’s planning something
big. There was another guy I heard say they had 3 hours which,” John checked his watch, “was almost an hour ago.”

“What is he planning?” Oliver immediately threw at Stan.

“I don’t know.” Stan moaned and Oliver could tell he really didn’t. “I was just supposed to keep watch, I swear…”

A tear dropped down the side of his face, falling into the mess on his chest.

Taking a deep breath, “fine,” Oliver leaned in. “I want locations. All of them. Now.”

He didn’t even need to raise the knife again. Stan sang.

He felt the stain of it on his clothes. His skin. The tint of red on his thumb, the palm of his hand.

It made for another violent remembrance and there were already so many. It was too familiar.

And though he wanted to, he wouldn’t get rid of it. Not yet. Not until this was finished; until they were both home. Safe. With me. He’d carry it until then.

(He’d carry it with him forever – but there was part of him that he couldn’t silence: the part that wished for tender hands and the kindest heart to sweep across the dye of his sins change their colour. He’d pay for his own actions... but he still wanted. Even if it was undeserved.)

“Was it wise to leave him back there?”

There was no blink that brought him back to the present; he was overly cognizant of where he was and what he was doing. Or not doing. Of who wasn’t with them. Hands already fisted - one on the seat beside him, the other under the window as if he was bracing to jump from the vehicle - Oliver thought about how he’d left Stan.

Half-conscious against that pillar of stone. In shock. Alone. Utterly without courage. Suffering from withdrawal. Very aware that calling the cops would invite Slade’s temper and telling anyone about his own kidnapping would incite Oliver’s.

Yes, it was very wise.

“There’s nothing he can do.” Tense, his tone was as tight as his fists. “And we don’t have time to worry about it.”

And there was no space available inside him to care.

Hands at the wheel, John turned a corner that, in the expertise of less talented men, would have sent the car careening into a brick wall. “That list is pretty exhaustive.”

Oliver had to hold his body rigid - completely stiff - so as to not vault from the car and commit a mistake; one that would feel good for a moment but would inevitably ruin their chances.
The list.

Out of the nine places Stan gave them, he’d only known the address of two of them. They’d have to do research on the other places to narrow down their locations and one of those two was already a dead end. It felt more like a run around than an actual find: office buildings, warehouses-

“But the fact that Sebastian Blood’s Mayoral Agency is one of them, is troubling.” Dig aired out, sounding as disturbed as his words. “It makes me wonder whether Miss Lance was right before.”

And if it meant Laurel had shot the wrong man a few months ago.

Oliver’s breath fogged up the glass to his left. “I don’t care.” He hadn’t looked away from the outside world since they’d started driving.

“He could be part of this.”

The tendons in his neck flexed with his quiet but hard words. “I. Don’t. Care.”

“Yeah.” There was a softness to Dig’s tone that belied the gravity of what followed. “I noticed how much you don’t care.”

Oliver didn’t reply.

There was nothing to say, nothing he could say.

Then he heard the sigh coming from his right. “Where’d you learn to do that Oliver?”

He was silent for a moment before he spoke. “Russia.”

“You learned how to torture a man like that in Russia?”

“No.” As if it were the proverbial lint on his shirt to flick off. “I learned how to torture in China, thanks to Waller.” Oliver muttered, as if it was nothing. Business as usual; when, of course, it was anything but. “But I didn’t learn how to skin a man until I was with the Bratva.” Until he’d gone as dark as he thought he could go but still feared that, maybe, he could have gone deeper. “I taught myself.” He added as an afterthought.

What would Felicity say, hearing those words? How would she react?

“Jesus.” His exhale felt heavy. “Remind me to stop asking you about those five years you were away.”

Feeling a level of cold he hadn’t experienced since his early days as the Hood, Oliver shrugged a shoulder and even that felt wrong. “Why do you think I never bring it up?”

“I get that, but what you’re doing now – shutting down, becoming a stone,” it was a shrewd as John’s usual guesses as he kept his eyes on the road, “that won’t make this any easier.”

“I get that, but what you’re doing now – shutting down, becoming a stone,” it was a shrewd as John’s usual guesses as he kept his eyes on the road, “that won’t make this any easier.”

“I’m not doing it to make this easier.” Short, low; to any other man, Oliver’s gruff voice held an underlining threat. To Dig, it was a statement of intent. Oliver was preparing himself. Even if he had to lie as to why. “If the time comes, I need to be able do whatever it takes. Without hesitation.”

To get the job done.

“Normally I’d be the first to warn you of how easy it is to lose sight of what’s right in the face of what’s easy, but after the day I just had…” trailing off; a quiet damn it leaving him when they were
stopped at a red light behind a cue of cars, Dig’s left hand came up to rub at the skin of his brow, “let’s just say you aren’t alone in your hole.”

There was silence in the car for several seconds before Oliver shifted; his head turning to look at his brother in arms.

“Tell me.”

The order held a hundred questions with none of the answers being ones he’d like.

Fingers leaving a slight smear of red at the bridge of his nose, Dig grunted. “I was in her living room. I’d already done a sweep; it was clear, so I thought I might be able to persuade her to eat something before sleeping.”

Tense.

Every inch of John; the way he held fast to the wheel, the unease in his face… he was almost as raw as Oliver. “We were there maybe 20 minutes before I hear Felicity shout out.” Oliver’s stomach concaved; he couldn’t help it. And there was a perverse part of him that wanted to hear - in detail - what was likely going to be a chilling recount. Let it burn him as much, more, than it was hurting Dig. “I heard splashes.” There was a strain to the words - a level of anger - that made John’s feelings about this very clear. “Thuds.” The picture he was painting, a nightmare; Oliver’s focus was attuned so completely he could see every moment in his minds-eye. “I went to her - don’t think I’ve ever moved so fast - but before I made it, Mr I don’t know shit was there with a buddy of his and… I just knew what was happening in that bathroom.” Dig’s throat rippled as he swallowed. “I lost it.”

That hit him as hard as he’d hit Slade.

“Bathroom?” It was all he could get out.

“Bathroom.”

He’d just assumed - hoped - that ‘splash’ had meant the kitchen sink…

For several seconds, John just stared out the front window. Traffic began to move again and he moved with it, all the while the air around Dig turned purely volatile; whatever he was seeing making him twist inside.

“I failed, man.”

The words threw Oliver. “What are you-”

“She was taking a bath.”

A bath.

It set like a stone in his stomach along with all the implications burning through him.

Lying down.

Prone.

Nake-

“A bath?” So soft was his voice that anyone who didn’t know him, wouldn’t hear the lethality behind it.
Because Felicity bathing at the same time she was taken would mean…

“I thought she needed it. I just- I don’t remember the last time she relaxed.” Me either. “So, I ran her a bath and practically forced her to take it. So stupid.” Slowly shaking his head, Dig hissed through his teeth. “I didn’t think. Slade is out there; he’d taken Sara and Laurel, but I was so sure I could keep her safe. Instead, I made her more vulnerable than she already was.” Dig’s arm lashed out; his palm hitting the upholstery - once, twice - each smack like wood on wood, “dammit,” his teeth bared, the veins in his neck standing out… but Oliver didn’t even blink.

He was gone.

More vulnerable than she already was.

Vulnerable.

She had been. Which was why Oliver had chosen to behave a very specific way over the last couple of months; a way he thought would work if his relationship with Miss Smoak - his EA - was ever brought under a microscope.

It hadn’t made a difference.

He’d failed first.

Deep into the recesses of his dark place, was a small light. A place where anything was possible. Where a beautiful, innocent, young woman - stronger than she knew - who’d taken his soul for safe keeping, could be kept safe herself. Secure. So that even if she were to be preyed upon, or taken, or hurt; he would be right there to save her. He’d be where he was needed, where he wanted to be.

Sat in that limbo place of fear and turbulent anxieties, he gave into the comfort of picturing it.

How he would have exploded through her front door, calling her name before speeding through rooms he’d only been in a handful of times-

-Because, distance.

He’d be there in time to tear down her attackers - it didn’t matter how many there were, he’d take them all down - and shooting a hail of bullets into Slade before going to her. Before saying the words-

You’re safe. I’m here, you’re safe.

Even if it was only momentary, because in his world, no one was ever truly safe. And he should have known better, yet he couldn’t let it go. He could do it. He could make the world safe for her. He could take Thea in his arms and run and no one would follow…

Good things rarely happen. But he could make them happen for them both. No matter the cost.

Then reality kicked in and he remembered: he didn’t get to have that. The peace of mind that came with knowing you were good for the people you loved. That you brought them peace instead of a lifetime of suffering. That everyone he touched was hurt by him; by his darkness, his past. He’d chosen to survive: maybe this the cost of that selfishness.

And they had to pay for it, pay for my sins.

It took away that bright spot and replaced it with a void. With cold. Absent of-
You’re a good man Oliver Queen.

Her.

Eyes riveted on the darkness outside, Oliver’s pressed his lips together in an effort to suppress.

She would have been naked when Slade took her.

Like everything inside him suddenly stopped producing whatever magic that kept him alive, the world dulled to grey. The loosened fist around his heart squeezed and, this time, didn’t loosen.

It was twisted - wrong on so many levels - but he couldn’t stop himself from wondering.

Had Slade looked at her as he’d taken her? Looked at her like a man looks at a woman instead of a weapon to be used against his enemy.

Had he taken her in? Had Slade taken a moment to… admire?

Disgust flared through him, making his gut twist, just as something deeper - that thing nestled somewhere in the dark place - unfurled, stretched out and clawed.

His fingers dug into his thigh in the rare hope that a little pain would take away from the pressure in his chest... because this was never supposed to touch her. The ugliness Slade could show her, the brutal truth that some men could and would steal into her home, trespass upon her privacy and break down the social virtues that hid her from undeserving eyes.

It was far more personal than taking Thea.

“He took her Oliver.” It was a surprisingly fragile mutter from a man as imposing as Dig, but Felicity was his sister.

She wasn’t Oliver’s sister.

To Dig, this was the equivalent to an emotional Armageddon.

Perhaps it was chivalry, a form of bigotry… but Dig had accepted Felicity joining the team on the proviso that she be kept safe, that she remain untouched because she was precious. Innocent. Wonderfully bright.

This crossed every line in Dig’s rule book.

“He took her.” Dig repeated and Oliver forced himself to look at him again, seeing the now stony - utterly unyielding - look on the man’s face. “He drowned her, then he took her.”

The heart fisted tight in his chest, stopped beating.

“What?” He breathed into the stillness of the car.

Dig licked his lips and it took Oliver a haunting second to realise he was trembling with the same restraint Oliver was forcing on himself. “The thuds, the splashes...” and his voice changed; elevated, “whatever he did, he’d done it while she was in her bathtub, man.”

Oliver stared at him.

Blonde hair.
Red lips. Sometimes pink. Purple. Pale. Kissable-

Dresses. Skirts. Heels that clipped across the ground and made him look their way, made him take that second to stare at the way her calves were naturally defined and then overly so by the extra height.

A smile that brought the sun into a constantly dull sky.

Eyes that lit up at his every word; his successes and failures alike.

Fingers that delivered bad men to their dooms.

A voice that told him he was worth life.

Hands that made him wonder why his muscles always jumped under them whenever she was soothing an ache or injury. Hands he’d watch move when she speaks and imagine what they might feel like on his skin in a very different way.

A heart that wasn’t his to keep but beautiful to look at.

(It was a foreign kind of terrifying, being close to her.)

Colour that could be ripped free from his life because a mad man bent on destroying what good was left in him had forced her head under water when she was at her most vulnerable.

A world turned black without her in it.

“He’ll come after her.” He whispered to her, to Felicity because she was listening. Hearing him. “After what happened on the island… If there’s anyone he’ll target, it’ll be Sara.”

He was a fool.

Trying to speak, whatever words he’d wanted to say came out as a mangled moan.

He’d almost drowned once. More than once. Remembering it and placing Felicity in his place in the memory…

Like hitting a brick wall of pain.

Stop.

He couldn’t find either of them if he was breaking.

Discomforted, his hands came up to rub roughly over his face. Push it down. Turn it into something useful. “Drive faster.” He said, leaning forwards for his face to rest in his palms. “I need to show you something.”

“The Foundry?”

“Yeah.”

Dig stepped on it.
The house was well kept, despite the obvious state of dysfunction and disrepair that had seeped into its bones.

But Sara wasn’t there to judge its cleanliness. Lord knew, she’d lived in far worst abodes before. She couldn’t find Roy.

Here in his home, his living room, she was sure she’d find him. Sleeping. Or unconscious. Something.

Slade had taken Thea. There was no way Roy wouldn’t try to stop him from doing that. Unless he couldn’t do that.

She’d already checked Verdant. Nothing.

He wasn’t answering his phone either. Something’s wrong. Beyond Thea being taken.

This wasn’t something they needed, but Roy losing it was also something they didn’t need. Nyssa was coming with the Tibetan Pit Viper Venom but she wouldn’t arrive until the day after tomorrow. All Sara could do until then, was keep an eye on him.

Ollie won’t. So, she would.

It wasn’t that she was bitter; it was just that having an exposed back made her itch. She hadn’t survived years of horrors to be taken out by a 20-year-old attitude dispenser. It had nothing to do with truth.

Unfortunately, she’d also been forced to see that it did have something to do with her perception of the world. A skill she’d thought she’d been quite apt in, sharp with, and had been proven very erroneous with.

She’d miss-stepped big time today.

I’d just thought… did it even matter right now? Her lack of haste meant the possible pain of a friend who was dearer to her than she realised. Seeing Felicity on camera had been like being shanked.

Whatever thoughts – hopes – she’d been carefully culminating had died right there and then.

But still, no matter how much she tried, she couldn’t reconcile seeing Roy as a friend. She only saw the Mirakuru. And that instinct had kept her alive for the past 6 years.

She wondered if Oliver even heard himself sometimes. They had a loose cannon in their ranks and it was like he didn’t notice. She knew he cared; he’d gone on at length to her about what he wanted for Roy and how he thought it could be achieved. And he’d been all in for Roy cutting himself off from Thea, from his job at Verdant in case he accidentally or otherwise, hurt people if he lost control. It was a precaution.

But then he’d spoken to Felicity and weeks of conversation between himself and Sara, of what Sara thought was a trust between them, had been negated in moments.

“If we take away what makes him human,” Oliver whispered to Sara; barely out of earshot from Roy, “it means the past few months of progress he’s made will have been for nothing.”

Where those even his words? She’d found it difficult to believe, especially with his fears. Until… she
hadn’t. Until, *Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl*, and everything suddenly made all kinds of sense. Whether he’d been right or not remained to be seen but Sara knew *she’d* been wrong a whole lot more.

She should have seen it. But she hadn’t. It hadn’t come together for her the way it normally would have, until this night. And it made her the fool.

*I didn’t mean to be.*

But she’d had to try.

Straightening – eyeing the couch covered with two threadbare throes – Sara exhaled through pursed lips.

Taking Thea… for some reason she – none of them – had thought Slade would go that far. So, they hadn’t prepared for it. Not even a little. They’d had their asses handed to them and they hadn’t actually been in the fight yet.

She wanted Slade. But not at the cost of Oliver’s loved ones. *Or* her own.

*Patience beloved.*

Eyes closing, she reached for it: the heart she’d pushed aside. *Nyssa.* Missing her was a constant. *Needing* her was brand new. And she did. She needed her. Needed her in a way she’d never need Oliver. Or Laurel. *Or daddy.*

And she hadn’t understood why until, again, today.

It was Oliver who’d made her face the truth, all without actually doing a thing.

*Oliver should have kept a better watch of his girl.*

His reaction, the energy in his denials against Laurel’s claim, the way he’d focused on Slade like a shark, how he’d lost focus of everyone else in the auditorium.

Everyone except two.

That’s when she knew.

It’s also when she realised how much she’d pushed for something that could never be.

The buzz of her phone brought her out of her spiral and she shook herself free of it before pulling it out of her pocket, saw who was calling - prayed there was nothing else to add to the growing list of problems - and pushing to accept the call.

“Laurel?”

“*Just thought I’d give you a heads up.*” Her sister immediately explained, sounding beyond triumphant, confident and self-assured. “*Slade Wilson has officially been placed in police custody. Courtesy of yours truly. You can thank me later.*”

If the expletive *shit* was a facial expression, then Sara was wearing it.

*She wouldn’t.* “What? Why?” *She couldn’t be that...*  

(She could, she really could.)
She did.

“Sara,” disbelief filled her tone, “he kidnapped us. He’s taken Thea.”

“But you have no proof. Not to keep him there.” All Laurel was doing was delaying the inevitable. All she was doing was insuring an even greater unfavourable reaction from Slade. A consequence none of them would enjoy.

“We were eye witnesses. And as the daughters of one of Starling City’s most decorated police officers, our say has some power here.” Swift, concise and to the point. A point of Laurel’s own making. She’s not going to listen to me. “We have a duty to uphold the law. I’m doing exactly what dad would do.”

In a way, she was right. If Oliver – the Arrow – gave the go-ahead, their father would arrest Slade Wilson on sight. But Oliver hadn’t, because he knew something. Or feared something. Regardless, this could have consequences on Thea.

On Felicity.

“Laurel you have no-”

“Sara.” It was firm but not unkind. “I’m doing the right thing. At the end of the day, it’s about helping Oliver. And that’s what I’ve chosen to do. Help Oliver. Oh and, you might want to make him watch the news.”

“Sorry?”

“The Press where already outside of the auditorium when I arrested Slade.”

“Wait, citizen’s arrest?” Better question-

She’d booked him right outside of the auditorium? For everyone to see. Or did she do that so there wouldn’t be any blowback from him?

Smart.

But also, not. Also, very, very showy.

“It’s legal. And it makes me feel better knowing he’s behind bars. He can’t hurt anyone in there.”

“Laurel…” She allowed very inch of what she was feeling to filter into the name.

Laurel was many thing Sara admired but one of the few things she didn’t, was Laurel’s ignorance. And how her older sister sometimes forgot that she didn’t know everything. She didn’t know about the Mirakuru.

“Trust me, ok? This is going to work. I can feel it.”

Feel what?

The line disconnected before Sara could answer; the droning sound echoing the hopelessness beginning to build in Sara as she stared unseeingly at Roy’s furniture.

“Shit.”
On any other day, it would be comical how she and Thea Queen - Oliver’s little sister who Felicity had barely shared 2 words with in the past, awkward - were wrapped around each other.

But not today.

“Ssh.” Lightly whispering the sound - not that Thea needed the reminder to be quiet but saying it reminded her of how Oliver had repeated it to her, how she’d drawn comfort from it - Felicity kept one hand loose over Thea’s mouth as a gun dangled in her other.

Like, held between her index finger and thumb.

*I really don’t like guns.* Even the little ones. Even if she was a half decent shot, courtesy of John Diggle, ex-military badass, *of which I am neither.* Give her Wi-Fi and the closest thing to an accessible interface and she could destroy virtual worlds but *this*…

*I am so very out of my element here.*

Here, being the warehouse. They were still in the warehouse. *Though, in my defence, it’s fracking huge.* And of course, there was more than one.

A cluster of creepy criminal dens.

On the plus side, it meant Felicity knew roughly where they were. Oliver had patrolled through here in the past during his search for vertigo. The bad news - very bad - was that any hope they had of leaving said cluster of buildings without being noticed had dropped to single digits.

*Because, guards.*

There were less than a dozen of them but each carried a weapon; a somewhat more intimidating sight than a 5 foot 5-inch woman barefoot, dressed in a thin - blood stained - t-shirt and shorts with only 5 bullets to her name. *Did I mention I hate guns?*

Firing on their pursuers back there had been terrifying and she’d deliberately only aimed to keep them away. She doubted she’d injured either of the two men she’d shot at, although she had heard a yelp-like shout from one of them before falling through that door, which made her want to jump up and down.

But she wanted her boys here. Pronto. *I don’t think I can do this.*

Keep Thea safe.

It was imperative. Her first and most important goal… and she wasn’t sure she could do it.

*No.* Mentally slapping herself, she took a quivering breath. *Get it together.* She’d been through worse… but that was by herself. And she hadn’t made a good job at protecting her person. More like selling her body to the whim of a lunatic with one eye.

Still, it was defensive. She’d been *protecting.* Shielding others, even if the proposal was a farce in the end, it *had* held him at bay for a short while.
For this, she’d have to be - had already been - offensive and she wasn’t sure she could do that and be anywhere close to affective. But she had to try.

For Oliver.

*Channel Sara.* Eyes fixed - wide; *I am not a wimp, I am not a wimp* - on the area just outside of their little alcove, she whispered too light for anyone to overhear. “Are you ok?”

*I am the very definition of fearless. Why be Goliath when I can be David?*

If she said it enough, maybe it would come true. *Just keep swimming.*

Also, her brain was making up for her fear with really bad one liners.

“Uh huh.” Cheek pressed against Thea’s, “Sure,” it wasn’t difficult to hear the way Thea’s voice wavered or feel the very large gulp the girl made. “I always wanted to spend 24 hours in an abandoned warehouse. Just er… you can get us out of here, right?”

It hit Felicity then that Thea didn’t see a scared and beyond uncomfortable Felicity Smoak.

She saw the woman who’d stun-shocked the hell out of the man who’d kept her ramrod in a chair and forced her to plead for her life into a camera. She saw the woman who’d hugged her tight after untying her, saw the woman who’d stolen the guard’s walkie talkie and pistol. Saw the woman who’d been aware enough to hear the eerie - but quiet - click of two rifles having their safety features taken off in time to send Thea blazing out the door and skilled enough to fire back.

Even if she *had* fallen through the door before locking it shut. *Smooth.*

It didn’t matter how she appeared to Thea. What mattered was that she could take the load of Thea’s fear.

Truth be told, as much as she was unravelling, Felicity was faring far better than she normally would have been. And that was because of the guard just around the corner of her room.

Her trusty nail in hand, she’d deliberately *not* thought about what she had to do and, after calculating her timing, speed and distance, Felicity had flown at him from behind and had embedded the large nail into the muscle at the back of the man’s neck.

Not to take him out, but to make him drop his guard.

Like everything else, she pretending the blood didn’t exist.

Mouth open, preparing to shout, he’d lifted his arms as he’d turned – his stun rod still tied to his pants – only to meet Felicity’s fist. Not in his face; she’d break her knuckles.

But in his throat.

He’d choked. Stunned and – too filled with adrenaline – it had felt logical for her to grab his head and wham it into the wall behind him; her squeezed eyes closed the entire time.

*And that is the extent of my knowledge in self-defence.*

Pitiful.

But it had worked, however briefly.
She’d taken the stun rod, pushing back the memories of having the things jammed into her rib cage hours before - ignoring the aches and pains of the day - to tip toe back to the large area where she’d seen Thea.

The same room she found her in again with, luckily, her imposing guard facing the opposite direction. It had taken every ounce of courage she’d possessed to use the stun rod on him.

*Which leads us back to now.* How did they escape such a huge place? Obviously, Slade hadn’t expected an escape - she’d made him sure of her good behaviour – which was why there were so few guards. Still, there were roughly 6 guards too many.

She wanted – needed – Oliver here. Right now.

How fantastic it would be if he suddenly blitzed through one the decrepit building’s many, grimy windows, wearing his suit and shooting a quiver full of arrows with the names of each of Slade’s men carved into the side. She didn’t care if that epitomized her eternally as the damsel in distress.

*I watch too many Robin Hood movies too many times a week.* Though, truth be told, since she’d told Oliver about his mother’s secret, she hadn’t watched one.

The dreamy image of an Arrow save gave her strength to say, “Y-yeah.” *Way to sound reassuring.* Felicity took a deeper breath. “We’re going to be fine.”

The only reason they hadn’t been found was because of their size.

Rushing out of the building they’d been held in, they’d both skidded - bare foot, *ow* - to a halt at the small garage they’d entered. The *back* of the building. *So not helpful.* Catching another door further in, she’d taken Thea’s hand and had sprinted towards it only to enter another cavernous room. Her instincts had screamed at her; in such a space it was impossible to defend against open attack so they snuck alongside the walls into the shadowed areas, slipping through several archways with no doors - plastic wrap and boxes were everywhere - only to find a recess almost completely hidden from view.

If Slade – or Frank – had been there, they’d have been found by now. Slade because he was a tactical genius and Frank because his instincts were insidious: he could think like his victims.

“We’ll give it another minute and then, when I say, we’ll move to the front of the building and-”

“But which way’s the front?” Thea’s hissed.

Good question. “We’ll see a decrease in side rooms; there should be a long hallway around here.” If memory served, though she’d been blindfolded at the time. “There’s a door at the end. It’s coded but don’t worry: I can hack it.”

“Oh.” Like Thea heard this kind of thing every day. “So, you can hack too?”

“It’s a hobby.”

“No wonder Ollie hired you.”

Felicity blinked. “What?”

There was something in her tone that put Felicity on edge.

But as quickly as it came, it vanished. “Nothing.” Thea loosened her hold - making Felicity realise
just how tight she’d been gripping her in return - pulling back to reveal, in the dim light, a wan shell of composure.

“Just, you know, if you can hire anyone to be your EA, a hacker’s probably a good choice.” Voice somewhat shaky, Thea crossed her arms around herself. She was cold. Felicity wasn’t faring any better. “Not that I’d know… is there anything you can’t do?”

The slight smile was destroyed by the plea in her eyes. A ‘make me believe we’ll be alright’.

_Damn it._

She wanted so much to respond with ‘please; I eat situations like this for breakfast and glory over them for lunch’ but she could barely persuade herself. “There’s a lot I can’t do.” Better for truth to be told but her tone held a jokey quality to it. “I only wish I knew how to go commando on these guys.” Her smiled dimmed because it became increasingly obvious that these were _not_ the words Thea wanted to hear. “But,” catching her attention again and decidedly not flinching when the girls dried mascara on her cheeks highlighted the fear in every inch of her, “I can get us out of here.” _I will. Even if it kills me._ And it wouldn’t because Slade was a sick puppy. Alive and squirming was how he liked her best but that same preference didn’t apply to Thea Queen. “All we need is a little luck.” _A phone would be great._ “And a friend.”

Dressed in green.

_Come on Oliver. Tracker. Remember._

“A friend?”

Deep breaths… “Yes.”

Smile.

Pretend.

“Right.” Thea breathed, her stare fading over as her mind went elsewhere.

_Ah. That was the other worrying thing. As if there weren’t enough worrying things to keep me occupied._

Take the plunge: ask the question. Negate the consequences.

“Thea.” She spoke gently, gaining the girl’s attention - though she was just 5 years younger than Felicity, Thea looked very young just then - and asked something that could make Oliver’s sister shut down on her completely. “What did he tell you?”

When Thea was alone. After Felicity had been taken from the room, what words had he fed her in the dark?

…Thea stilled.

_Crap on a very big cracker._ He’d told her _something_. It was in her eyes; a darkness and a pain that hadn’t been present with her fear earlier, from when she watched her get beat down. _Super fun times._

If Felicity had to watch something like that…

That could have done it, but, no. Felicity’s gut told her this was something else entirely. And her gut was almost always right. A gut Oliver trusted, until he pulled in his shield and made decisions for
everyone. "Obstinate man."

Back to Thea.

The girl’s jaw locked, visibly tensing as she mulishly shook her head. “He didn’t say anything.” And tried - failed - for blasé.

However, Thea Queen was a creature of emotion.

Briefly closing her eyes, Felicity forced herself to push. Though she knew from experience that pushing a Queen was never a good thing. “Please, I need-”

“What?” The snap - a little louder than preferred - surprised Felicity into quiet. Thea shuffled on the spot. “It doesn’t matter what he said, okay?”

Oh, it mattered a great deal if it was making Thea this angry, because only anger could break through anxiety like that like in a teenager.

Which was, surprisingly, a better alternative to fear. Inopportune, it made for brasher discourse.

Try.

“That man, Mr Wilson?” She said, as low and as soft as she could manage under the circumstances - a setting filled with tension - looking Thea in the eye the whole time. “He’s set on hurting your brother.” Felicity offered, skirting dangerously close again to the truth but she saw Thea look at her uncertainly out of the corner of her eye and, seeing the want there, forged ahead. “He’ll do anything. Take anyone. Use whatever tool he has at hand to achieve this goal.”

And people were tools to Slade Wilson.

The furrow in Thea’s brow looked more apprehensive that puzzled. Like… she knew something and it wasn’t a good something but it was a thing she expected to hear from Felicity’s lips. “Like secrets?”

Secrets.

First, she hadn’t asked what Felicity had expected her to. She hadn’t asked about the why of it all. And second, Thea was looking at her like she was waiting for Felicity to give her something.

But, what?

“Huh?” Loquacious? No, but Felicity was stumped.

Jaw still set - unclench honey; it hurts to watch, she was too young for that kind of bitterness even if she had good reason to be - Thea spoke. “He told me that my brother has been keeping things from me. Things that I have a right to know.”

Oh God.

Malcolm Merlyn.

“What things?” She didn’t mean it to come out as a whisper but this is bad, very bad. “Thea, what did he tell you?”

Looking from one blue iris to the other, Thea’s own hazel eyes narrowed. “Do you know?”
Felicity balked. “What? No.” Well, probably, since there really wasn’t much Oliver didn’t tell her. “I don’t even-”

“He said you were special too, you know. Like Ollie but not a sinner.” Sinner. Sure. That he’d use it to try to warp Thea against her brother… And, yes, it was disturbing how clear she could hear Slade’s voice in Thea’s words. “He called Ollie a sinner but you’re his special friend?” It sounded as obscene as Thea obviously thought it was. “Do you have some sort of relationship with him or something? Are you seeing him behind Ollie’s back?”

She felt something inside her perish. Literally; something broke. And vanished…

Hope.

_Relationship._

A universe of meaning in a single word. It made her stomach revolt.

_I don’t-

Did it even matter? Did any justification make her empty words more credible than the truth? That she’d said yes to the most indecent of proposals… out of fear? Said yes to a devil because she’d literally no idea what to do and yet she hadn’t asked anyone for their input? Yes, she’d gone to Lyla… but why not Oliver? Diggle? Sara? She could have opened her mouth at any time.

She hadn’t simply because she’d wanted Oliver to live without the kind of stress a hopeless situation induces.

But… was that her only reason?

She honestly didn’t know.

Other than that, would anyone even care? They’d focus on one thing. The fact that she’d kept valuable information from them, that she’d known at times where Slade might have been and his intentions…

And Thea obviously hoped it wasn’t what she thought it might be and what that thought was, was sickening. Thea had no idea what was going on; Felicity couldn’t blame her for thinking that.

But… it hurt.

It made her think of how others would react. Would they think as Thea did, that she was engaging in some perverse kinky foreplay with the enemy? Like she was doing something shameful. Like she was just as tainted as she feared.

Something in her expression must have reflected her thoughts because she watched Thea’s go from defensive to completely open. Scared.

Letting out a shallow exhale, Felicity tried to soothe her and it wasn’t as hard as it should have been; opting for truth. She’d sensed that only honesty would gain Thea’s trust after months – years – of being lied to. ‘I’m not in a relationship with Slade Wilson.” Her voice was a rasp that made Thea flinch but the mere _thought_…

Would Oliver think the same, given the chance?

“He said I’m special because he’s insane.” After weeks, it was only answer Felicity would allow
herself to entertain because the alternative might feed her already very present nightmares. “He’s a psychopath,” she tried to quell it but her voice still wobbled, “who found a new toy.” Pointing to herself, as hard as she tired, she knew that her smile was broken. “I’m entertainment.”

And that was it really.

Slade was a psycho. End of story.

She could only imagine how this all might sound to her… as much she wanted to shield Thea, a part of Thea understood that no matter how much she wanted the girl to remain shielded, reality made such a thing impossible.

And with Thea’s next words, this showed. “He hurt you.” She sounded like the frightened 19 year that she was. “It looked awful.”

*It felt pretty crappy too.* “I’m sorry.” Felicity murmured, stepping forwards, and she really was because Thea shouldn’t have had to see that.

And yet, what came out next, completely changed her perspective. “You didn’t flinch. Like you were used to it.” By the tears forming in Thea’s eyes, it had done more than simply upset her. “You must have been so scared but you didn’t flinch.”

Felicity saw it in her then, just as she heard it: how can you be strong like that?

“Your want the truth?” At the girl’s nod, Felicity gave her half of that. “I wasn’t scared.” She was a dab hand after all. “This…” she swallowed, “it isn’t the first time he’s lost it with me here. I just wanted you to be alright.”

Because she didn’t want to imagine how Oliver would be if Thea wasn’t.

The small abrasion at her collarbone - the place Slade put the stun rod - would be something Felicity knew he’d furious at. The same with how very small Thea appeared to be right now.

Playing with her hands, Felicity itched to reach out to her; to offer comfort, however small but-

“You’re saying you’re alright?” Thea said – because it wasn’t really a question – bug eyed. “After all that?!?”

Finger whipping up - *fwup* - she responded with like-minded bug-eyed-ness. “Keep it down.” Whispering, she waved a hand looking like a demented ventriloquist. “None of that matters right now, alright?”

It would later. When she was alone and in great need of a shower.

Like she didn’t understand – not even a little – Thea searched her face.

Felicity waited through the inspection.

But what Thea said next was the opposite of what she expected to hear. “So, you’re dating Ollie?”

“W-what?” Heart practically fighting to escape her rib cage, Felicity floundered. “No!”

Squeaky whispers were not the best way to convey truths.

The abruptly coy look in Thea’s eye told her that. “I thought he was dating Sara but-”
“He was dating Sara.” And suddenly, the alternative of being afraid and watching for the guards was very appealing. “They broke up about a week ago and no, Oliver doesn’t see me that way.” She shook her head, once. Hard. “At all. I’m a friend.”

His team mate, IT girl and partner.

And… that was all.

The idea of him being with her - wanting to be with her - the way he’d been with Sara - the way he’d been with Helena - was overwhelming. As was the way he sometimes was with her, like yesterday. Like the past few weeks. So, she didn’t think about it. Better it not be thought of: she didn’t want to waste more time in fantasy land and forget to live.

Para-quoting - even mentally - Albus Dumbledore is very telling of my state of mind right now.

“I just thought… never mind.” Thea exhaled, shaking her head. “It looks like I really don’t know a lot about Ollie.”

Uh oh. “I’m guessing he makes it difficult to change that.” No ‘guess’ about it. She knew full well how Oliver’s fear of the supposed destructive nature of his love - his perception so very skewed - was what kept him staying late in the Foundry to cut down any chance that he’d run into his sister in Verdant. “But you know I think, in his own very Oliver way, he feels he’s protecting you.”

From himself.

But her answer had an altogether different effect on Thea than the feminine solidarity she’d been trying to create. Licking her lips, the girl sent her an oddly shrewd look. “How well do you know him? I mean, you work for him and you talk to him and…” her hand brushing out, gesturing over her person, Thea looked her in the eye.

And… what exactly?

What was she waiting to hear?

Her hands chafed at her arms. “There isn’t much to tell.”

For a moment, Felicity was granted with what she liked to term the ‘Moira Queen’ stare: the one that made her feel like all her secrets were written in bold on her skin, exposed for the world to see.

Then Thea scoffed. “Right.” She looked away, done with Felicity and the conversation. All because it hadn’t been what she’d wanted to hear.

The psychology of teenagers.

Eyes dropping low, Felicity breathed in slowly. “I’m not sure what it is you want me to tell you.”

“Forget it.” Tone as tight as the way she was now holding herself, Thea didn’t look back at her. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Thea-”

“No.” Almost growled, she earned back the girl’s stare. “I don’t want to hear any more lies. Not from Ollie and definitely not from his secretary.”

It was meant to be scathing. Meant to push Felicity away, but Thea had no idea that her stubbornness didn’t come close to matching the woman in front of her. It was just that, Felicity usually had more
patience.

But not this night.

“Okay.” She gave Thea moment to think she’d won before adding, “Though you haven’t even asked me what it is you want to know yet.”

“What’s the point?” She muttered. “It isn’t like you’ll answer.”

“I don’t know; you might be surprised.” Smiling softly - because as bitchy as she knew Thea could be, she also knew that the girl before her was lonely and beyond done with being left in the dark - Felicity cocked her head. “Try me.”

Head whirling back to see her, Thea’s glare fixed on her sympathetic expression. “How about the truth?”

Um… “About what?”

“About what Ollie’s hiding from me.” Keeping silent, Felicity let Thea vent. “Always hiding. Always distant. More so than he was after he came home the first time.” The words were filled with a bitterness that did nothing to belie the grief in them. The isolation she must have felt. “It’s like he suddenly decided to take a step back from me, from mom. And he won’t tell me why.” She huffed and continued quietly. “He doesn’t tell me anything anymore.”

Secrets were difficult enough to keep, never mind explain. And there was a strong argument Felicity could use against this, against entitlement Vs justification. Just because Thea wanted to know, didn’t give her the right to know.

But she was also Oliver’s sister. The things he did and would do, affected her. In a way, she had more than a right to know than most.

But.

“His secrets,” she began and Thea’s gaze flickered with a hope she’d tried and failed to temper that stabbed at Felicity’s stomach, “aren’t mine to tell.” Watching his sister harden - as expected - Felicity drove home her point. “How could he ever trust me again if I just tell you the things he obviously isn’t ready for you to hear?”

Because she knew Thea knew something. Something that would hurt Oliver for her to know. It was in her eyes. There wasn’t any point in hiding from the girl that she knew too, especially not when she needed Thea not to turn on her brother after all this. Oliver needed his family. He needed - just once - for someone who’d known him before the island to accept everything that he was in the present. Otherwise, him moving into the future will be impossible. He’d stay in the dark. Afraid of the light.

And Felicity couldn’t allow that to happen. Not when he deserved so much more, when there was so much more to life than living on an island of your own making.

There was something in Thea’s face - an understanding - that told Felicity that as much as the girl hated it, as much as it stung that ‘Ollie’ didn’t want to let her in - was too afraid to - she knew that there was truth in her words.

However…

“Slade told you something, didn’t he? About Oliver.” Thea’s eyes dropped to the side. “Do you want to ask me about it?” Felicity cautiously offered.
An ambiguous olive branch, but a branch nonetheless.

Again, Thea stilled. Except this time, it was with surprise. As if she hadn’t expected the invitation.

“It’s a secret.” She mumbled.

That wasn’t good. But if Felicity could reduce the damage done, she’d do so. Even if it meant earning Oliver’s ire. Just add it onto the pile of bad decisions recently.

If Thea already knew, then Felicity wasn’t betraying his trust. Not that she’d add to whatever Slade had told her. She’d just try to make Thea see it from Oliver’s point of view, just to give him a chance to explain later.

Just a chance.

She shrugged up a shoulder. “It’s likely that I already know what it is.”

Shuffling, Thea’s shoes scuffed the ground. “I’m not sure I even believe it. But if it really is the truth, then I don’t think I can share it with you.”

That both warmed Felicity’s stomach and hit her in the gut.

As angry, bitter or sad as Thea was with her brother, that didn’t mean she didn’t want to protect him.

But it meant Felicity knew exactly what Slade had told her. She always trusted her gut, and the small wow factor in Thea’s tone pushed her to let out the breath she’d been holding.

And speak.

“He told you he’s the Arrow.”

Fast – worryingly so – Thea’s head shot up to Felicity’s face, seeing the calm there. The knowing. The pride.

Felicity was proud of Oliver. He’d managed the impossible. Vigilantism wasn’t something even a small group of people could accomplish otherwise there’d be more than one fugitive in the city. And doing that on top of running a company, albeit, when he remembered he had to actually enter the building to do so - which he had done with some surprising zeal this past week since the breakup - was tantamount to a phenomenon.

And she needed Thea to see that, to see the ‘special’ under the mask and to not think the worst about it. To not see him as the monster he saw in himself.

Eyes shooting to and from her own, Thea’s exhale was shaky. “It’s true.” Her words breathless. “He’s the Arrow.”

She hadn’t needed to worry about his sister’s response.

“All those times I got at him for not being at the mansion, when I thought he didn’t care… he was out there, helping people. Saving them. Saving me. Oh my God, he saved me.” A shaky hand covering her mouth as she spoke, Felicity couldn’t tell if Thea wanted to hurl or laugh out loud. Please be the latter. “Twice. He saved me twice. Mom. Roy, he… why couldn’t he tell me?” Her quiet question was filled with sadness, but this time it wasn’t disappointment in him. It was disappointment in herself. “Why couldn’t he come to me?”

“Oliver, he’s…” shaking her head, Felicity allowed herself to smile for real because she felt it. That
wealth of feeling she’d never buried for Oliver Queen but also never expressed. “He’s a good man. The best man. A hero.” She knew her eyes were soft, knew her words were filled with a devotion she couldn’t get rid of, “But he has demons. And they’re loud. They’re a constant voice in his head. He doesn’t believe he is that man, the hero, or that he deserves the sort of admiration, respect and love he’s already earned ten times over.” Arms still crossed, she gave Thea a little that’s just the kind of guy he is head jiggle at her wide-eyed look. “That’s why he didn’t tell you. He thought you might see him the way he sees himself.”

It was too big a risk for his heart to take.

“And what way is that?”

Small smile gone, Felicity sighed. “He thinks he’s a monster.”

A murderer.

Something born to die.

She watched Thea swallow as she processed this. “Why?”

“I think that might be a question best left for him.” Let’s not step on that landmine just yet, though mines of any kind have been all sorts of fun for us in the past.

“U-um, you’re all sweaty.”

Yep. “Needless to say, your brother doesn’t see himself clearly. Being shipwrecked earned him a set of skills he needed to survive.” And survive he did, thank God. “Unfortunately, those same skills have set him apart from the rest of the world.” Keeping him emotionally frozen in time.

For a moment, they were both quiet.

Then Thea rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”

Only a sister could respond with that. “That’s Oliver.”

“Ollie’s an idiot.”

Felicity managed a tense giggle. “He can be.” Tense because, they were laughing in a really bad part of town. “How about we get ourselves out of here,” somehow, “and you ask him about it yourself?”

Thea nodded, straightening. “Sounds like a plan.”

Though we are officially plan-less but let’s no shoot a girl while she’s down. “Yup.” Peering out from their hidy-hole and around, Felicity quelled the shudder she felt coming. It was quiet and quiet meant no guards.

It was also dark, because, night.

It did not mean something ominous. It. Did. Not.

“You ready?” She shot back at Thea who nodded again, reaching out to grasp her free hand and pressing her lisp together at the way Felicity was handling the pistol in her other.

“Oh.” Felicity blinked, her mouth in an ‘O’ shape. “Right.”

Righting the weapon - feeling it’s weight fully in the palm of her hand and in the control of her
fingers were the trigger rested - Felicity took a moment to at least gather the ability to pretend she was a bad ass.

“Let’s go.”

Tugging on Thea’s hand, heart in her throat, they shot out of the room - almost silent without her shoes, though Thea’s made up for it with light taps, crapola - and into darkness…

…Somehow emerging out into a hallway. It didn’t look any more familiar than the rest of the place, but the further along they trotted - hearing Thea’s breaths behind her - the more the length of it registered in Felicity’s memory.

“We’re gong the right way.” She breathed, relieved. “At the end of this corridor, there’s a 3-digit lock on the door,” turning to Thea, she made every effort to soothe any anxiety the girl might be having, “and I’m pretty sure I know what it is. If I don’t, it’ll take me about 3 minutes to get through anyway. We’re-”

Her ‘we’re going to be fine’ didn’t quite make the cut, because Thea wasn’t smiling back, albeit unsteady but relieved.

She wasn’t even looking at Felicity.

She was staring, her eyes wide and fearful, behind her… towards the door.

A footstep sounded, just one. But it made the hairs on the back of Felicity’s head stand on end anyway before a voice broke through the silence, one accompanied by cigarette smoke and overly-pungent aftershave.

“Sunshine.” It sang.

Sunshine.

Felicity’s stomach dropped as bile rose.

The way he stretched out he syllables – a sentence of meaning in a name. Felicity.

But not like that. Not even close.

“Look who’s being a bad girl.”

Ugh. Her eyes closed; her mouth closing on a sharp inhale. Why him?

“You remember what Mr Wilson does to bad girls like you… don’t you?”

Her hands curled into fists.

The burn of each strike of the cane at her back and thighs. Unyielding restraints that bruised and tore at the skin of her wrists when she hung from them. Lancing fire and ice in her veins after each invasion of a needle. That lightning flash and body jolt that rattled her bones at every shock and turn of a switch. The ruthlessly inescapable mass of water against her mouth, her face-

The rare stroke of his fingers on her skin. The rasping metal of his voice in her ears.

The look in his eye. The absence of his heart. That crooked smile…
And yet none of it - not the pain, the pressure, or the humiliation - compared to the feeling she got when he spoke.

“It’s not what I’d do to you, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

She didn’t have to even look at him to know he was smiling.

Frank.

Of course. she turned, preparing herself to see him and knew immediately when she did that no amount of preparation would have helped.

“The boss wants a word.” Eyes narrowed - not in anger, no, in an appreciative exploration of her form - Frank licked his lips, cruel amusement lifting the corners. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

Waking hadn’t made his heart race like this since the war.

Since he’d gotten Lyla out of Russia. Since she’d surprised him very nicely the morning afterwards.

“Can’t I thank my ex-husband slash current boyfriend for saving my life?” She’d murmured into the skin of his abdomen before sliding her tongue down over the edge of his boxers and slipping her fingers under the material. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about doing for hours.”

“Well,” he’d grunted as her hands made short work of his lethargy. “who am I to deny you anything you want?”

She’d hummed over him and he still doesn’t know how he’d refrained from taking over for her right then and there. “Good boy.”

This time, pleasure and joy were the last things he felt.

“Shit.” He heard someone whisper right next to him.

Chin touching his own chest, ass in a chair, Dig figured he’d been drugged. And by the shaking hands currently on him, the fact that his arms had been untied for easier access to a vein, whoever was fumbling beside him was trying to dose him up again.

“Slippery fucking thing.” The voice sounded anxious. “If he comes back in and sees me like this…” the fearful sentence trailed off into silence as Dig heard what he was sure was a dispenser.

“Ten milligrams.” The voice muttered and whoever it belonged too, Dig could smell the alcohol.

Then unsure fingers grasped his arm, unable to budge it with only one hand. “What does this guy eat, children? Arm’s too fucking big.” Two hands this time wrapped around Dig’s and lifted-

Fast – too fast for this guy – Dig slipped the same arm through the hold whoever this idiot was had on him, opened his eyes, stood up, whirled him into his chest hard enough to cut off the shout about to hurl out of him and secured his forearm around the guys throat.
“Quiet.” He’d bit out. “Where is she?”

Because that was all that mattered right now.

But a quiet click to the left had Dig moving for a weapon he didn’t have and, almost too late, reached for the band of the jeans the man he held wore for the pistol there. He lifted it and clicked off the safety in time to see the man who’d bested him earlier walk out of Felicity’s bedroom looking disturbingly at ease.

Until, of course, he caught sight if Dig.

And the gun pointed directly at him.

“What are you?” Dig demanded, but he shouldn’t have spoken at all. In that brief moment where his mind was partly occupied by the words his mouth had been making, whoever the man was split faster than he’d seen Oliver sometimes do. Shooting out of sight, the man ran around to the back of the house and Dig heard a door bang open before he’d even pointed the gun in the right direction.

“Damn it!” Feeling all sorts of agitated, he cold cocked the guy in his grasp, hoping his car was still outside-

He didn’t like this.

There was nothing about this day that Diggle remotely liked. The calm he’d felt at Felicity’s the night before had shattered in a single moment and he hadn’t gained even a piece of it back. He didn’t expect too, not even after they found them.

But this wasn’t something he could process with any amount of ease.

Arms bracketing his body, a hand came up to rub across his mouth before muffling words into his palm. “I don’t like what I’m seeing here Oliver.”

“Get in line.”

It was a growl worthy of Starling’s vigilante, except the Arrow hadn’t made an appearance that night. All his titles, his alias’s: Oliver Queen. Ollie the playboy. Mr Queen CEO. The Arrow. Bratva Captain and any other name he held that was kept hidden…

They all fell before Oliver.

The man. The brother. The partner. The friend.

Letting loose a long breath didn’t come close to helping Dig. “Is there a queue?” Nor did the dry attempt at gallows humour.

It fell flat.

“I shouldn’t have brushed off the possibility so quickly.” He couldn’t see Oliver’s face just then but he could hear it in the man’s voice: the deepening of that pit inside him. Whispering words and thoughts Oliver had probably chosen to bury rather than face. “I should have gone back and taken another look just to be sure.”

That Slade may have been watching their girl. Watching Oliver and his behaviour with her. Watching them all from a closer distance than they’d ever thought he would.

“I should have done a lot of things.” Oliver’s self-derisive rebuke couldn’t drag Dig’s eyes from the
three screens before him.

Three screens depicting the twelve cameras Oliver and Felicity had installed - secretly, *we’ll be talking about that later* - 7 weeks before. Three screens that alternated from one to the other. Three screens where more than half the transmitters had shown the form of Slade Wilson watching them from several yards behind.

And in at least half, it hadn’t been Oliver he’d been looking at.

“I don’t like that.” He mumbled as a close-up shot of Felicity’s face - blowing an errant piece of fringe out of her eyes with a puff of her lips as she did - with a gap to the right where he could, once again, see Slade standing in an alley somewhere behind her. “I really don’t like that.” He twisted, finally moving his head to see Oliver. “You said you went over there?”

Oliver, who hadn’t stopped pacing - furiously delving through thoughts and solutions, coming up with empty each time - nodded absently. “He left a message; a reminder that I’d been too slow.”

One thing Oliver wasn’t, was slow.

But a thing he really was, was blind.

A furrowed brow shouldn’t possess the ability to be dark but Oliver’s was. In fact, his entire expression including his physique - down to the marrow in his bones - was viscerally fixated and violent with promise.

For the first time, Dig was sure that if Oliver found a reason to kill once more, it would be for this; be it this night or the next and so on and so forth. Until Slade was finished. He hadn’t seen this version of Oliver since… he hadn’t seen him like this period.

This Oliver wasn’t the harnessed weapon and bogus playboy he’d met the year before last. Nor the robot or the assassin. This version of Oliver was a man Dig could fully relate to. The kind of person who would do anything to protect the one’s he loved. A soldier.

And, unfortunately, a mafia renegade who could and would skin a man.

Still, “This isn’t your fault.” And that was the honest to God truth.

But that wouldn’t change a thing for Oliver: Slade was here because of him and his scoff told Dig that Oliver was more than willing to take on the responsibility of Slade’s actions unto himself. “Deniability through neglect is no excuse.”

That completely threw him. “Say what?”

“Neither is ignorance.” Walking by once again - behind Dig and beside the medical table - Oliver’s hands had settled on his hips and his grip, from what Dig could see, was making his knuckles whiten. “I can’t forgive myself for that. I won’t”

“Okay.” Turning where he stood - Felicity’s seat untouched beside him - Dig told him: “Start making sense: you lost me at neglect.”

For a moment - watching his friend slow to a stop - Dig was sure he’d get the usual response. A ‘what’ with an innocuous ripple of confusion across his face and a swift eye flicker to their surroundings. Puzzlement.

He did not expect what Oliver chose to give him next.
Mouth open on the tail end of a sigh, Oliver looked down to the metal of the bench and paused for one second. Two. Three-

“I’ve been… keeping my distance.”

“Come again?”

A second breath shuddered through Oliver, “I made a decision,” and his voice was quiet - not small exactly - and softened by whatever he was feeling the most just then, “to stay away from her during the day, when we’re…” he gestured to their surroundings, “not here.”

“Felicity?” Dig already knew the answer but this explanation was territory he hadn’t expected to be walking across any time soon, because, complicated didn’t even begin to explain it.

Nodding, Oliver still didn’t look up from the table. “The past couple of months, we’ve maintained a professional and extremely functional working relationship.” It was true. QC stock was at an all-time high; commercial and corporate assets had risen in net-worth and the total overall value of the industry had levelled off to just below what it used to be under Walter Steele’s reign. Any other descriptive to be used was Felicity’s - and oddly Oliver’s - domain; Dig just knew that whatever statistics they’d been receiving recently had made the financial board of opportunistic dicks, very happy.

Dick’s because, thanks to Oliver’s irreplaceable EA, Oliver hadn’t had to fire the thousand or so employees they’d been vying to throw away for vacation perks and, in response, they’d made damn sure that Isabel Rochev would spread just how little they thought of the bottle blonde IT goddess Oliver was inseparable with who’d saved their company for them. The comments - because they hadn’t had another leg to stand on - were demeaning at best.

Oliver didn’t know.

They hadn’t told him to his face, because even with Oliver’s so-called ‘professional distance’ they’d seen just how much Oliver needed her. Saw the expensive coffee machine he’d personally bought her (though the three of them had benefited from it), the increase in salary above and beyond the call of EA - and the dresses that came from it that Oliver hadn’t benefited from at all, nope; the man was a monk who let his eyes drift down but once a day; restraint had never been so unrewarding - and the way he never once rejected her point of view. A perspective that had saved them money, time and reputation.

They didn’t want to lose that either. Didn’t mean they liked her for the reminder.

“We managed it.” What, the never-present professional code of conduct between you two? The looks you throw each other through the glass that neither of you understands in borderline indecent? The way you lean into each other’s space and don’t realise how that looks to everyone else? The way fight like a married couple? You managed that?

Sure.

Even when they were physically distant, emotionally they were never too far away from each other.

Of course, Oliver wasn’t a witnessed to Dig’s internalisations. “We stopped stepping out together for lunch,” he continued, oblivious, “I stopped going to her home-”

“You visited her?” A brow quirked high, because since when? More often than not, he drove them. Blue eyes flickered to his brown; a frown in them. “After work, sometimes I’d go to her house to
look over financial blueprints. It happened more when you were visiting Lyla.”

Both brows rose this time.

That explained it: since rescuing Lyla from the Gulag - oh, how she hates knowing that she needed to be rescued - Oliver given Dig leave to visit her after QC hours and some weekends. So, he’d probably missed a lot of this.

Still… Financial blueprints. That Oliver could have approached her about more easily before leaving work. Right.

Because it definitely wasn’t about the company of his perfectly proportioned - brotherly, yes, but Dig has eyes and uses them, even Lyla mentioned it - incredibly talented, sassy as hell, warm to the touch, voice in his head, very bottle blonde IT girl: His. Girl. Wednesday.

Dig cleared his throat. “So, you just… stopped?” A nod. “And that had nothing to do with a certain canary who flew back into town?”

It hadn’t been difficult to notice. Dating Sara had meant changes in the routine of the team. One of those changes was a decided drop in dinners and lunches for three. Now, it was for two and neither of the two were Felicity or Diggle. With Lyla back on the scene, John hadn’t minded much and knew, realistically, that sooner or later the new dynamic would change again.

But Felicity… putting aside the changes in her recently - he couldn’t think about that just yet and not lose it - he knew that she, no matter how hunky-dory she liked to tell him she was, missed it. She missed the comradery and, though she wouldn’t admit it, missed how Oliver would look to her and only her during a mission. Trusting her. Relying on her.

It ached, remembering this.

He knew that she’d thought she was - if only in this small way - special to Oliver. With Sara on the team, it had made her see just how not special she really was to the emerald archer.

“Dig, I do fine. In and out of the pants department, thank you.” She’d told him once, when he’d been tired enough and stupid enough to pry. “But I’m not that girl.” And the small smile on her face had hurt to look at. “I’m not the one that unbelievably attractive, heroic figures of man,” she’d tapped his arm, like it was a joke, “throw themselves after. I’m the one they go to for information. The one who’s safe to talk to; not the one who makes their heart race, who they fall all over. I’m 5 feet 5 inches, barely. I don’t have legs as long as my body and I can’t flutter my lashes quite so well as a certain Lance sister.”

“You’re talking about Laurel lance?”

“I’m using her as an example. Gorgeous Laurel. Thank you, Tommy Merlyn.” The added grumble and eye roll had confused him but, running on no sleep, he hadn’t asked. “Or, I could use the fabulously sexy and lethal - if psychotic – Helena? Or a certain Amazonian Canary who’s currently-”

“Oh, you’ve made your point.”

“And I hadn’t even touched the magnanimous McKenna Hall yet. Or the obviously irresistible Isabel Rochev.”

He’d quirked a brow.
“I’m over it.” The brow didn’t move. “No, really, I am. He was lonely. But even though there’s part of me that delights knowing that he respected me enough to not consider meeting me in my hotel room to let off a little steam, the rest of me realises…” she let out a puff of air, resigned. “If Oliver found me remotely attractive, he’d have made a move already. It takes him less than 24 hours to do exactly that if he’s with a woman that sets him alight for a prolonged period. I know,” she added on seeing his grimace, “you didn’t need the image.”

And since then, she’d come to accept that her role in Oliver’s life had nothing to do with anything beyond helping him in his goals. She didn’t inspire him. Didn’t give him hope. Didn’t make him smile: she did nothing but provide details in the absence of them.

It was probably the first time Diggle had thought his sweet girl was an idiot.

But Oliver hadn’t helped her think otherwise. When a Lance sister was involved, looking left or right seemed impossible to him.

And yet, if what he was saying now was true, then all of it - the emotional detachment, the time spent with the Lance sisters - had been more an act than a lack of tact. Hm.

It also made the past week more than a little confusing. There’d been a closeness between them again, even before Oliver’s break up with Sara that felt more than what they’d had prior to Sara’s return to the city.

Then again, that could be more Diggle’s quiet desire to have the Foundry clear of all but three.

Strangely, his question had the opposite reaction than what he’d expected, which seemed to be a theme of then night. No admittance or agreement…

A swift flash of anger on Oliver’s face settled into a grudging acknowledgment.

“Being with Sara…” the pause had less to do with Oliver’s control and more to do with the simple act that Oliver didn’t always know why he sometimes did the things he did, like date the younger Lance sister and distance himself from his only source of emotional support. He just knew that he did. “It wasn’t about that. I didn’t do what I did with Felicity because of Sara.”

Looking elsewhere, Dig tried to find the correct way to ask-

“More the other way around.”

Pause.

Hold on…

The gritted way Oliver had said that, like he’d forced it through a granite jaw made Dig wonder both what it had been about and why it seemed so difficult for Oliver to admit aloud. Or why he’d want to admit it at all. Maybe he’d needed to.

“I had to make it look like all there was between me and Felicity was Queen Consolidated.”

But... Why?

Settling against the desk behind him, John asked the first million-dollar question, because - if you can believe it - there was more than one. “Was this something you spoke to her about before going ahead with it?”
He could do this now, he could ask; even though time was of the essence. After entering the
Foundry they’d programmed - with a lack of speed that had almost make Oliver break - the details
Stan gave them into Felicity’s database and let it do its thing to find them some addresses.

They were still waiting and ten minutes into this had felt like ten years. John needed the distraction
and Oliver needed to be honest with himself.

Eyes drifting from Dig, to the support column and back to Dig, Oliver took more than a few seconds
to fumble through his bullshit response. “No?”

“Oliver, man,” grousing, Dig’s eyes closed - more a grimace - with the absolute feeling of a man
having to physically reach for calm before explaining the feminine sex to a half-cocked teenager.
“Women need that.” There was laughter in his words too though and a seriously not so hidden
beneath it all. “They need to know they matter.”

Felicity deserves to know. Every day. Every week.

Because the woman had sacrificed her life to this, to Oliver. And Oliver knew that, John knew he
did. They… talked. At length. On one not-so memorable occasion, whilst drunk.

But in the here and now, Oliver looked so perplexed that the shadows on his face momentarily
melted away. “Felicity knows she matters to me.” Like this was a given.

_Saying her name in that definitive way of yours isn’t selling anything either._ “Does she? Do you tell
her?”

“I.”

“Do you?” John gave him a moment to feel the weight of what he was saying. To make him silent.
“I mean, are the words said? Is there a clear understanding in her that as your IT girl, she knows
she’s irreplaceable, but as your friend, she knows she’s wanted here by you?”

Mouth partially open, Oliver had stilled.


“I don’t…” swallowing, Oliver glanced away. “I’m not… good at saying…”

Dig hedged a guess. “What needs to be said?”

“I used to think she didn’t need me to.” Mouth closing, side-on, Oliver’s eyes took on a sadness that
had little to do with the situation at hand. “There’s something about her that seems so strong, so…
untouchable.” There was something in that, something Dig couldn’t ask about because he
instinctively knew it was too intimate a subject to even hint about. “Putting her up there,” on that
level of importance, “would make her vulnerable.”

And that was the meat of it. He didn’t want her to be the target.

However.

“So, what, you just let her go on thinking she means less than the everything she already does
mean?”

Oliver remained silent. He didn’t even look at him. Conclusions were being made in his head that
little to do with Dig.
“And why *her* Oliver?” He was in a roll it seemed and for once, Oliver had brought it all up. “Why not Sara? Or Laurel Lance?”

Because he had with Thea too. He’d backed off.

He’d kept Dig close - *I can take care of myself thank you very much* - he’d already been separated from his mother and the Lance family were on Oliver’s speed dial.

Yet, Felicity and Thea he’d impulsively pushed to the peripheral of his life. Dig knew just how deeply Oliver loved Thea: she was the one, uncomplicated relationship Oliver had ever had. An unconditional attachment that Oliver couldn’t think of living without. But why was Felicity included in such an exclusive category?

John was willing to bet exactly why without needing 3 chances to do so.

But unless Oliver could admit it, his understanding of Slade and his ability to anticipate the man would always come up short. He’d - they’d - always lose.

“I mean,” Dig hedged on; watching as Oliver’s neck flexed, “wouldn’t it make more sense to not take lunches with Laurel after Slade’s return, given your history with her and her importance to you? You didn’t even ask Felicity to set up surveillance at her house. Instead, you’ve been acting like… like everything’s the same. And yet you distance yourself from *her,*” from Felicity, “and not the woman you pined after last year. Not the *sister* who returned a few months back.”

Put that way, it sounded senseless.

But Dig knew Oliver.

He knew why the man hadn’t spoken yet; why he’d taken a step back, why his fingers were hanging onto the edge of the med-table.

“Its,” Oliver licked his lips, “complicated.”

“Ok.” Dig muttered, nodding. “Alright. Explain something to me though: you say you’ve been keeping your distance but, lunch Oliver? At Big Belly Burger? Not exactly keeping a low profile there.” In an absent way, it was fascinating how Oliver grimaced - wincing - before the look turned into sometime resembling shame. “*Especially* not with that ride on your Ducati.” He added because, *yeah;* Felicity had been more than vocal about that on the way to her place.

It took Oliver a few seconds but he gradually looked back at Dig; his eyes more than a little vulnerable. Exposed but curious.

…Hopeful?

“She loved it.” Dig gently told him, seeing the impact those three words had on him. “If she hadn’t been so tired, I’d be hearing the pros and cons of motorcycles vs any other vehicular motion from now until Christmas.”

Oliver didn’t move but, since he could speak whole paragraphs with his eyes alone, he didn’t *need* to. Looking briefly elsewhere, just south of Dig, his eyes became a shade of tender Dig hadn’t known Oliver capable of. *Whoa.*

Maybe if he pushed the door open a little…

“If you can’t explain that, then how about the three invitations to coffee you’ve offered her since
“She looked tired.” The raw rasp was immediate, as if Oliver needed to get it out. “And, I may have realised that my plan—my efforts to remain detached, had backfired.” Or that the woman in question inspired more feeling in Oliver in the last 24 hours than 2 months of sex had with Sara. Than six months of pining had for Laurel. Than all the in-between moments ever could.

“Did you honestly think that would work?” His tone was kind even if his question wasn’t. “That you could detach yourself from her so easily?”

“I had to.” No yes or no; just that he had to. Christ. “Whether or not I could, didn’t matter. I had to try. To keep her safe.” Hard to the touch, Diggle might have called it defiance but there was a haggard nuance to the way Oliver held himself that told Dig just how behaving in a way that was so against his natural instincts, had affected him the past 2 months. “I’d do worse to keep her safe.”

“I witnessed that worse in the parking lot. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to learn just how far you’d go for her.”

Felicity wasn’t a Lance sister.

Diggle remembered something from the year before that he’d never quite been able to expunge from his mind.

Laurel Lance had been an advocate for truth and justice. A woman who held firm to the law and the rules it demanding the population live by. When he’d first heard about her, he’d considered it understandable that a man like Oliver Queen would want her; she’d sounded perfect. Pristine. Beautiful.

Except Dig had barely spoken a word to her.

She’d also been one of the first people to call the vigilante a murderer. A killer. And yet, every single time Oliver had saved her or made her world that much easier to cope in with an act of violence, the vilest of his acts were suddenly honourable to her.

He’d only known about the situation because he’d overheard about her after her ordeal with Cyrus Vanch on Oliver’s radio before Felicity had made stealth reconnaissance a breeze. He’d been looking for Oliver - after the recording he’d made of Mrs Queen’s admission to her involvement in the Undertaking - and had searched the SCPD for him, only to overhear Laurel Lance midway through a conversation with her friend.

“...Joanna, I'm fine. He saved me. There’s nothing to worry about.”

He hadn’t seen their faces through the door he’d paused at; he’d only heard their words.

“Laurel; I thought you’d stopped working with this guy.” Whoever Joanna was, she sounded less than impressed with her friend. “Didn’t you tell me he was dangerous? You came to me in tears, terrified of him! You called him a murderer.”

“It’s different; this was for me.”

“Do you even hear yourself?”

“Look, sometimes you need to do bad things to get the job done. Sometimes-”

“Sometimes killing people is an option if you give the OK?”
There was a pause in conversation before Laurel spoke again; this time quietly. “That isn’t fair. It was to save me Joanna.”

“I think,” her friend sighed, sounding deeply troubled, “I’m just having trouble accepting that you can be so nonchalant about something that rightfully terrified you before, just because it’s for you. There is literally zero fear on your face right now. By that kind of judgement, a person can make just about anything acceptable. Any atrocity doable… if it’s for Laurel Lance.”

“Joanna…”

“I don’t say this lightly Loor. Your perception of the world worries me. It makes me wonder at all the times over the past year where you’ve deliberately ignored the consequences to earning the ire of some of the city’s most dangerous men, just because you wanted to make examples of them. And if you remember, I was working right alongside you during most of those cases!”

“Yes! And we did Jo, we-”

“The vigilante did Laurel! Your first big case was Adam Hunt and you had nothing. You pushed ahead with Somers too, knowing he’d come after you and there he was; your knight in shining leather. Then with Brodeur, he scared you so much you pulled back completely… and now he’s done it again but this time it’s fine because it was for you?!”

The insanity of what she was saying must have – if only a little – made sense to Laurel because her next words were filled with self-rebuke.

“It was just… it was nice knowing I had someone dependable at my back.”

“And your dad isn’t dependable? I wasn’t dependable? We were right there Laurel. You didn’t want us on your special team of two. The Hood, The Arrow - he wasn’t ‘at your back’ or by your side. He wasn’t there as a friend. You called him because you knew you were in over your head, just as you knew if you told him you were in trouble, he’d be there to clean up the mess.” It was a close thing but Dig managed to hold in the urge to give this Joanna a round of applause. Spot on. “Him killing those men to save you was completely acceptable to you because it was for you. And you liked that Laurel. You knew he’d do it and it was alright because it meant you got to walk out of there alive.”

“How can you even say these things about me?”

“Because I’m your friend and you’re scaring me. Where’s the law abider I went to college with? You can’t just pick and choose when to be ok with something as serious as murder.”

“He didn’t murder them! He was protecting me.”

“So, it’s only murder if he isn’t protecting you? You see, I love the fact that we have a vigilante ready to get his hands dirty. It makes feel better, especially after losing my brother, knowing there’s someone out there the bad guys fear. But he made a choice to be a criminal to stop criminals. Criminality used to be something that stopped you in your tracks too. Now you’ve found a loophole in making it occasionally acceptable. Slippery slope Loor. Now I get why you didn’t tell anyone.”

He’d almost walked in to give the woman a hug.

It wasn’t that he’d thought little of Miss Lance, but Oliver’s ability to see straight was impaired whenever she was brought into the equation, which made Dig’s job a whole other level of difficult. It didn’t help that the woman had issues buried deep, almost as deep as Oliver had shown he’d buried his. And Oliver hadn’t shown much of anything.
If Oliver had threatened to skin a man to save Laurel, she’d have one reaction.

Tremulous love.

If he’d done the same for Sara or Felicity, Laurel would have one reaction.

Judgement.

Yet Dig knew something that no one else did, not even Felicity. Oliver would never go so far as to lose what was left of his soul for Laurel Lance. He couldn’t. He wasn’t the man she’d lost, so he couldn’t give himself completely to her. He’d die for her. He’d kill for her. But he wouldn’t skin a man. He wouldn’t pass that line.

For Felicity Smoak, he’d skin a man. He’d tear a man inside out; hang, draw and quarter him if he had to… as long as she didn’t find out. As long as he didn’t have to look too deeply into her eyes afterwards.

He’d never be able take her lack of heart with him.

*Love makes monsters of us all.*

There was also something Oliver didn’t know: something fundamental, it was that there was nothing he could do that would make Felicity turn against him. She wouldn’t be happy knowing he could skin a man for her. But she wouldn’t judge him over how and why.

“As long as we get them back,” Oliver gruffly uttered, “it doesn’t matter what I have to do.”

“I think it matters a great deal to Felicity.” Dig pointed out. “To Thea too, if she knew about who you really are.”

“What, a killer?” Oliver snapped, shattering his stillness as he moved down the table.

“A hero.”

His chuckle - one utterly without humour - made the hairs on the back of Dig’s neck stand on end. “Hero.” It was barely there, the mutter. “I think I’ve proven that I’m not.” His gaze was hard even though his words were the opposite. “I’m not even close. I didn’t see this coming. I couldn’t stop Slade.”

“Who could?”

“Someone who was paying attention.” He threw at Dig, looking him straight in the eye from across the table. “If I’d acted instead of waited, if I’d done what I’d wanted instead of-” He lost breath and stopped talking.

*My turn.* “You weren’t to know he’d go after her Oliver. Or your sister.” Near scoffing, Oliver twisted away. “And you can’t be in ten places at once. You had no way of knowing what Slade would do, how he’d do it or when.”

But something in Oliver had known all too well, something he hadn’t paid attention to. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have pushed her away in the first place, only to pull her closer this week past. He wouldn’t have avoided contact with Thea only to watch her every move on camera.

“We all thought she’d be the last person he’d touch.” For common courtesy’s sake, if for nothing else.
Faced away, Oliver clenched and unclenched his fingers. “I was sure he’d go for Sara.” He muttered, his eyes somewhere deep into the Foundry. “After what happened on the island, it made the most sense.”

“Then why didn’t you push her away too?”

A heavy inhaled moved Oliver’s back. “Felicity convinced me not to.”

Dig smiled, looking down. It was a brief thing.

“She told me that there wasn’t any point keeping people at arm’s length because the chance that Slade would hurt them anyway was too high.” Oliver added quietly. “That I’d regret the time not taken with them.”

And his tone… it reflected a very different pain. For all his action in doing what Felicity had told him to do, he’d still done exactly what she’d feared. Except the truth bearer had been the recipient, not the woman he’d been sleeping with.

“So, you didn’t drive Sara away and you tried to fix your friendship with Laurel?”

Oliver nodded; his stare into the dark uninterrupted.

“You went back to QC to made sure you’d have a company left to run after the dust settles with Slade, you mentored Roy and you tried to live your life.”

Another, tight-lipped nod.

“All because Felicity told you to.”

The insinuation hovered in the air between them and this time Oliver didn’t nod, his fingers didn’t tap, he didn’t walk about… he didn’t move at all.

“But you still pushed her away. You stopped talking to your sister.”

The repeat of it was unnecessary, but the new meaning behind it wasn’t.

He’d pulled everything in closer – as close as he could stand, except two women whose opinions of him had the ability to destroy him.

Body taught, he caught Oliver’s foot tapping fast slight but fast against the floor like he was about to blow a fuse.

“What does that tell you Oliver?”

A shaky exhale from him told Dig that Oliver knew full well the point he was trying to make.

And brought home another point Dig was sure Oliver had already run over in his head: Isabel Rochev. Thanks to Felicity, they knew she was working with Slade but they hadn’t considered the months she may have been watching them before yesterday. More than once she’d had an all-access pass to the machinations between Oliver and Felicity. Their abrupt distance would have done more than puzzle her. She’d have made note. Had that tipped Slade off?

And if Slade knew Oliver the way he claimed, if he’d been watching as closely as they’d realised he had, then he would have seen this too.

Slowly, as if his arms were laden, Oliver’s hands came up to cover his face. “I didn’t plan it.” The
words, muffled, were barely audible. “I didn’t think about it. I hadn’t intended to take her out. Or go for that ride.” Another shudder made the croak in his words more obvious. “She wasn’t supposed to even be there. And she’d looked so…” Whatever she’d looked, Dig would never know.

Hands and fingers dragging over his face, Oliver pushed them up, up into his hairline to stay locked on his head.

And he said it.

“I’d just missed her.”

Dig felt that somewhere in his chest.

Oliver could be a big idiot too, but at heart he felt everything. And the level of pure feeling he was throwing about the room just then, was palpable.

“It was selfish. I can’t just… have what I want.” Eyes laden with something John was sure was regret, Oliver continued. “But what that was didn’t hit me until today.” Voice husky, it made Dig stare. But then, his hands sliding down the back of his neck, Oliver sighed; losing hold of whatever had made him breathless. “I pushed Thea away because she’s my sister. It was instinctual; I didn’t plan on it. And I hurt her with it.” He swallowed. “Keeping Felicity at a distance… it was different. I woke up the day after we’d planted the camera’s intending to make it clear to the outside world that we were nothing more than work associates.”

An accord to which, Felicity would have cooperated. Even if they hadn’t discussed it. And that must have made her feel like a queen, bad pun intended. “Why?”

Oliver’s unsettlingly darkening eyes flickered up to Dig’s and he got the distinct impression that this was new territory for the archer. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

A breath released through his teeth sounded like a warning. “I’d had a rough night.” Nightmares. “I don’t remember the details but it made me get up and—”

-And give in to fear.

Instead of admitting anything at all, Oliver reiterated, “I don’t know.” He looked like he’d been kicked a thousand times while he was down. “I did what I thought I had to.”

“And what was that?” Say it Oliver.

Hands leaving the back of his neck, his arms falling by his sides. “Keep her safe.”

Keep her a secret.

There was a thread to that Dig could pluck to death but he wanted Oliver to do it for him, to - just for once - face what scared him. “From what, Slade?”

“For me.” Unblinking, Oliver just looked at him. “Keep her safe from me.” He swallowed at the pause in Dig. “Slade took Laurel because he knows I care about her, but he gave her back because he also knows that what we once were no longer exists. He thought that she was the woman I love but, somehow, he knows that’s changed. He knows everything.” There was a slight manic quality to Oliver’s eyes – eyes that seemed so deep just then – that would have worried Dig if he didn’t know that it was fear making them like that. Fear and love.
There was nowhere for him to run.

“Which explains why he didn’t touch Sara.” Dig added thoughtlessly.

“Yes.”

“And why he took Felicity instead.”

Like a swap.

Oliver closed his eyes.

“Come on Oliver. Even a blind man could get this one.”

“It’s-” The bridge of his nose furrowing deeper, Oliver shook his head. “It isn’t that simple-”

“Look, you’ve been telling me this is all your fault.” Finally, Oliver’s face started to harden. “That Slade wants to make your life a living hell on earth because of what you did. So, what does he do? He walks into your family home and makes his point: he can get to any of them at any time.”

He watched Oliver suck in a deep breath. “I got that already.” And clench his jaw.

“Did you?” He waited for Oliver’s eyes to hit his again before adding, “your family Oliver. He made his statement and then he vanished. A couple of months later, he shows up again and he doesn’t touch your family at first. Instead he takes the two women who you have a complex history with.”

“What’s your point?”

“Love, Oliver.” He offered quickly, softening the attack. “It’s about who you love.”

Oliver’s throat flexed, lips hiding the snarl in his throat behind them. “You aren’t telling me something I don’t already-”

“It’s about who you love the most.” He said over Oliver, seeing the man’s mouth seal shut. “And who’s loss would destroy you.”

Frozen, Oliver didn’t say a word.

“Put that way, it makes all the sense in the world, why he took Felicity. Why you pulled away.” Considering how the psychopath had lost the woman he loved, it made every sense. Smiling slightly, Dig’s head cocked sideways. “But you already knew that.”

Face slackening, the vulnerability Oliver had been letting out in bits and pieces, came out full burn. Maybe he’s already known or suspected, but having it said aloud was a very different thing entirely. And it was hitting him all at once.

He was realising.

Finally.

The way he was staring at him though… like Dig had betrayed him with the truth. As if he hadn’t wanted it acknowledged, knowing that would make it real. And real was scary. Real was exposed and solid and vulnerable to hurt. Real could be torn away from him, could be spoiled. Real could mean happy. But happy, to Oliver, was something that died faster than it lived.

And love… Slade was using Oliver’s love as a weapon against him. It was only natural that Oliver
would want to distance himself from his heart. From Thea.

From Felicity.

This, John was making him face.

“You-” Emotions choking him, Oliver whirled away - fisted hands clenching and unclenching, his cheeks flexing at the ripple of fear, anger and want that was crippling his reserve - sucking in a breath that didn’t seem to have any affect before unnaturally stilling. Before gazing down at the metal surface he’d been tapping his fingers against unconsciously since they’d arrived.

Before curing his fingers into his palms - baring his teeth - and moving so abruptly it almost made Dig, who’d expected nothing less, to flinch as he slammed both his fists down onto it’s cold surface.

A sound - something from deep in his gut - ripped free from Oliver as, head bowed, he took hold of the table by the rim and uplifted it, sending it toppling over sideways. The crash rang about them.

“Oliver.”

It was muted but he knew Oliver heard him when he saw the shake of his head as he turned away. Not now. Near-stalking into the depth of the Foundry, Dig let him go. Facing yourself was never an easy thing to do. For Oliver, it was crushing.

He loved defensively. He protected through distance.

Maybe he needed to learn a different way.

Exhaling, Dig moved to look at the screens again. Images of Oliver and Felicity attaching cameras no longer distracted him from the anxiety being helpless had over him. Turning them off, he stepped over to the searches they had running, seeing a selection of possible addresses it had already churned out and thinking only one thing. Too damn many. Already 13 addresses and it had only matched three of the nine locations Stan had tried to describe to them.

They had an hour and a half before whatever thing Slade’s men had mentioned, started.

“Thea’s phone.”

The bark of words made Dig’s heart slam against his rib cage, Jesus. Looking quickly up, he saw Oliver striding from his side; he hadn’t heard him coming. “What?”

Oliver had shut down completely: his face a marble, detached copy of itself. “There’s a tracker on Thea’s phone. Felicity put it there. I forgot about it. Do you know how to access her programme?”

Each word was a clipped message, each sentence short and to the point: they screamed don’t.


He was too raw.

That’s fine too. “I do. But not in the ten seconds she could do it.”

“How long?”

Dig let out a huff of air. “Ten minutes?” Maybe more.

Oliver stared at him. John stared back.
“We’re going to find them.” Oliver finally managed.

Cocking his head to the side, Oliver’s own personal nightmare asked the question that mattered most. “Without her?”

Another reason - one more characteristic of a tactical genius to act upon - one of logic, to take their IT girl. The only person who could find Thea and Felicity before true damage could be done was Felicity.

“Do it.” Oliver ordered after a moment, striding over to the glass cabinets for his gear.

“You’re suiting up?” Not to state the obvious but, in Oliver’s current head space, maybe arming him to the teeth wasn’t such a good idea. Then Dig remembered the image of Thea and Felicity running for their lives onscreen and he dismissed the thought.

Just as well; Oliver didn’t reply. But that wasn’t the only problem.

Thea.

She didn’t know about Oliver as the Arrow.

It felt like seconds later – but was in fact 5 of those 10 minutes – the side door to the Foundry flew open before Sara ran through it.

She didn’t stop moving as she spoke. “We have another problem.” Her eyes flickered to Oliver’s in point as she reached for her own leather stash. “I can’t find Roy.”

Quizzically, Oliver frowned. “What?”

But his tone was anything but casual.

And she caught it but didn’t comment. “With Thea taken, I didn’t understand why we hadn’t heard from Roy yet.”

Damn. “I completely missed that.” Dig breathed.

For a long moment, he watched Oliver make a decision. “That’ll have to wait until we get them back.” He gestured to the GPS signal that was – slowly – being narrowed to a location.

“That isn’t all.” Sara said, zipping up the side of a black boot. “Laurel-”

The computer pinged.

“Where.” Purely visceral, it couldn’t be described as a question.

“I’ve locked it into my phone.” Dig threw out in a rush, hurriedly putting on his coat and reaching for his bag of armaments. “I’ll tell you in the van.”

“Guys, I know this isn’t the time,” Sara tried to say as they all moved out together and she sounded worried about something else altogether, “but you need to hear this.”

“Later.” Oliver ground out, punching in the code to the door. “Thea and Felicity come first.”

And they stepped outside, unseeing of the way Sara’s lips pinched shut.

God Laurel.
WEBG Starling City 7 News, channel 11:

“Slade Wilson, public friend of Starling’s soon-to-be Mayor, Moira Queen, has been arrested on the grounds of kidnapping her only daughter. More information soon to be unleashed with a press release from an inside informant, Miss Laurel Lance; DA and daughter of highly decorated Officer, Quentin Lance.”

The news report cut into a brief clip of Laurel Lance talking to a reporter outside of the SCPD’s main station.

“I’m just doing what needs to be done.”

A microphone was pressed as close to the brunette as possible. “Miss Lance! What proof do you have of Mr Wilson’s involvement?”

“No comment.”

The shot cut back to the anchor-man.

“In a further surprising twist, allegations towards the involvement of one Felicity Smoak have been made alongside the declaration that Slade Wilson is a threat to the entirety of the Queen bloodline. According to a credible source, Queen Consolidated’s EA may have been working with the millionaire in a bid to secure the Queen fortune. Whether a ransom demand has been made is still unknown.”

A shot of bottle blonde, Felicity Smoak outside of QC is shown before the news feed cut back to Slade Wilson’s arrest.

“Slade Wilson denied any connection to Thea’s Queen’s kidnapping when questioned earlier this evening. More with the news at 9.”

Unruffled, uninterested in co-operating, and unperturbed by the situation, Slade let out a breath.

He’d expected this. Had planned for it even. Still, the way it had formed so effortlessly made him glance at the woman before him and wonder how.

How on earth could the kid have loved this woman?

To love deep mistrust. To allow such misguidance. To harbour bitterness the way she obviously did.

There was no love without trust.
As without heart as Slade now was, it didn’t mean he didn’t understand the fundamental and most crucial elements needed for that kind of love to last.

He’d long since concluded that this was why Oliver had been with her before being stranded on the island. Everything that they’d been, had promised an inevitable end should their relationship progress into unknown waters, the kind that scared little boys like the one Ollie Queen had been.

Other than that, he didn’t see it: the so-called strength this woman supposedly possessed in spades.

She’d fallen into a pit of loneliness and addiction. Both were of her own choosing. Both were easy to do, preferable to trying. It was contemptable and a waste of his time in trying to understand.

He’d done the same: loneliness and addiction. Except both were taken out of his hands. Both were forced on him.

And any woman could learn how to throw a punch just as they could hide behind skill and knowledge and defensiveness. It was the heart that made a woman truly strong. The heart and the way she may make use of it.

Where is hers? This, Slade wondered, as he observed Laurel Lance standing in front of the desk where he sat.

Inside the Starling City Police Station Headquarters.

Citizen’s arrest.

Laughable. But it served a purpose. If anything, it would make an interesting comparison between the Laurel Lance Oliver had described to him years ago to the woman staring down her nose at him.

“I’d say this wasn’t a surprise Miss Lance but I think I may have underestimated you.” The cuffs at his wrists jangled when he turned his hands over, inspecting the restraints with a cool regard.

“You’re much stupider than I thought you were.”

It wasn’t intended to be an insult. More a simple statement of fact. She’d done exactly what he’d wanted her to do and she’d done it without hesitation.

Still, he saw that Miss Lance didn’t like it. I’m heartbroken, truly.

For her to think she was accomplishing anything at all with this... But, if what he knew of her was correct, she’d eaten every word he’d given her and chewed on it until it made sense in the only way her self-involved mind could process it. To a person so removed from Oliver Queen’s life, it became a way to cement herself inside his circle and remain there.

Again, he knew Laurel Lance was lonely. He’d given her a way out of that, at a cost Laurel would pay gladly. A cost that Slade had a vested interest in keeping around. A woman that would destroy herself for the man Laurel Lance still coveted.

But Miss Lance also had no idea what she wanted from life. Fortunately, I neither care nor possess the inclination to.

He cared about what affected the kid. From what he’d seen, Miss Lance didn’t. Not anymore. She may have once, but Oliver had since sought clearer waters to swim. To a degree. Sara Lance, after all, did not a true love make.

What she represented to Oliver, was an easy path. Connection. We’re all animals; slaves to our
urges. Even I have them.

Arms folded across her middle - from what he could see, she hadn’t unclenched since the night before; if she ever did - he saw an urge quite clear in her now. The urge to crow victorious over what she deemed a victory but what was really a notch of pride. “You say that and yet you’re the one in cuffs.”

As if that meant anything. To her it obviously does. It just showed she didn’t understand the game. Nor the kind of life Oliver Queen lived.

“Imprudence is not a virtue I enjoy,” he muttered, as if she hadn’t spoken at all and he caught the flash of frustration in her eyes at his disinclination to give a fuck, “and I’m quite sure Oliver feels the same.”

By the frown on her face, she didn’t get it. And, since she hadn’t responded to the insulted, she wanted to. Badly. After all, she wanted a favourable reaction from her green archer.

His eye took her in, squinting inquisitively. “Did you think this would accomplish anything?”

“You kidnapped Thea Queen.” She mulishly stated.

He nodded. “I kidnapped Thea Queen.”

Her jaw clenched. “You just admitted it in a police precinct.”

“Yes.”

He was confusing her, he could tell.

He sighed, taking pity if only to hurry this up. The less time he’d have to stare at her, the better. “There are rules to this game between me and Oliver.” Less a game than his life, but a chess match was a more appropriate appellation than others. “Your involvement complicates them. My reaction, his response – all of it is altered by the choices you force into it and the consequences that others have to suffer.”

“Cut the crap.” Of course; so easily dismissed. “You can’t do anything from in here.”

He arched the brow over his one good eye. “Can’t I?”

Arms loosening, she pressed her hands on the table. “I have enough evidence to keep you in here for trial.”

“All you have is circumstance and the word of a madman. Maybe you have more than that,” he said, deliberately showing with his tone that it was less than impressive, “maybe you have leverage. Either way, in less than an hour’s time, I’ll be walking out of this room a free man.”

She leaned closer. “That’s not going to happen.”

“It’s already happening. For instance,” deliberately moving his head in a move affecting concern he said, “where’s your father?”

Her mouth opened on a silent gasp as she moved back. “What did you do?”

“He’s safe.” He shrugged. “Or as safe as can be but that’s up to Felicity Smoak, isn’t it” Let her make of that what she obviously would. “Some of my men have personal grudges against the unflappable Quentin lance.”
Wide eyed - *ah, the appropriate response; finally* - she straightened. “Where is he?”

“I can’t tell you that unless you give me something.”

She looked down at him through her lashes. “Never.”

“Unclench.” He ordered and she flinched as if insulted and she probably was. “If you don’t do this one thing, you’ll never see your father again. Choose: me behind bars,” bars he could easily break free from, “or your father?”

It took 10 seconds longer than the 2 he’d thought it would take.

Looking like she’d swallowed a lemon, the woman straightened and dropped her arms.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, that looked difficult to say.” He whispered, before tutting. “Pride before a fall, Miss Lance.”

She fisted her hands. “Just *tell* me.”

And he did: he asked for his phone back and 20 minutes alone. After the five minutes it took for her to make sure he was telling the truth, to verify that her father was missing, she returned with it. Placing it on the table - because if she’d thrown it at him like he figured she wanted to, he’d told her that in no uncertain terms that Thea would suffer for the defiance - she left without a word.

He made the call to Frank he’d promised 30 minutes before.

Enough time for Frank to have found them.

The right moment for Felicity Smoak to make another choice she should never have had to but now, thanks to Oliver Queen and his delightfully immoral mother, had to bare the weight of.

And she would.

Beautifully.

Frank made them stand there as they waited for his phone to ring. Seconds that spanned entire minutes. Minutes that felt like hours.

Until it did ring. Until her stomach concaved. Until Slade ordered her to do the impossible.

“*Miss Smoak.*” His voice like rusted metal, grating through the ear piece of the mobile, made her shiver again and she was already cold enough. They were so close to getting out of here. “I believe there is one more secret that you and Oliver have kept Miss Queen in the dark about for long enough. *Tell her.*”

Oh God.

*Feeling Thea’s scared gaze on her back and Frank’s leering one against the rest of her, the weight*
of this settled heavy on her chest. The threat of it and the possible fallout.

She swallowed, staring to turn her head this way and that. "That’s not my secret to tell.”

“Tell her,” Slade repeated, no louder than before, “or one of my men will shoot Quentin Lance. If I don’t contact them in the next 7 minutes, where they aim will be up to them.”

She didn’t ask for details. And she didn’t disbelieve his word. After 7 months, she’d learned full well what he was capable of and the type of promises he made. And this was as much a promise as a threat.

With a deep breath, she was turning to face her, face Thea and seeing her expression - the slow intrusion of dread there - made Felicity want to beg for forgiveness. But she couldn’t. Not ever.

Oliver was going to hate her.

But if she didn’t-

“Hurry up.”

Frank was still holding the phone, facing towards them so that his boss could hear every word.

She didn’t have a choice.

“Thea…”

“What is he talking about?” And for her to sound like that, for Thea to look at her with that trust in her eyes, cut into Felicity like a knife into butter. “What secret?”

Licking dry lips, I can’t do this, Felicity paused a second too long.

“Frank won’t let either of you leave until you say the words Miss Smoak. And be quick about it. After that stunt you pulled, my patience with the day is waning. I may not want to let the Sargent go.”

Quentin’s life. Thea’s heart. Oliver’s trust.

Choose.

She chose.

“There’s,” deep breath: ice and slow, “a reason why Oliver’s been distant with your mother recently.” But it came out fast, too fast, yet if she did it slowly, Felicity was sure she wouldn’t get it out at all. “Two months ago, I did a favour for Walter. I’ve done it before; he’s come to me with-”

“Get to the point.”

Fucker.

Her eyes closed, blocking out their surroundings and the questions in Thea’s gaze. “Your mother told you that she had an affair with-”

“With Malcolm Merlyn, yeah,” Thea interrupted, more than a little stung at the memory and shuddered. “Thanks for bringing that up.”

I’m so sorry. Felicity opened her eyes. “Well,” she licked her lips again, how do I even say this?
“They weren’t… they-” She looked up, away…

*I can’t do this.*

It was too much. She was shaking and it was too much, too difficult to say. Why was Oliver’s family even like this; a landmine at every turn. She was about to ruin Thea’s life-

“No, Felicity!” Slade commanded and she jumped. “Or I will.”

Because it wasn’t an empty threat, he would absolutely do the thing for her; if only to make it sound so much worse than it was. Sucking in a breath, she threw out the words like a punch because no matter how she said it, they wouldn’t hurt Thea any less.

“You’re Malcolm Merlyn’s daughter.”

And there you have it.

The end of Oliver’s trust in her.

The end of Thea Queen’s innocence.

She watched it die, right at that moment. Watched something priceless fade away and she was powerless to do anything but blame herself for the loss.

And the depth of Thea’s inhale was more a rattle than a reach for composure. “What?”

“They weren’t careful.” Felicity muttered and oh boy, she was explaining contraception the by-product of a thoughtless lay. *I’m an idiot.* Begging with her eyes for Thea to listen, to *not* hate her, Felicity didn’t know what else to do accept continue. “There was a doctor who helped your mother…”

There really was no point. Not when she saw Thea curl in on herself.

“Oh my god.” Eyes drifting low, the furrow on her brow etched with lines of pain, Thea moaned. “I don’t- I don’t believe you.”

But part of her did. After the way they’d talked not too long ago, after the day they’d had, something in Thea did. She knew Felicity had been honest with her earlier and she knew she was a hacker. She knew.

She *knew.*

“It’s true.” And it was a whisper because each word was a blow to Thea Queen. “I made sure.”

*Of course I did.* For the first time, Felicity hated her thoroughness. Hated her need to solve mysteries and uncover truths. Hated her absolute resolve to be honest with Oliver. If she’d been any less, Oliver wouldn’t have had to live with knowledge that he knew could destroy his sister. He wouldn’t be estranged from his mother. Walter Steele wouldn’t have come to her for help in the first place. And this, right here, wouldn’t be happening now.

And maybe. She would have never met Oliver.

For that alone, she couldn’t take it back. Meeting him, learning about him, helping him: it was priceless. She’d never take it back. And for that alone, she’d suffer with this. She’d take possible scorn and anger and hate and she’d pay it gladly.
He was worth it.

He’d walked into her cubicle and for the first time in her life, he’d made her feel like she could make a real difference in the world. It was a feeling she’d take with her into the dark and whatever the future held for her.

A feeling that helped her to take the broken look in Thea’s wet eyes and remain standing.

The girl’s hands fisted in her hairline as she shouted. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?!”

“I don’t know why your mother didn’t.” Felicity answered with as much truth as she could afford. “But if you think about it, you should be able to figure out why Oliver didn’t.”

“No! God, what is it with lies and my family?” And it was less a shout than a sob this time, her hands falling. “Malcolm Merlyn. Oh God, Tommy!”

Tears. Beautiful tears were pouring down her face and all Felicity could do was watch.

“Tommy was my brother.” Her breath hitched. “I don’t know what to do with this.”

Hand lifting, Felicity tried. “Thea-”

But she twisted away. “I don’t know who to trust right now!” Her eyes flashed with it too: with the chaotic mess of emotions Felicity had brought up in her. “I-I don’t understand…”

“That’s alright. You don’t have to do or be anything right now.” Just, please don’t blame him. “You don’t have to trust me or anyone. Just,” don’t blame Oliver; blame me. Just me. And maybe your mother, because, God, why had she kept it to herself for so long? She knew why, really. But the fact that she had was why this was so difficult right now. “Don’t make assumptions until you know everything-”

She hadn’t seen it - the flicker in Thea’s eyes - the need to escape. So her heart flew into her throat when Thea whirled around and blitzed in the direction of the door.

The door in front of which Frank still stood.

“Wait!” Her feet began to move too; seeing Thea’s heeled shoes take her straight towards the man. “No, Thea-”

-He let her pass him. Didn’t even touch her. Didn’t look at her.

No, he was too busy burning a whole into Felicity.

And it took her 3 seconds longer than it should have to realise he still held the phone aloft.

“Well done.” Slade praised her and she felt sick. “I’ll be seeing you soon.”

Frank cancelled the call.

“He said,” and his voice – quiet or loud – was creepy no matter the tone, “that once you did what he asked, he’d let you go. Both of you.”

She stared at him. What? In what world did that make sense?

“He had other plans for you.” Frank admitted, seeing her expression and lifted a pointed finger to her. “You ruined them.”
“I can’t begin to tell you,” though her voice wobbled and cracked, her tone was filled with condescension and she hated that she could tell by his slow but thin grin, that he was enjoying every second of it, “how bad that makes me feel.”

He laughed and God, she’d gladly go the rest of her life without that sound.

But then the sounds of gunfire, some shouts and the thrum of car engines drowned him out and her heart that had lain in her throat dropped back into her chest to hammer away like a hopeful sparrow’s would.

Oliver.

John.

Like he hadn’t a care in the world - like the arrival of the Arrow and his entourage; I know it’s them - was nothing to worry about, Frank cast a small glance behind him, as if he had x-ray vision - I wouldn’t put it past him - and could see through the wall before looking to her again. “Friends of yours?”

She didn’t reply.

“You know,” one foot lifted and before she could say a word, he started to walk towards her; each step slow and inescapable, “this could have gone down a whole different way. If you didn’t fight so hard, if you were just a little bit weaker,” his hand lifted, finger and thumb inching together to give her the universal sign for tiny gap, “he’d have given up on you.” If she didn’t know him, she’d think the laugh that came out of him was gentle. “You’re too tempting for you own good.” He shook his head; his smile widening.

And those words - with that look on his face, the one where it seemed like he was wondering if his jaw was wide enough to eat her head whole with - was a whole new level of terrifying.

She felt him in her gut, coiling like the snake he was.

But before she knew it, he was right there; in her personal space. Rock solid, she couldn’t do anything but stare up at him to find his eyes already on her. And feeding.

Eyes that didn’t blink. “I could have broken you.” He whispered, looking like he very much wanted to try. “But he won’t let me touch you.”

The smallest of mercies.

Her mental bravery didn’t reach her physically. His words slithered deep and it made her move without wanting to. She’d hate herself for that alter, for being so affected. For being afraid. For forgetting that he was just a man. She stumbled with it, but there only so many places she could go.

Her back hit the wall.

He was in front of her before she could inhale.

“You’re so,” he sucked in his bottom lip, his eyes trailing down over her from, “fuckable.” His eyes came back to hers. “I’d like to fuck you.”

It hit her like a smack.

The word – words – seized in her chest. They shouldn’t have done, but they hurt regardless. No man
had ever spoken to her like that before, like she was nothing. Like she didn’t have the right to be treated like a human being worthy of respect, to be treated like a lady instead of a thing. An object to play with.

Not even Slade was like that with her.

“Breakable.” Frank muttered and it was as if she wasn’t even there. “Under my care, you’d break. And you’d enjoy it, I know you would. I’d show you.”

Under my care.

And how many other women had been under his care?

It was pretty much as she’d ever need to make sure she never slept well again.

She flinched when he moved again, his hand reaching up to touch her face. “What he doesn’t know, won’t hurt him.” He breathed, his hand hovering inches away; torn between obeying the boss who kept him well-nourished and the urges he barely kept in check.

He didn’t have the chance to find out which side of him won.

There was a bang - the sound of a metal door yielding beneath the strength of a green leather boot - and suddenly, where Frank had been, there was only air.

She didn’t gasp or cry out, didn’t make a sound. There was no breath in her for that.

He’d taken it from her.

Oliver.

She’d turned at the sound, away from Frank who she knew was already sprinting in the opposite direction, towards the end of the corridor where the door rattled against the wall and everything just… stopped.

Stopped existing. Ceased being something that she should care about. There was nothing to fear anymore, all the bad just melting away…

Oliver moved hard and he moved fast – so fast he almost hit the wall – before reaching for an arrow, before notching it and letting it fly at the retreating man he’d probably just seen pressing himself against her.

For a second, it didn’t filter that this was something she should worry about. Frank’s presence had all but vanished to her. He was unimportant. And she didn’t look to see if he’s escaped, though she knew he had; the echo of his footsteps reaching the warehouse beyond them growing distant with every second. And it should have registered that Oliver wasn’t gunning after him. He wasn’t moving at all.

Nothing mattered just then.

He’s… here.

And suddenly, here was safe. Secure.

Whether she truly was or not, didn’t matter. In that moment, she felt it - let it be real; it’s been a really bad day, let me think it’s real - and she clung to it. Believed in him, in Oliver coming for them as the Arrow and-
And the way he’d stopped too.

Stilled.

As if… he’d walked into a brick wall. Right in the middle of the hallway.

Between herself and the door.

All at once she felt blocked in, trapped between running and the truth.

And it felt like heat. The type that didn’t burn the skin but the veins beneath. It was as safe as it was dangerous.

But she never wanted to be anywhere else except right where she was; in the middle of a lion’s den, wearing exactly what she was wearing, looking like she’d been dragged to hell and back, if he was right there too. Looking so…

He looked like a dream.

Like… everything. All she wanted, needed and believed in-

Clamp it down.

She couldn’t think like that; he wasn’t hers. It had never been so difficult to do.

Swallowing it down, she let out an exhale and made herself look him in the eye.

Except she couldn’t: his hood covered them. But his jaw…

It made her realise she hadn’t heard him breathe. As if he’d been holding his breath in the seconds they’d been staring at each other – and they had been staring at each other. She could feel his eyes on her, like a physical presence. Drinking him as she was, like he was water in a hot desert and she hadn’t drunk any for days, she noticed it all.

She noticed the movement of his chest.

She may not have heard him breathe, but he was panting.

It felt like anger. Like he was angry at her.

W-why…?

Did he already know about Thea?

The pain of that possibility was exquisite.

But this also reminded her of that glorious time before Slade and his proposal, when she’d been daring. When she’d been bold; when she’d gone out alone, unprotected, to take down the clock king.

Back then, she’d looked at him and beyond the conviction inside her - beyond the need to prove herself to herself and no one else - she’d felt a tingle of fear. A special type of fear. Not of Oliver. No, of the promise in his eyes. The one that said-

The one that said he’d deal with her later.
The one that had made a rush of heat spontaneously shoot down her spine.

The one that made her wonder - for the one thousandth time - what it would be like to be his and face his ire.

The look that only served to remind her that he wasn’t.

This time, she couldn’t see his eyes… but she was sure she felt them on her; on her skin, and she knew that presence somehow, like how she’d imagined his touch would be.

It was how she realised that his anger – this violence stemming from him in waves – wasn’t directed at her.

His intent, however, was.

He looked violent, but it wasn’t savage or feral. It was intense, sure, but his expression wasn’t marred by aggressive lines, his hands didn’t fist and his teeth weren’t grating together. That emotion wasn’t aimed externally, it wasn’t aimed at her.

His intent, however, was.

“Sara’s unconscious.” He ground the words out.

…Like how he’d been then. Angry. But not at her.

It made the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding leave her, loudly, like her lungs as dramatically chosen that time to depressurise.

And she watched his body – the whole of him – jolt.

“Oliver.”

She hadn’t meant to say his name. Nor had she wanted it to sound so needy. Take it back, before he notices! (Felicity could be just as much of an idiot as a genius.)

But it made him move.

One second he was as still as a stone statue and the next, he was stalking towards her.

Her mouth was still open – rapidly drying at the sight of more than 6 feet of pure muscle mass, hotness, sex, warmth and everything she’d ever wished upon a lonely star for, intent on making her brain freeze – and in the absence of intelligent thought she pretty much made a noise analogous to a dying mouse.

Then all that he was slammed into her, taking her off her feet as he did. And she would have fallen, would have careened backwards, headfirst into the wall…

But his arm wrapped fast and tight – so, so tight – around her back, his chest pushing into hers, his legs pinning her in place between him and the wall before his face – masked and all – forced itself roughly into the crevice between her neck and shoulder and pretty much every inch of her seized, stunned. She could smell the leather. His sweat. Her lungs constricted. Her heart beat like a pair of drums were having a party in her chest, because they’d never… he’d never-

Then he opened his mouth and she felt a hot breath coat her neck.

“Felicity.”
Felicity.

Her eyes fluttered shut. Oh God.

Destroyed.

He’d destroyed her. With her name, the way he said it- the way he made her feel it; feel every ounce of the desperation he’d obviously suffered through, every inch of his fear lacing the tremble in his arms – because his other was there too, the bottom and top of his bow still in his grip pushing against her butt and shoulders with his fist light between her shoulder blades – and the low timber of his voice.

“I’m sorry.”

It shook. His voice shook, he was shaking, he was-

“No.” She whispered, feeling herself deny every bit of the new guilt she knew was weighing down on him. “Not your fault.” She shook her head.

His free hand fisted in her crappy shirt and she allowed herself a moment to feel this. The weight of him, the warmth, the care… like a blanket of comfort. Oliver had never held her before.

Sunday, he’d hugged her.

This was what it felt like to be held.

“We have to go.” And was it just her or did that sound like the very last thing he wanted to do?

She found herself nodding before giving him a quiet, “okay.”

Drawing in a breath, feeling the brush of his chin - scruff and all and, ooh, deliciousness; I’m going to hell - he pulled away from her, his arms falling from around her and her body sagged.

But he was still right there, his hands grasping her shoulders keeping her steady.

And it should have been strange how they weren’t talking, how his eyes were just… taking her in, how one of his hands lifted – his chest pressing close again, which she figured was to make sure he caught her in case she slumped – for his fingers – still very much gloved – brushed at the abrasion to the side of her face, near her hair line.

She didn’t say she was fine and he didn’t ask. Why ask about the obvious when he already knew the answer?

Except-

“Your feet.”

It bothered her that she still couldn’t see his eyes but, with his head turned down that was impossible anyway.

She swallowed. “Oh, erm…”

Slade had taken her naked after all.

How could she even begin to explain that?
But, it seemed she didn’t need to.

“I’ll clean you up.”

_Uh... wuh?_

Did he just say what she thought he’d just said?

Even after the events of the day, her brain went decidedly south for the winter.

His voice hadn’t exactly helped: _how can he sound like that?_ Breathless, caring and lethal. A girl could live off his voice alone.

But the logical part of her, forced her to look down and... _well, they do look kind of dirty._ Her feet. _And achy._

Then his hand was in hers and he was tugging, gently.

Together, they moved down the hallway. Not running. Walking. Like they had all the time in the world, even though they really didn’t. Just a few moments to collect themselves before the storm came back in.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter could practically be titled as OLICITY.
Oh, and expect lots of Diggle shade.
Chapter Notes

I'm so SO sorry guys for taking so long. It's been a crappy year in some ways for me, my mum being ill has been kicking my ass. It's ok: it isn't anything worrying, but what she does have upsets her. She isn't used to it - to feeling weak - and it's getting her down. In turn, that gets ME down and it'll be a little while before she improves. But she will get better and that's what's important. In the meantime, it means taking pills that give her major headaches and make her feel sick (the glory of medicine that is supposed to heal *eye rolls at doctors because apparently this is a good thing*). Anyway, I hope you like this: it isn't as long as it was supposed to be but I thought I ended it at a good place. If you skip ahead, you won't understand the ending.

See notes at the bottom...

(Indecent Proposal) (candykizzes24)

"I'll clean you up."

He was just ahead of her.

She couldn’t see past the leather, past the hood. To his eyes.

Just his hand in hers, which was a shock by itself. They’d never held hands before; it had felt… forbidden. Two steps past what she’d ever have with him.
So, where had the barrier gone?

Was it… was it because she’d been taken with Thea? How did he know? How had he figured it-

The camera. A live stream?

The man she’d clubbed - and stunned and kicked and shocked half to death because holy mother of God, he’d had two guns on him, two, with Thea tied to a chair and Thea couldn’t be tied to a chair anymore otherwise Oliver would lose it - and the way she’d acted, the way she’d scrambled over to Thea who’d cried on her shoulder - who’d asked questions she couldn’t possible answer without Oliver - and very real bullets that had been shot at them.

Had it been recording them?

She looked at him. Really looked at him. At the leather and the height and… him.

The way he moved with her now - slow, slow steps like he had all the time in the world when he really didn’t, as if this wasn’t the absolute worse place he could have found her; wearing the thinnest of shirts and shorts, a little blood splatter here and there, dirt certainly a factor - with his body slightly curved towards her own but not directly in her line of sight, knowing what she might be not saying, that she could have lied about being fine… knowing that she had. And unlike before-

“After the Campaign rally, we’ll go for that ride… I’ll take you out to Monument Point. Just you and me. And we can finally talk. I want you to talk to me.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone?”

-This wasn’t something he was walking away from without her. He wasn’t going to let it go. Worse still, he had a right to it.

Yet… he was waiting. Just that. No pressure, no pushing, no ordering.

Gentle.

All she had to do was something: to say something - anything. He was waiting. And he was giving her room - breathing space - without really leaving her alone at all.

He’d never done that before: he’d never wasted time. Time they didn’t have.

But he was giving it to her anyway. And in addition to the space, to the quiet; Oliver was a constant. Unmovable, because he wasn’t going anywhere. She didn’t know how she knew that, just that she did. He’d decided, and he was telling her in the only way he knew how.


It told her nothing at all. It told her everything. It confused her, made her worry for him.

It steadied her.

It made her heart race.

What had happened to him today? After Slade had taken them… Well there was Sara, Laurel; now Thea. Now his IT girl. Too much was too much, even for someone as strong as Oliver and he’d never seen himself as strong: just someone who could do the hard things so people like her never had to.
Well, 6 weeks ago, she’d had to. She thought she’d had to. No, I did have to. I did.

Oliver- there was a chance he’d seen that video, if it had broadcasted. There was a chance he’d seen everything she’d been trying to keep hidden from him. And knowing Oliver as she did, she could only see his reaction going one way. Not. Well.

Especially after the way he’d held her. The way he’d taken her hand and hadn’t given it up yet.

Still, it wasn’t the worst way it could have gone. Not by a long shot, and she was ashamed to state that some of the ways she’d thought to tell him weren’t all that great either. I blame sleep deprivation.

But this? His behaviour - his silence and reluctance to solve any of it - felt different.

There was a focus in him that she’d never seen or felt before. Quiet. Unshakable. Regretful. That was the last thing she wanted. She’d aimed for the opposite. She’d aimed for a lot. The road to hell and all that.

There was something else there too, but she couldn’t see his face. She didn’t know what he was thinking. It was jarring.

Relief could do this. Overwhelming relief that his sister was outside, safe where he could find her because, there was just no way he’d be so steady if he hadn’t seen Thea Queen. No way he’d be like this, like-

Like I’m his focus. His entire focus. Like she wasn’t just his friend who’d been hurt - a victim, say it Felicity - and was now safe. Like she was more. Except-

Thea.

It didn’t make sense to her.

He had to have seen her, so why the patience? Why wasn’t he itching to go back outside? To make sure she was as absolutely untouched as she was mere minutes ago, you know; when she ran out of the hallway because I dropped the mother-lode of all truth bombs on her?

She felt sick: how many truths had been unearthed in one day?

And if he’d seen the video, if he’d spoken to Slade, if he knew anything at all; why weren’t they running? To the Foundry. The SCPD.

They had to go.

It hadn’t ended; Slade hadn’t been stopped. Miles to go before they’d sleep, but it was as if he didn’t want to leave and he wasn’t alone.

It isn’t rational; the part of her that wanted to stop moving. Am I sleepy? Hungry- who’s hungry? Ice cream and a bed weren’t going to just magic themselves into existence and Oliver wasn’t going to let her stop here for the night. The idea of how he’d look if she even suggested that, it might actually get him to move faster.

But the stillness of the hallway created the illusion that nothing could touch them. That everything was fine. That they were safe. That it was over. That he would-

“I’ll clean you up.”
Um… that.

She swallowed, heart thudding.

What had he meant by that?

*Something very normal and not at all inappropriate, probably. Obviously. Right. Of course. Why would it even- because there definitely wasn’t - shouldn’t even be questioned in any way shape or form, nope - any reason for those words said by his leather wearing self, to be taken to be even close to the unsuitably arousing possibilities her brain could conjure in the seconds after they had been uttered.*

It was heady. It was all in her head.

*Let it go.*

But it was *hard*. Difficult. It felt impossible.

She couldn’t- no; she didn’t *want* to. Something inside her was grasping onto it tight.

It had been *so* long; so many weeks since she’d truly felt anything beyond fear, beyond pain and worry, it was almost too much to stop herself from latching on. *Ugh. So needy.*

He’d never *cleaned* her up before. In any sense of the term. On those few and far between moments when she’d been rescued after being in danger, she’d cleaned *herself* up.

He’d just hovered at the side-lines.

So, it was important. She needed to know what *he* meant by it because, it *felt* roughly ten steps beyond anything she could have thought up between them and she’d thought *a lot*. A LOT, a lot. ‘Clean her up’? It could have meant… it could have meant a lot of things. Delicious things. Unlikely things.

*Extremely unlikely.*

Like, never, *ever.*

And right now, was *so* not the time to be thinking about it. Even if she *had* to because-

*“Look who’s being a bad girl.”*

Because, Frank.

Her eyes squeezed shut.

*“Sunshine.”*

She shuddered.

And-

*“I was enjoying the view.”*

Slade.

She *had* to get rid of them. She feared she never would.
He drowned me.

He’d taken her Sunday and-

“Does it bother you?” Still quiet, the hoarse quality to his voice made it so each word crawled fingers of fear - fear and perversion - over her. “Being unable to see me?”

-Had made her fear what might be in the dark again. There were too many things to remember. To hear. To smell and feel and regret and fear and she needed Oliver to get rid of them from inside her. A deep clean. They’d made her dirty; they hadn’t needed to lift a finger.

Oliver could do it, she knew he could.

But it was too much to ask.

She wanted to think, dream and wonder about Oliver - about the impossible, unthinkable them - and slowly erase the voices, scents, the words and the pain they caused - like a screwdriver coring into her soul - and have them scoured out from inside her.

Frank’s was a very different seed of black to Slade’s. With Slade, she’d chosen. As much of a victim as she was with him, she’d also made a choice. She knew it was skewed thinking that, but if she didn’t, there wasn’t a chance in hell that she could have endured this far. So, she’d told herself that she’d agreed. That she had some control.

But with Frank and his brand of poison, her ‘victim’s mark’ so to speak was exposed. As if everyone could see it. As if everyone would know.

*My god. She got it now.*

She understood why people who suffered, who were hurt, who bore witness to savagery - who were treated like they were less than human - chose to remain silent rather than bare their taint to the world.

Shame.

It was humiliating. Reprehensible. Terrifying. Nauseating to consider confessing only to damage the people who care about her and how ridiculous was that?

How many in Starling city were hurt day to day - she’d seen several on her monitors, had met a few - who don’t come forward? She knew the statistics; she’d run them herself.

Looking at them, seeing it all from a different perspective was like peeking into hell.

There were people out there who had to pick themselves back up and push forwards because they had no choice but to do so. If they didn’t, they’d die: eaten by a sometimes cold, cruel world that devours the weak.

They had to press on, without help. Sometimes, without love. To reach beyond the dirt, the memories that seep in - deep into bone, into marrow, thoroughly embalming you in the stink and slime and stench and touch of the evil that screws you over and twist-turns your life into the joke it becomes; where black is somehow safe, where love is pain and sex a shameful reach for peace, where loneliness is preferred over loved ones who can judge and wound just as much as the memories that have taken over your life - and somehow, try to put it behind them.

*How? How did they do that? She needed to know. Is there a manual or something? A ‘how to be’?
For some reason - for the first time since the beginning - she didn’t feel strong enough to do the same.

“Everything about you is soft.”

“You’re a pathetic little girl with no power.”

Weak. She felt weak. As if that’s all she’d ever been-

*I know better than this. Stop it.*

But it was too easy to let that voice in; the same one that had been telling her most nights that she couldn’t continue, that she’d break, that she’d betray Oliver somehow with how much Slade liked to talk and question.

The same voice that died a quiet death whenever Oliver looked at her, touched her, *saw* her…

This time, he wasn’t enough. He didn’t block it out. Didn’t drown out Frank. Didn’t quieten Slade.

He was her safe place, where he’d effortlessly wipe it all away with a word, a look, a smile; making a small piece of her feel untouched by the rough hands and crude fingers that shoved needles into her skin, strapped her into chairs, tied her to ceilings, forced her head underwater, and reminded her that she was a toy. That she was all cracks and hasty bandages under the skin.

He helped with that. Like a shield would. A blanket made of steel. And she’d relied on him for that.

It was weak.

To have any affect now, Oliver would have to do *more*. And that was a no-no.

She’d made a deal with the devil to keep them all safe; *that* was on her. On her shoulders and in her head and even if she’d never be able to scrub it clean again, so be it. She should have been able to tolerate the consequences. To foresee the many ways in which this could all go straight to hell.

*Of course,* it would all go straight to hell.

*Of course,* the devil would go back on his word.

*Of course,* he’d make damn sure to prove that it was all for nothing; that her every attempt was wasted.

*Of course,* he’d take Thea Queen and try to make the girl’s belief in her brother shatter into pieces too small to put back together, because one of Oliver’s very few tethers to hope was his sister’s faith in him.

*Of course,* it wouldn’t matter if Slade had his ‘plaything’ to go to when all was said and done, he’d *still* try to turn Oliver’s world to ashes.

*Of course,* he’d still have plans, within plans, within plans, to keep her own superfluous.

*Of course,* he’d use Felicity to do it all.

The. Weakest. Link.

And that was the point, wasn’t it? Slade, he’d just been revelling in watching all her preconceived notions of being able to keep them safe - her conceit at believing even for a second that she was
doing everyone a favour - gradually crumble into dust at his feet.

She hadn’t been protecting anyone: she’d just been postponing the inevitable.

Fool.

I’m really sorry.

And suddenly, the leather-clad hand in hers felt more like a chain. *I was so stupid.* All of her wanted to wrench free from the security Oliver naturally provided; a security she’d prided in never having allowed herself to need because it wasn’t hers, yet still *wanted* in a way that was frighteningly intense and utterly undeserved.

She felt unclean. She felt Slade, *Frank-*

With every look he’d sent her way since the beginning of the indecent proposal, it was the look of a man who was picturing her under him; naked and in pain. At his mercy.

*Gag me with a spoon.* No woman - or man - should ever have to feel that.

But, no; she didn’t *feel* Oliver. Even though he was right there.

“*I’ll clean you up.*”

Would he, if he knew? He wouldn’t want to touch her. Wouldn’t *want* anything at all. That tiny piece of him that she knew had wondered, once or twice, about… about *them* and the big untouchable ‘what if’ of it all. He wouldn’t.

And she needed to be clean.

“*I’ll clean you up.*”

It was all about feeling.

Oliver’s voice wasn’t something she simply heard. The way he looked at her, wasn’t something she just saw him do; she felt it everywhere. Everything about him, *everything,* made her physically respond and wasn’t *that* just pathetic? Unfair. For it to be so strong in her yet, *so* unrequited.

But she wouldn’t change it, the unrequited-ness of the thing that she rocked on the daily. The way it made her feel was unlike anything she’d ever experienced, but-

“*I’ll clean you up.*”

*Come on; even objectively, it sounds about ten different kinds of very, very pleasant.* Suggestive as hell.

A little… dirty.

But not to Oliver. Not his job. Not *them:* not Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak. And to *say* it like that - for it come out so naturally - it *had* to have been born from worry. From fear.

“*Your feet.*”

So.

*Keep a lock on it.*
Oliver wasn’t offering to be hers.

She felt that - the truth of it - hollow out her ribcage.

He’d probably been scared out of his mind for his sister, probably beyond freaking out trying to look for them, so - like a person does when someone they care about has been hurt - they shower them with kindness. Until they choke on it.

Until they become addicted, but that person has already turned away from them. It wouldn’t take long.

The moment the truth comes out, it would change. Everything that was happening now, the way he was behaving, was born from an ignorance she’d enabled. She’d been hiding the truth from him - not outright lying because she hadn’t really been asked - until Sunday when she’d deliberately led Oliver away from the subject, from her.

So, she couldn’t take advantage like this. Not even in her head. And the things in her head, well… they were wrong anyway - they were friends - and they were so selfish, her thoughts, because what she wanted, was for him to-

“We’re here.”

Like she’d slamming into something - like he’d called her back to her body - she sucked in a breath. It took seconds too long, moments where she tucked his voice in tight and let it seep in (a forgivable indulgence) and fortify before coming back to her surroundings.

It was long enough for him to turn to her.

“Felicity.”

Not a question or a push; his hand tightening on hers. A, hey.

A, look at me.

And not at the wall she’d almost crashed into.

Oops. She’d taken two steps past him. Crap-a-doodle. “A-um, I…” I, what? Mouth open, let’s see me get out of this one, she looked from the wall to the door, then back over her shoulder at Oliver--

Ooooh.

Like being whammed with a truck - made of pillows - her insides turned to jelly.

She could just see his eyes and he couldn’t look at her like that. Not here. She was defenceless here; completely without her armour and he was just-

Perfect.

-there. He was right there. And he was different somehow. Unguarded yet hard. It went deep. And she swallowed for a very different reason because oh boy she was in trouble.

Remembering his jaw, his scruff, against her throat and seeing it now all taut and fierce - obviously he wasn’t as calm as he’d seemed - didn’t help.

It, he, was totally beyond anything she could deal with right now (a hot shower, a double Jack and coke and maybe, she’d be able).
But it was Oliver looking at her in a way he’d never looked at her.

It was Oliver seeing everything in her the way he knew she didn’t want him to, but without pressure. And he was just taking it - all the bad - inhaling every little nuance in her, every movement she made. As they’d walked, he’d probably been doing it then too: listening to her breathe. Waiting.

Waiting for her to slip up.

Like she just had.

All without saying a word.

Because he knew she was tired, he knew she’d been hurt in ways he couldn’t see. Knew that she’d had a day. By the expression she could half see on his face, he didn’t hide that he knew it-

Wait… had it been a test?

He’d stopped walking and she’d continued right on past him, unseeing. Not even cognizant of it. Instinctively knowing he’d take care of her, she’d left herself wide open.

Dangerous, in the field.

He’d needed to estimate where she was. Emotionally. Mentally. Physically.

Now he had an answer.

And she was just standing there, looking at him. Gormless. Like a zombie. A gormless zombie.

He was watching her back. And there was something he wanted. Many something’s.

Her next inhale felt shallow.

If there was a way to unfix his attention from her, she didn’t know it. She didn’t deserve it, hadn’t earned it- she’d been the danger this time. The one with the secrets.

She knew about his boy. About his mother, her third painful secret/lie (her first being the Undertaking, her second? Thea’s heritage), Samantha and his boy. The threat on his sister and the people he cared about, she knew a lot. Too much.

And he wanted in.

Unbalanced, she stumbled on two feet - of course I did - finally looking away from him, to the door.

“Um…”

Um, what?

After a moment, he moved too, reaching past her until his free hand was lifting to touch the wall beside the exit, near the handle.

He made no effort to open the door.

She looked from his hand, glancing up to his hood, then back again.

It was secured around her own: not tight, just… secure.

What is he waiting for, permission? Oliver didn’t do that; He made his own choices. I’d like to get
out of the hallway that smells like Frank and damp and metallic. And-

Didn’t they have to go?

“Aren’t-” Her throat closed, and she cleared it because oh help; that was pitiful. “Aren’t- are we leaving, or…” Or, what? Where was the rest of the sentence? Like, I see the door there. It’s a great shade of grey.

She’d never felt so discombobulated before.

And he was utterly silent, which. Was. Odd.

He was so still when before… before he’d been shaking. His arms, his voice – they’d trembled.

Please say something. It wasn’t like he talked all the time but, just this once, be the talkative one Oliver. She was damn near begging him with her eyes but, he wasn’t looking at her. It made her jittery, made her look away. It’s so quiet and we’re holding hands and if he was anymore still, I’d-

When she furtively looked back to him - because I can’t help crucifying myself - his eyes were on her.

...Couldn’t he just blink or something?

Like the air had been punched out of her, she made a sound; something tiny and helpless instead of the words that had been forgotten somewhere midway.

They were so vividly blue, his eyes. Even in the crappy light. Even in the dark.

She’d looked into them before, directly, and maybe it was the hood, but they’d never - not even on Sunday when they’d been daring her to break the rules he’d built between them from across the table - looked that intense.

Something had touched him. Something had made him decide, had made him feel.

It wasn’t relief.

But this suffocating pause - continuing to just stand there, eyes unblinkingly on hers like it was something he’d just do every now and then (um, he kind of does actually – not going there) and nobody had ever found it unusual - was lasting far too long and it was making something inside her chest, tremble. Made her want to-

He exhaled, cutting into the tension. Even that sounded different: as if it wasn’t really a breath that he’d been holding in at all. “Right.” It was more to himself than to her.

What’s going on?

Then, slowly, his palm - the hand on the door - slid down. Slid off.

She watched it drop to his side and felt it reverberate through her like he’d banged on a gong. He turned to her; fully this time. “Let’s stay.”

It was pretty much the point where her brain stopped… well, going.

And there was some kind of meaning, that she didn’t understand beneath those two words. Something more; something heavy with a knowing that made him steady in one way and still shaken in another, something that was uncompromisingly hers.
Her fault.

To say that she was thrown was an understatement. “What?”

“We’re staying.”

“We are?” It made no sense, even though she’d considered that this had been his intention from the start. “We’re not getting out of here?”

“Soon.” Gravelly timbre in a voice as naturally hot as his, just wasn’t fair at all now, was it?

“So why? We need to do damage control.” Eyes on the prize. But there was a sinking feeling in her stomach at the unchanging way he was looking at her that made the words come out with a small, nervous, laugh. “I’m pretty sure we’ve got more important things to-”

“No.” Felicity meet the wall called Oliver. “We don’t.” Despite the firmness of tone, his face was anything but. “This is pretty up there.” He licked his lips, pausing for one Mississippi, two Mississippi... “The top.”

But she knew better: he was the calm before a storm.

The top.

She’d triggered a landmine. A long timer, maybe. But a boom would come soon.


“You did.” Something about him just then - the way he looked at her - was dark. And it wasn’t bad. Not a bad dark. Nothing like Slade’s. Just something more. “It’s okay. I get it.” He wasn’t giving her permission after the fact or letting her know she was safe, he was simply saying-

“How long am I going to let you keep putting yourself last?”

He was saying that he saw right through her bullshit and that her bullshit was lovely.

But her bullshit was going to end.

“It’s not the time.” It was embarrassingly telling; her floundering, even as she looked him in the eye. “Or the place.”

“It never is.” And he sounded so understanding it rippled through her, because he knew; she wasn’t brushing him off. She was just trying to keep him from hearing the truth and the truth meant pain and oh the irony; it was something he probably knew a thing or two about. “But the moment we leave here, we won’t get the time.” At least not for a while.

And she kept running away.

Yet there was no judgement there, on his face. There were other things. Things that made her want to hide, just as much as they made her want to touch him. To penetrate through that invisible wall between them and why had that even come into her head?

But it made sense: it hadn’t just been about keeping him from getting hurt and the multitude of other reasons why she’d kept quiet. The other part of it was that she really didn’t have a clue how to tell him. Or where to start.

“Oliver, what if we’re here,” she found herself saying, lifting a hand to their surroundings, “and
Slade does something else? I’m scared of that more than anything else right now.”

It wasn’t a lie.

And he agreed. “So am I.”

“Oh, then.” Groovy. Great. Magical. “Let’s—”

“But that’s been true for months.” Her mouth snapped shut. “And it doesn’t change the fact that we need— you need… to talk to me.” With the hood angled just so, his face fell into shadow. “I need to listen.”

I don’t, and you really don’t. “But—”

“Just a little.” He breathed; his head moving with it. “Even if it’s only a little bit. Can you give me that?” And he spoke with such care. “Just a few minutes Felicity,” a minute at a time, that’s what he was asking, “I promise.”

She didn’t like it. The care. She didn’t like it.

She could give him an inch here - it would help prepare for later - but, she already felt like a victim. She didn’t want Oliver to see her that way. And he does, doesn’t he? Clearly. Either that or he felt guilty. Not good. Not right.

And once he knew more, he’d definitely see her that way. Or worse.

“I’ve just had a bad day.” It was a weak line, but she managed to affect it with almost 100% stoicism. Except, Felicity and stoicism weren’t friends. “A little soap and water and I’ll be good as new.” As if that was all it was, but he didn’t know that.

But affecting blasé wasn’t a talent of hers, made clear by the way Oliver looked at her. Into her.

Waiting again. For the truth.

Her pretence was transparent. And she knew it was as scarily obvious to him now, in a way that it hadn’t been on Sunday.

The softest of soft blinks were followed by words that told her just how screwed she was. “Just one?”

“Sorry?”

He took a moment, like he had to, before he answered. “Just one bad day?”

Just one bad-

Without permission, the stoicism left her face like it had been wiped off. That tiny, up-beat smile? Gone.

He knew.

But, how much? How much did he know? And who told him? Why? Why would-

Her thoughts puttered to a stop because he saw it: her fear. And his jaw clenched; the skin stretching over bone and muscle. Angry. More than angry.
But then… he smiled. It wasn’t anything like she’d seen from him before; Nothing to write home about but it wasn’t a happy turn of his lips. It was laced with the same desperation he’d been feeling all day, but it was speaking to her.

*I get it now,* it said, *and I know it’s bad.*

There was nothing there to hurt her. Not from him.

It froze her in place.

As if he could read her - he always could - he shifted. *Closer.* “Talk.” And *there* was the tremble, spoken with an undertone. “Talk to me.”

Tumultuous.

He was holding by a thread.

It scared her for all the wrong reasons.

She *wanted* him to lose it, even just a little. And it was wrong of her. Deep down, she knew why. She knew and hated herself for it, for thinking it. Wanting it.

Sex.

That single moment of nothingness and everything merge into existence.

Something that wasn’t pain. Fear.

Maybe it was just a coping mechanism. Her body’s way of suggesting a way to feel anything but the tar-like poison the last 6 weeks had left inside her. Her brain’s way of distancing herself from all the black spots, from the wrongness - from all the bad.

Oliver deserved more than that.

But it pushed at her, stronger than ever because she was so pitifully susceptible to him right now. It pulled, making sure that if she was to feel anything other than the sheer fear, the humiliation and guilt that revealing her lies would create, it would be this. It would be *him.*

*Is this shock? Am I in shock? Is that a thing I have to go through now?* She’d never, not once, been in shock before. Oliver and John might be machines in the field, but Felicity’s ability to compartmentalise outshone even theirs. She was born with it. Proud of it even, of how her brain never let her down, never gave up on her, never stopped working to save her life: her great adapter.

So why couldn’t she adapt to Oliver already? *It’s been almost two years; what’s the hold up?*

It wouldn’t stop.

And he wasn’t helping.

“Hey.” Gloved hand, un-gloved hand; it didn’t matter. When it came up, tentatively touching her elbow… then upwards in a gentle grip around her bicep - and now I know how big his hands are to add to how gentle they can be, how violent and no, no, no - electricity shivered through her, inch by inch. Until her feet tingled. Until her chest was burning. “Felicity?”

*Maybe being alone with him isn’t such a good idea.* Sunday. *I love Sundays.* He’d made them special. Just one lunch. The motorcycle. The talking. The thousand ways she could interpret it and
the one way her brain - a pachinko machine-like theme ground full of innuendo and sewage, _so much sewage_ - wanted to.

It was hope, she decided, that killed just as much as it saved. Just as beautiful as she knew it to be - because she’d felt it so much, especially since meeting her boys - it was also the touch of the desert; sand, grit and dry skin. Painful, thirsty work that made you want to give up and go home.

She thought she’d buried it and wanted so much right then; things she could never ask for, things she’d fought against and had decided months ago to stop wanting, to just let be.

It was like her brain was all mush and no substance. Nothing was computing. “You want me to talk.”

“I want you to trust me.” And then he did something that made her feel as small and as ugly as she’d been starting too. “Please.”

He was begging.

Please.

_Please._

_Please Oliver._

Looking into his eyes, it hit her just how far she’d pushed him. If the shoe was on the other foot, she’d never have accepted _his_ silence. His secrets. He’d given her space and time, thinking it was what she wanted and was now punishing himself for not seeing what she’d made sure he _wouldn’t_ see.

She’d done this to him. She’d made him look like that.

_Oh_, she wanted to go back.

Back to Sunday, back to BBB - to the way she let him slip inside her emotions as he did her, to the way they verbally dug into each other to find the taste of grit and sweat and sex because there was meaning there, a heartbeat that could feed them - to when she felt more like her herself than she had in a long while as they’d sat there discussing sex - fucking or making love - and other diverting titbits, when he’d been more himself than she’d ever seen him be.

She’d never seen his eyes light up like that before. He’d never thrown _that_ smile her way - a lift of his lips that was as much an invitation as it was genuinely happy - he’d never leaned so close or smelled _so good_ - _god, he’d smelled amazing_ - and he’d never asked without speaking if he could touch her.

He had.

With his eyes, he’d spoken to her. He’d asked if he could do a _lot._

Just now, he’d told her they could stay right where they were because he felt like she needed to talk, but maybe he needed that more.

She _needed_ too. She needed so much that she started talking without thinking and that was _not_ a good idea. “What will you do?”

“What?” He mouthed, confused.
Standing there, dishevelled - in a damp, dirty hallway, in a dilapidated building - her heart jackhammered in her chest. “What will you do if I don’t?”

“If you don’t, what?”

“Don’t talk to you. Don’t tell you.” She sounded so small, weak again. “Don’t open my mouth and share with you.”

As if her words were expressions on her face, his eyes searched all over it. “What will I do?” He repeated to himself, unsure. Detecting some meaning he couldn’t make sense of. “I-”

“Will you force me?” She whispered.

The dull ache in his eyes flared, the furrow at his brow tightening. “No.”

“Then we’ll be all alone in an empty corridor.” Her voice wobbled, her eyes stung but she felt very wanton just then and it was all kinds of wrong. “Doing nothing.” Her eyes flitted over his. “Or something.”

Stunningly… he seemed to take it the exact way she’d meant it, even if she hadn’t meant to mean it that way. *Say that three times fast.* The way she hadn’t meant to mean it, but the way her body was screaming it. The way no one else would interpret her words.

Except he had.

Mouth very slightly open, something in his gaze deepened - darkening the sliver-blue there - as he thought through it, surprised by where her words and his brain were taking him and then-

He shivered.

As his mouth closed over a shallow inhale, he *shivered.* His eyes flickered down, to her lips.

A wave of want almost took her to the floor.

His throat moved and when he spoke, it was rough; like a fire racing over dry grass. “What… do you want?”

*Holy shit.* It was painful how hard her heart was pounding. “What do I…?” Making him explain, it felt like she was *pushing* him, and she didn’t know why.

“Anything you want.” It rippled through him, whatever *it* was. “I need to know why Slade took you. I need to know what he did. More than that, I need to know you’re ok. Telling me you’re fine isn’t going to do that.” Quietly, he shifted, leaning on one leg so that his face was turned over her own. “What do you need?”

It sounded intensely sexual to her and it shouldn’t have made her ache in places she’d forgotten existed inside her.

What did she *need?* She needed a lot right then, too much, but what did he need? What did he *want?*

She could do anything she wanted right now, and he’d *let* her. She could feel it: she could take advantage.

He was asking her to.

She knew him like the back of her hand; he was *asking.*
Didn’t he realise how bad that was? How wrong. To sacrifice like that. To be willing to betray his own scruples like this. She couldn’t go there.

It wasn’t as if he was some pinnacle specimen of the male sex- *okay, he’s pretty close; if he was anymore ‘pinnacle’ she’d be in big trouble. Part of it’s definitely the leather. And everything the leather covers.*

It really wasn’t difficult to be partial.

Partial was such a thin word for it, but maybe it was the most precise one.

*Partial.*

Felicity, who’d been a ‘partial’ entity before she’d met him: limited. Incomplete. Then there he was: Oliver Queen, walking into her office and suddenly, emptiness wasn’t a foregone conclusion. A life half lived was no longer the sole option available to her. He offered a world of colour and life and exuberance which shadowed the violence, the dark nights and the fear and she took it gladly. Happily.

Gratefully.

Because of him, she’d never truly be empty again.

So, she was partial, very much, to every inch of Oliver Queen.

*Get a grip.*

On him-

*No.*

But how could she stop?

Stop wanting to feel him against her. To have his body on hers. *With* her, so that - for just a moment - she wouldn’t be alone.

Willingly.

It felt like a sin, because he never would be willing… right?

He’d always been very *male*, for lack of a better word. When they’d first met, it had been distinct in him - that masculinity. The virility. But, ultimately, he was submissive with women. He gave *them* the choices, the options - save the secrets he’d never tell.

She’d often wondered; if things were different, how would he be with her? How would he *feel*?

Oliver was the definition of ‘Gentleman’. In many ways, it was made worse by how blind he could be - that very special type of blind that punished as much as it made him wonderful - but in this, Oliver was a patient, somewhat vulnerable type of man who tried. Really hard. And it was a hit and miss kind of thing with him.

It was painfully easy to imagine how much of that gentleness would make its way into the bedroom.

The *weight* of him. Encompassing and secure. The sure heat. The *power*, because he was ridiculously strong, and she *liked* it. She could dive right into him and dine for days.
She’d imagined more than once; his hands on her, his skin against hers, him perfect and pressing. Giving. Following her. Taking her there. With his scent on her roving fingers, she’d move with him, for him; thanking him in most primitive way she knew.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Reality didn’t make it any less alluring. Didn’t stop her from wishing, or prevent it from being something she knew would shut her brain up for a while.

That *something* being a thought-stopping, toe curling, body-numbing orgasm.

How good he would be at that, she could only wonder, and boy had she wondered on those rare - because of Slade - nights alone and he’d only ever been amazing at oh, everything and-

*God, stop it.*

It was absurd. It was honest.

And it was wrong. Bad. Very bad.

But, instinctively, she knew.

If she plucked up the courage to ask now, if she needed it enough… he’d say yes. He’d allow himself to be subjugated. He’d give. He’d let her take.

He’d let her use him.

And she felt that everywhere. But it wasn’t what she wanted.

“*Sometimes you just need to get fucked.*”

She wanted him to fuck it all away.

The day. The last 7 weeks. The cold in her. Slade’s voice, his face. Frank.

*Make it go away.*

But she wanted him to want the same back from her. To be so beyond reason he’d go for it, destroying all the poison until it was just him, until all she felt was him. *Please.*

He could do that. She knew he could.

She wanted it and she wanted him. And he had no idea.

He didn’t know he could do that to her. That he currently was doing that, just by standing there. Just by being his infuriating self.

If he knew, it would change everything. Their friendship would die on the spot. Teamwork would be awkward at best. There’d be no more lunches, no more coffees and *definitely* no more motorcycle rides. It would be over before it began, which meant any physical attention he could give her would be… well, sympathy sex.

*Ah, no.* Not happening, not a chance in hell. It was all or nothing. Never would she sacrifice such an important relationship for a quick round.

If she ever had that chance with Oliver, it could - would - never be a simple thing. Never be casual.
So even as part of her wanted to reach out, right now and find a way to not be afraid anymore, the rest of her understood it was impossible. Oliver didn’t want that.

“So… sex?” His words were an intoned rumble from somewhere in his chest.

But remembering the way his eyes had traced over her - a secret thrill rippling through at the memory - she knew he would. Sex at least.

He’d consider it.

Them being where they were made the thought - the suggestion - wildly real. The wave from her toes spread upwards and out as every hair on her body stood on end.

But she had to let it go.

It would never happen. Even if she could see it happening.

Even though she could picture an Oliver who did, who would. Who was so inclined, he’d need to do something about it. Immediately. Like he couldn’t breathe if he didn’t touch her that way right now, looking to her like she was the answer to every question he’d ever asked.

Even if she could see him dropping her hand for a grasp in her fly-away hair. Could see him stepping into her. Manoeuvring them into the wall. Where he’d press against her, where he’d let her pull down his hood, and she wouldn’t have to imagine anymore how his jaw would feel under her fingers as they scraped for truth. Wrapping himself around her, pushing hard – push in deep.

Wanting her.

Wanting to make her feel.

To make her smile and cry out and laugh until she shed tears. To let her breathe in his leather and sweat and taste the salt from his skin, feel his scruff intentionally on her neck, feel his teeth press down with the intention to taste.

Eat her whole.

His mouth on hers, tongue stroking over her own, knowingly sending sparks down - down - again before saying those words that had left him like an errant thought earlier. Words she couldn’t believe he’d said, never mind meant.

“I’ll clean you up.”

I’ll take care of you.

Hushed, brushed, against her lips to make her forget. Just for a little while.

Keeping on his mask - because he would be himself with her; she’d settle for nothing less - he’d reach into her crappy shorts and drop to his knees, because maybe - just maybe - her taste on his tongue would make him want to savour her there too. The way she needed. If he was the kind of guy who could want her, who liked doing that kind of thing, he wouldn’t hold back.

And I'm awful.

He. Was. Her. Friend.

She shuddered. My partner.
It was a dream. And she needed to wake up.

They were still stood there, unmoving. *I pushed the limits of being pitiful in this long ago.* Seconds after she’d met him, really.

That kind of friction wasn’t meant for her and him. It was meant for-

For who? Who was it meant for?

She didn’t know. All she had to know was that, it wasn’t meant for her. He’d held a torch for both Lance sisters for so long. And Laurel had woken in the Foundry to a concerned sister and her ex-love. For all Felicity knew, they could have talked; could have made plans. Could be rekindling their romance and starting anew.

And it had absolutely nothing to do with her.

Nothing.

“The first thing I do in the morning, when we’re at QC or in Verdant’s main office - the first thing - is look for you.”

Nothing.

“I can’t think of anything more important.”

…The pain in her chest was exquisite.

She loved him. She loved him, she-

“You’re soft. Weak. Easily broken. Quaint. A pretty. Little. Girl... The kid wouldn’t normally touch a girl like you to turn her away... you don’t make any sense in his world; Oliver Queen doesn’t do ‘friends’ with women. He’s your friend because he doesn’t find you beguiling. You’re a tool.”

-couldn’t have him.

She was a fool.

And she was tainted.

So, they very much needed to leave, before she did something - in this continuous moment of weakness - she’d regret forever. They could talk later, surrounded by Dig and Sara and-

“Dig.”

At the sound of his voice, her eyes flew open - *when did I close them?* - head shooting up to see him because it had been right there at the back of her mind; a niggling worm of doubt.

“He’s alive.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“That’s what you’re getting.”

Slade telling her Dig was alive was so vastly different to hearing that he was fine from Oliver. And there would be no way Oliver would be so copacetic if he wasn’t.
“Yeah, she’s with me; we’re alright. Can you give us a few minutes?” Hand to the com at his throat, his gaze didn’t stray as he spoke; the message clear. *You aren’t going anywhere yet.*

Not even inside her own head.

“I know.” He continued; his voice a tribute to every erotic thought she’d ever had. “We won’t be long. Keep an eye on Thea.”

Then he flicked off his end of the com. He dropped his free hand. His chest moved out then in; a deeper than usual breath.

*Frack.*

“*Yeah, she’s with me; we’re alright.*”

They were safe.

They weren’t safe with *them*; outside with him and Sara, *no* – they were *inside*. Alone.

But the enemy had been taken care of, the *immediate* threat was no longer immediate and absolutely yes; John could spare Oliver a few minutes alone time with… with the woman he’d been slowly falling in love with for the past 18 months.

In some ways, it felt liberating thinking words he’d never allowed himself to. He wasn’t a matchmaker, but he’d known that if he’d considered the pair in front of him - the bickering that made them gravitate together until they were inches apart instead of yards *away* like it did with other people, the odd way they both seemed to be on the same page 99.9% of the time and the way Oliver softened around her, the way Felicity was so attuned to the him that she knew what he wanted and when - he might have done something before now, he might have stepped in when it wasn’t his place. *And ruin the natural order of things? No thanks.*

He wasn’t going to test fate or push waters not ready to shoulder a ripple.

Except… to say that he’d given Oliver a push in the right direction earlier, would be like admitting he’d used his pinkie finger to nudge him off an already low hanging precipice. It hadn’t taken much. At all. *The man was right there. Total goner.*

He’d just hidden it; locked it away somewhere deep inside – so deep that Oliver couldn’t recognise it for what it was.

Oliver had known he’d loved Felicity. He’d also known that it wasn’t the way Diggle loved her. But he’d been willing to play Dig’s ‘big brother’ card against his own feeble ‘we’re friends’ lapel that he’d been slapping on top of everything ‘Felicity shaped’ since he returned from his second trip to Lian Yu.

“It’s about who you love the most.” He said over Oliver; seeing the man’s mouth seal shut. “And who’s loss would destroy you.”

*Frozen, Oliver didn’t say a word.*
“Put that way, it makes all the sense in the world, why he took Felicity. Why you pulled away.”

Considering how the psychopath had lost the woman he loved, it made every sense. Smiling slightly, Dig’s head cocked sideways. “But you already knew that.”

He’d deliberately cornered him. It would be a lie to say he didn’t feel guilt at that. At the near-betrayal on Oliver’s face; terrified at the thought of having something to lose that could truly break him. Boy needed a push, he’d just told him what he already knew but wouldn’t face. You have something to live for and it makes all the difference in the world.

Diggle knew. He understood. You didn’t survive this world alone. Those who did were made of something Diggle had never understood and honestly, didn’t want to. It wasn’t necessarily a sign of strength to be able to live alone, nor was it a bad thing. It also wasn’t a sign of weakness to need others. And Diggle knew the type Oliver was; he’d known, just as Felicity had, mere minutes after meeting him. Oliver needed people. He needed to matter to them, just as he needed to have people who mattered to him. He was just frozen at what it could cost him. Of what might happen if his loved ones were hurt because of him, of what they might see in him afterwards; the kind of thing that could make them flee.

Felicity wouldn’t. Oliver knew that and maybe that was the problem. If he brought her in any deeper, he’d never be able to dig her out. She’d be rooted too deep for him to feel anything else but her. He’d seen that look before in a man’s eyes – the look Oliver wore in the Foundry earlier – and he could admit; it was rare. That moment where one person suddenly becomes ‘all’.

If she was ever taken from him… The Count’s a good example.

Months ago, before Oliver could put a label to the feelings being cultivated inside of him, he’d killed The Count.

And he hadn’t regretted it.

“It was justifiable.” Oliver had told him the next day, after he’d visited Dig’s apartment to see how he was faring. “Even the barest of chances that the syringe could have touched her… it felt like justice.”

That’s what he’d said. Justice. Except-

“How’d she take it? You killing The Count, to save her?” Because it was Felicity and John knew she’d blame herself for knocking Oliver off a goal line he’d been more than happy to veer away from for a night.

“…She’s the one person who cannot be touched by the darkness she sees on her screens.” They’d promised each other once, that they could protect her. It had been conditional on her joining the team: she’d never be hurt if they could help it. And she had. “For most people that’s too much. She sees enough. It doesn’t matter how strong she is and not all strength is measured on a ladder of hit lists. Targets.” He’d quieted then; lulled by the peace of his own thoughts as he hovered in Dig’s door way. “It’s empathy and intelligence and wit. And kindness. Sincerity. There has to be a balance.”

And Felicity… was his balance?

Does he even hear himself when he speaks?

It didn’t matter, not at the time. But now?

Felicity had been taken by his worst nightmare and she’d kept the fact that Slade had spoken to her -
that she might have been visited by said nightmare - before, from them all… now Oliver had her with him. There wasn’t anyone else on the planet who Diggle trusted more to keep Felicity Smoak safe.

And now, they had some alone time.

It should have been weird to line ‘alone time’ with Oliver and Felicity, but it wasn’t. It’s been a long time coming.

“…we’re alright.”

All was right with the world once more. For a few minutes at least. “Thank God.” Exhaling, Diggle still felt on edge as he disengaged his side of the com; probably more to do with waiting a little longer to see their girl.

Oliver had sounded exactly as he’d wanted to: fine. Which meant, he wasn’t. Not by a long shot. So… he clearly needed a moment. Or ten, but they didn’t have time for ten. One would have to do.

What wasn’t Felicity telling them?

Beyond what they’d discovered tonight… I should have known. Those times he’d given her a lift had dwindled, as had their coffee mornings, so he’d missed things, but he should have seen it. More than most. I hadn’t. It hadn’t even occurred to him that it was something beyond stress or worry. At least, not until she’d started to lose weight. Until she started looking like Oliver did after a particularly hard night. There had to have been something and he’d promised himself he’d talk to her about it, but Oliver had gotten in his way.

“Let me do it.” Oliver muttered to him, low, after they’d caught Felicity in the Foundry anyway after being given the night off. “I want to talk to her.”

“We both do, I-”

“It needs to be me.” And his surprising insistence, the look on Oliver’s face, had been the only reason Diggle had held back the last few days. “I need to… I need to help her.”

But… why hadn’t she told them?

“Was that Ollie?”

A sharp inhale - caught - had Diggle turning his head to Sara as she near-glided over tarmac. “Uh, yeah.” He cleared his throat. “He’s taking a minute.”

Drawing up beside him, Sara looked… agitated. Worried. “I don’t think we have a minute.”

He looked at her. “Is this about what you were trying to tell us before we got in the van?”

The same van now housing a clearly disturbed Thea Queen, who’d taken one look at ‘The Arrow’ before telling him straight, ‘I know who you are. I know you’re Ollie.’

He didn’t think Oliver could pale so fast, even under the hood.

“Thea…” It seemed to be all he could say as he’d reached out a hand.

But all Thea did was shake her head; not in disappointment, but as if there was just too much… too much to think about.

Then Oliver was speeding inside the back building whilst they put his sister up in the back of the van.
with a blanket over her shoulders.

“I couldn’t tell him in the car.” Sara said; her blonde wig fluttering in the breeze. “I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“What are you talking about?” Because, clearly, Dig and Sara were thinking different things.

She sighed. “It’s Laurel.”

Ah. “Okay… I thought everything was good. Sleeping Beauty awakened and all that.” Whilst I took Felicity home and she was kidnapped.

Yeah. He had some thoughts about that. Nothing any of them - Sara, Oliver or Laurel - would want to here.

They were going to.

“She didn’t know anything. At least, she didn’t remember until later. Oliver wasn’t happy about that.”

Of course. “So, what’s the problem?” When she paused his body turned to her, peering at her profile. “The man asked for a few minutes. We have time.”

It came out of her quickly. “What little she remembered, pointed in a direction Oliver doesn’t believe.” Her voice quieted; hair falling about her face as she shook her head. “I don’t believe it. And I’m worried about what Ollie might do once he finds out.”

“Finds out what?” He was getting a bad feeling.

Sara didn’t respond. “I saw his face, after she woke. And a little whole ago, at the auditorium.”

After the video footage. After Slade Wilson’s taunts. His torture.

With Oliver in the car; after Stan. After Dig’s truth bomb to him in the Foundry. During the ride in the van when he’d looked like a ticking time bomb about to go off. And the sound of his voice just now over the com: completely unreadable.

Unpredictable.

“I needed to wait until he’d seen them before saying anything.” Sara finished but it wasn’t enough.

“Sara, I need to know what this is about.” Checking the broken door Oliver had vanished through, Dig asked. “What did Laurel do?”

Sara just looked up at him side-on; her eyes glittering in the dark. “Something you’re not going to like.”

He’d had enough. “Sara-”

“She’s just made everything worse.” Taking a steady breath didn’t help her. “If I’m right, she’s just made everything worse.”

Bad feeling.

Really, it should have been them three from start to finish. Always.
“*Can you give us a few minutes?*”

She stared at him.

*To… what? To talk? Or to… um-*

“Come here.”

She blinked. “Wuh- uh.” *those aren’t actual words. I had words, all the words; where did they go?*

But he was talking well enough. “You’re cold.” And his voice crawled over her skin; sounding more ‘lover’s caress’ than friendly concern and didn’t *that* just take her to the floor? “Come here.”

“I’m-” she shook her head, mouth open as he unflexed his fingers from hers - a gentle signal to disentangle - and she practically tore her hand away from his. “What?” She repeated, watching his hands reach for his jacket.

Watching as they dragged the zip down his chest.

*Guh.*

Fantasy’s beguile- *Nope.*

“Here.” He shifted… and then she could only watch - gape - as he pulled down his hood, as he shirked off his jacket from his shoulders. *Um. Something stuck in her throat as a form fitting - very form fitting - black muscle shirt stretched far across his seamless pair of perfect pectorals - she really didn’t know what perfect pectorals were supposed to look like, but something inside her (call it instinct) told her his were - as he held out his jacket.*

Presenting to her.

His eyes - his entire expression - was soft. “It’s warm.”

Warm? She felt like she hadn’t been warm in a while.

But… but this was the Arrow’s jacket.

Said jacket held aloft, eyes on hers, Oliver moved to place it on her with nothing from him to show the day they’d had or the problems they were facing. This was something he could solve. It was one of his things - his extremely male thing - about protection and care, knowing that it didn’t really do anything in the long run for her - except she’d remember it at some point and feel him on her - but doing it anyway because, really, he just needed to do something. To make something better. Since she wasn’t giving him much of anything and he didn’t want to push her, he was going with door number 3.

That’s what it was about. Putting her first.

She knew him. In his head, he was the one who’d put them in danger. A little offer of comfort was nothing on his part.
But to her? All she could think was that it was his body heat that had made the warmth and he was offering it to her after Slade and his words and the way he’d looked at her - the way he always looked at her - as if he could see pieces of herself that he could pluck at and manipulate until they were hideous-

“This side to you is intriguing. You seldom show it… Is it shameful to you? Your violence?”

-bringing them to life.

“How well you take what I give you.”

Things she hadn’t known existed inside her - in those dark places where she’d sometimes hide - things that weren’t real but made so by his need to ruin her. Things that had her thinking that, if she could take it - and keep her friends safe - then maybe she was enough. Maybe she was enough to train. To go out into the field. With… with Oliver.

The kind of thoughts that make her wide open to conceit and that trickle of doubt he somehow brought to life inside her, when no one had been seeing that she was afraid-

But he had! Oliver did. He’d seen her. He’d just waited because he hadn’t known how not to hurt her more than she obviously already was.

And it had killed him to step back. She’d made him do that. At this moment, it felt like she ever did was make Oliver do things he didn’t want to do. It was Slade’s voice in her head, the way he made her wonder even now whether it was all her fault - if he’d chosen Thea to take because of her - even though she knew, logically, it had nothing at all to do with her choices, it was Thea.

Oliver’s Thea.

But maybe her choices had made the situation worse.

Her stomach twisted violently.

To take what Oliver offered now, because he was worried about her, because he cared about her and thought she needed - deserved - it when she really didn’t, I don’t. At all. Not for me, for her to even consider letting herself when she- when Slade had-

“I said,” he started, and the following two words were like cannon fire on her chest, “are you cold?”

In her moment of justifiable anger, she’d forgotten. She was completely at his mercy. And the last time he’d been feeling whimsical and irritated with her, he’d used the cane. She couldn’t go there again, not when her skin was finally starting to heal.

Lips dry, she replied just as quietly, “Yes; I’m cold.”

It made all the sense in the world for that one moment, why she recoiled.

Just… away.

It was so abrupt and uncoordinated - irrational - that her head smacked into the wall behind her. Oh, ow. Graceful, she was not. But her body had moved on its own. I’m a mess. She’d overreacted. I’m such a…

It took a few seconds for her to realise her palms were up and out. A - don’t touch me - stop sign. A defence against… against something truly kind. Oh god.
Against Oliver.
Her twisted stomach un-looped.

From his point of view, this would look-

*Oh no.*

It was silent.

She was hyperaware of how he’d stopped and focusing past her hands - she needed to see his eyes - she opened her mouth to apologise-

Only to feel *sick.*

If he’d looked like he’d been in pain before, it was *nothing* compared to how he looked now.

Like she’d taken a knife and had - as excruciatingly slow as possible - pushed it into his chest.

“Oliver?” *Is that my voice?* “It wasn’t- it was nothing.” It was everything though, wasn’t it?

He didn’t say a word, didn’t respond at all.

He just stared at her.

Like she was speaking a different language- no.

Like he’d just seen the one thing that proved to him how right he’d been on Sunday.

“I’m *sorry.*” It came out as pure panic - *he isn’t moving, he’s just standing there* - and it was. “Okay? I’m sorry.” She couldn’t think of what else to say and it seemed important to continue anyway; willing him to see her extreme overreaction - *I’m better than this, get it together* - for what it was rather than what it looked like. “I’m sorry.”

If she said it enough, maybe he’d stop looking at her like that: blank expression, eyes-

An open wound.

A man who was losing his grasp on reason, because he’d been shown that his rigidly built walls - his illusion of that very control - hadn’t existed in the first place.

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.

*My fault.*

Each *sorry* from her seemed to intensify the red rim around the white of his eyes.

Jaw locked down so tightly it looked crushing - like granite - the knuckles on each of his hands paled as his fingers tightened on the jacket hanging uselessly from them. Still looking at her, he forced a breath so shallow - through locked teeth - it *rattled.*

She’d *really* hurt him.

“Wait-” *for what?* She tried again, trying to moisten her suddenly dry mouth, “there’s nothing-” but her voice *wobbled* and it. Did. Not. Help. If the way the muscle alongside his jaw jumped, the way his abdominals convulsed was any indication, it didn’t help at all. “I didn’t mean it. It’s-” *It’s okay.*
An emotion she couldn’t touch moved up towards his eyes. “It isn’t what you think-”

He dropped his jacket.

On. The. Floor.

And left it there.

Arms falling to his sides, they smacked against his thighs.

“Oliver,” fix this, “it’s okay.” I promise. “I’m okay.” And she sounded far too tender, devoted, but this was Oliver and she just wanted him to feel better, to know none of the bad was him. That the black tar, the poison she was battling inside her, the twisted way it made her feel; none of it was his fault. She was okay. He was okay. They were okay. So, everything during this moment was okay.

But it wasn’t, because she still hadn’t moved away from the wall.

It wasn’t, because if it were, none of this would be happening.

It wasn’t, because the only way to describe what happened next, was that Oliver stumbled.

The Arrow stumbled.

Bodily faltering back a step, as he continued staring at her. Unblinking.

Saying a thousand things without really saying anything at all, she swore he could see everything she’d thought she’d hidden. And the proof appeared on his face; it creased with what looked like pure misery to her - his eyes closing against the tide - and he bore his teeth past thinned lips-

Then this sound left his throat; very low, strained. Haunting. She’d remember it late, take it with her into sleep.

It was as if he’d tried to speak and breathe and cough all at once. His head moved against it, to shake it off but with each jerk his expression grew more severe, more affected. His face didn’t line - it was a beautiful face - but it could darken.

It could talk without saying a word.

Scream and hate and love, all without shedding a single tear.

This. This was how he’d be once he knew… once I tell him everything.

He’d feel helpless, despite her defiance. He’d see right past her façade and rip her open. See the many ways Slade had gotten to the meat of her the past 6 weeks. And he’d despair.

He’d hate her. But he’d hate himself more.

She couldn’t let him feel this. It wasn’t his fault: It’s mine. She just felt unclean, that was all, and it had nothing to do with him - he was innocent - had nothing at all to do with his gentleness and the way he’d wanted to take care of her and really, how wonderful of him to offer that.

He wasn’t responsible.

She just didn’t want him stained with her lies, not yet. Just a little longer. Let the lie live a few hours longer.
So, she opened her mouth to say just that - without the ‘unclean’ part - to make it all better, like she’d done so many times before. *What’s one more?* “You know, you’re right.” She nodded firmly, like ‘yep; you’re amazing for seeing this’. “I am cold.” Cold, warm; it didn’t matter. *He* did. *He* mattered. He’d always mattered, it would always be him and he needed to think clearly. “Okay?” Though his eyes were closed, she pointed at the jacket on the floor, opting to put it on - to prove everything was totally copasetic, *I am 100% unflappable and I will endure* - still smiling at him in case they opened. “I’ll put it-”

She should have seen it coming.

Body twisting, he rammed his fist into the wall beside the door. *Hard.* Hard enough to bruise the skin of his knuckles, even with the leather. Hard enough to crack the plaster there and some of whatever else lay underneath with the old foundation.

Her hand flew to her face, *oh god,* stopping the yelp she almost let loose.

Yes, she *should* have seen it coming.

*This* Oliver was an Oliver she’d never seen before. For some reason, she doubted anyone had. *This is*…

She watched his broad shoulders shift, contracting and expanding, saw the back of his neck tighten with whichever emotion was raging about inside him. She watched.

And she felt-

“Okay, time out,” It was impossible to keep the flutter of panic out of her voice as her hand came down off her mouth to rest under her chin. “I…” whatever else she could have to say blew out of her mouth with her next exhale.

A multitude of things, too many things to make sense of but she felt it all nonetheless. She’d wanted to run from him, so that he wouldn’t see. So that she wouldn’t have to look at herself through his eyes.

Now she wanted him to let loose on her the way she knew he wouldn’t. Couldn’t. “…Oliver.”

It was too quiet, and her voice did nothing for the *fire* in him - hearing his breaths hissing through his teeth - for the seething anger in the rise and fall of his back. For the shards of it in every line of each taut muscle visible beneath the muscle shirt.

And the thing she felt grew.


Repeating “Okay,” for what felt like the hundredth time, she tried to get her body to move. “Oliver, it wasn’t-”

Still facing away, he punched the wall again; his fist dragging down the cracking plaster and brick and something wrenched out of him with. A deep *aching* sound, louder than before and the hair on her arms rose with the irrepressible thing; *oh,* it hurt to hear.

She’d done that to him.

She’d been trying so hard not to. For weeks. Months. The one thing she’d always promised herself - something she’d *prided* in - that she’d never cause Oliver undue pain or add to his burden with
everything else he already had to contend with - coming home after 5 years of hell to face another few years of a different kind of hell - and yet, here she was. Doing just that.

Making him bend.

Just like he was doing now: his back bevelled with the force of his second uneven breath before he moved again, pulling back. His boots scraped worryingly over the floor as he straightened. Shoulders lifting, his arm fell, and his head tilted back; as if to look at the sky instead of a grey ceiling. Then he exhaled… and she wished to never hear it’s like again; loud, harsh and she-

_I hate this._

On the edge of her thought, he was turning to her; a little at a time. Disjointed shuffles, like he couldn’t move faster if he tried.

Until the very last moment, he didn’t look at her.

Then he stopped.

_Then_ he looked at her.

His eyes lifted; gaze dragging slowly upwards from the floor to her face, bringing a weight of feeling up with it - like it took everything he had - and she felt whatever flimsy excuse, _because issues become excuses after a while_, she may have had for keeping quiet, for- for _everything_, shatter like glass.

His eyes were wet.

_His eyes were wet._

And he let out another, shallower breath, not blinking. Just looking at her, with such pain that she almost mistook it for guilt. For disappointment. For regret and betrayal.

But it wasn’t any of those things.

“He hurt you.” The multitude of meanings was evident in his tone, in the jagged way his chest moved with his next shattered breath and she figured she deserved every moment of how they made the space in her chest shrink. Of how it hurt to breathe. “Didn’t he?” No, it wasn’t sadness or guilt.

It was fury.

 Barely supressed. Mingled in with… with whatever he felt for her. And he was feeling a lot; it was evident on his face.

And she couldn’t answer because it threw her; as if he’d sucked the air out of the corridor. He was right at the centre already and she was too terrified to even squeak.

_“He hurt you.”_ 

Yes, he had. And she’d done it to save them all. Why should everyone suffer if only she had to? But she’d also enabled Slade and it had taken her too long to understand that. To prevent a psychopath from getting what he’d wanted, to prevent what happened to her from happening to Thea and taking away what little was left of the child in her; she’d done it to secure the safety and happiness of a 7-year-old boy with his father’s smile.

Looking at him now, Felicity knew that Oliver wouldn’t agree with any part of it – save the safety of
his son.

Yes, she was terrified.

And so sorry.

And-

“If you were an animal,” came the rumble; the hoarse quality that told of tears and rage, “I feel like you’d attack me if I tried to get close.” The wet in his eyes made the blue look oddly silver. “I’m not moving.”

She realised it then, the problem: she hadn’t unclenched. Her hand was still fisted at her throat and her eyes were locked on him. Probably wide. Most definitely worried. Absolutely sorry.

And it was giving him pause. A great deal of pause.

It was the wrong thing for him to see.

As was, unexpectedly, the way she immediately tried to loosen up in response.

“You don’t need to do that.” Foot lifting ever so slightly, he looked like he wanted to move but didn’t want her to be pushed in any direction, other than the one she chose. His gaze told her; ‘curl up. Shout. Scream. Claw at me; it’s fine. Just don’t run away.’ “This isn’t about me.”

He didn’t get it: it was all about him. “I’m fine.” Forcing her fist to fall, Felicity stepped away from the wall; the small throb at the back of her head like a reminder of her tactlessness. “See? Nothing but good here.”

Smile. And believe it.

A quiet breath from him softened the hard lines on his face. “Right.” His eyes moved down, to her hands and she saw it. The fire in him, warring with his softness. The way he knew that everything he’d been considering might be true. The very clear way he knew that, in this moment, he had her. “As always.”

That didn’t sound at all reassuring.

“Right, so-”

“Felicity.” Eyes far too kind - still red - Oliver’s throat moved. “You’re holding a gun.”

What?

It returned to her, what she’d forgotten. The metallic coolness in her grip, the burden of carrying a tool that could take a life, one which had disturbingly lifted once her and Thea’s survival had become priority.

Oh.

Her hand lifted automatically to look at it. *I forgot I was even holding it.* It was such a heavy thing for something so small, but she understood now how easily people could use it so quickly. If the will was there.

Even if the thought near-repulsed her, she couldn’t let go of it.
Panic fluttered somewhere around her navel and she was helpless to it; to the way anxiety could just... take control whenever the hell it wanted. Except it never had with her. She'd always been able to ‘accept’ and ‘move on’. She might cry. Might shake. But she’d stride forwards.

So, looking straight at Oliver - who’d always made her ability to do just that, about one hundred times more effective - in what was probably her most unshielded moment, was a given. An anchor.

“You can let go of it.” He sounded so self-assured and certain with her. “I’m here. You don’t need it.”

“I can’t let go of it.” She whispered without thinking, holding her breath.

He nodded, earnest, lips pressing together. “Yeah.” And his voice was as whisper-thin as hers. “I’m… I’m not going to do anything. You’re safe.”

It took her a moment to make sense of that. “Repeat that sentence.”

“I’m right here: I won’t move.” He gave her another gentle shake of his head. “I won’t do anything you don’t-” His throat closed. As if he couldn’t breathe, his next breath was sucked in through closed teeth.

She didn’t understand what he was saying, why he was very clearly beating himself up. “Oliver?”

His head tilted down; hands coming up to cover his face, dragging over his cheeks and eyes - wiping away all evidence of his own suffering, as if to try and save her from it - and for several seconds he simply breathed into them.

He breathed for them both.

And then he murmured something that made her insides twist.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I don’t want to say the wrong thing. I don’t want to push too fast, but I need to know more. “But I need you to talk to me.” It was almost cruel, the way he implored. “I need to know.”

Because how could she do anything else but what he asked?

Blinking rapidly, she felt like dying. This was all snowballing and all she’d done was try to-

Try to hide from him. Just to escape the tempting sound of his voice. The way his eyes could make her bones hum.

Instead, she’d made him think that he’d scared her. “That wasn’t about you.” She made it come out as firm as it possibly could be. “You didn’t do anything.”

Hands sliding down to his neck, hanging there, he just looked at her. “I know.” He sighed.

“Ok, then why the…” she gestured to the whole of him; why the indecision and the words and the everything about him at the moment?

“You needed to hear it.” And he was so gentle with it, his voice that touched her skin. “For…” He swallowed again. “For the time you didn’t… and should have.”

For the time she didn’t.

“If you get any louder you’ll wake your neighbours.”
And should have.

“I wasn’t there.” He continued, killing her softly once more. “You needed me, and I wasn’t there.” Her head was already moving, a no, because there wasn’t anything he could have done but he spoke before she could. “I don’t know what happened. I should. I want to know.” Want could so easily become need. “There are things today that-”

“But this isn’t about me.” She put in. “What happened today- I’m barely a bystander.”

He frowned. “It-”

“And I’m sorry.” The words tumbled free; released by the way he seemed to be reading her so clearly. “So sorry.” For all of it; for 6 weeks of stupid - even with knowing that a boy with his eyes was safe now because of her and Lyla - and she admonished herself for the way she still sounded so… needy. “I can only imagine what you must have been through today.” The words felt small; nothing in the grand scheme of things. Who cared if she was sorry? It didn’t solve anything.

But the way he looked at her before she’d even finished her first ‘sorry’… He said nothing to underline or describe the severity and strength of whatever was making him stare at her so intently.

“Thea.” She was powerless to the pull of those eyes. “She- Slade told her things Oliver, and I played a part in that. I’m sorry-”

“Stop.”

“W-what?”

“Just,” he lifted a hand, like a stop sign, “stop.” As if he couldn’t hear another sorry.

Lips pressed together - agitation making her pull on them in - she blinked away her multiple weaknesses, watching him struggle. “Okay.”

He looked ready to kill someone.

It wasn’t aimed at her, but she felt it; an extra current to add to the electricity already coating the air. “You’re apologising?” He sounded so baffled and pained.

“…Yes.”

“Why?” As if he just didn’t get it.

“I.”

“I know she knows. She made sure I knew.”

Oh God. It fell like drops of lava down her oesophagus, but she only said. “I’m guessing by your tone that every negative connotation and descriptive expletive could be used to underscore that statement.”

Meaning, it did not go well.

“She knows I’m the Arrow.” He whispered; as if saying it any lounder would break his very thin tendril of hope that this would all somehow work out. “Got in my face about it the moment she saw me.” Yikes. At her expression, he made a sound that was close to dismissive. “If she was furious or,” he licked his lips, “betrayed, she’d have done a lot worse.”
“You’re Malcolm Merlyn’s daughter.”

The girl’s hands fisted in her hairline as she shouted. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?!”

She felt sick.

If only she hadn’t been so thorough that day, if only Moira had owned up to just one of her lies, if only Felicity’s need to know the truth wasn’t so strong, if only she wasn’t so goddamn smart and if only… if only she didn’t love, respect and trust him the way she did.

If she didn’t, maybe none of this would be happening.

She didn’t regret her feelings. The best she could hope for, was that Thea would lay all the blame at her feet. That Oliver wouldn’t feel the cold brush of his mother’s lack of faith when he discovers that she deliberately hid the truth about his son from him; only anger.

Directed at her. Or the universe for the injustices thrown down upon him and his loved ones.

She just… didn’t know how she’d live with it when - if - he did.

“What is it?”

Oliver.

His voice… she felt it in her knees and everywhere else. His way of saying her name - the not quite a whisper but not really speaking thing of his - that felt like the coarse fingers of his gloriously rough hands tracing a path up naked skin, her bare back. Husky; that was the word.

His feet lifted, moving across the floor; one step. Two. “Felicity?”

Her eyes fluttered, looking up. Tall.

Well, he was. Is.

And he was closer, which wasn’t helping. “I um… no.” No, what? Eyes closing for two seconds, she gave her head the tiniest of jerks - clearing cobwebs - and could practically feel the tension coming off him. “It’s uh...” It’s nothing. It’s a lot. “Just,” she flippantly flicked a finger up at her skull, “a lot going on in here.”

A lot that was slipping through her fingers, like sand in a sieve.

Like he was thinking about a lot himself, he came to a stop. Still holding back. Still a thousand things left to say. “What can I do?”

I’ll clean you up.

“Nothing.” She cleared her throat. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not even close.” If his tone had been a single decimal lower, she’d be feeling it vibrate through the floor. “You don’t need to try so hard with me.”

To fake it. To pretend being strong because she so wasn’t.

“What do you want me to say?” She asked quietly.

“Anything.” His head moved with it. “Say anything; just don’t lie to me.”
Oh Oliver. All she had were lies. She was dirty. She’d been lying to him on the daily. She was weak. And maybe it was her fault that Thea had been taken…

Maybe.

“Thea knows about Malcolm.” Because he needed to know, now. Before he got any ideas of comfort and touching and everything else that came with it. “She knows.”


“He was going to tell her.” She whispered, continuing despite knowing that he’d hate her for it. “So, I did it first.” Before he could hurt Quentin and make the truth more aid than honest, she’d done it first.

Bending forwards slightly - as if reeling from a gut punch - a noisy breath came from somewhere in his chest.

“I tried to tell her why-”

“No! God, what is it with lies and my family? Malcolm Merlyn. Oh God, Tommy! Tommy was my brother.” Her breath hitched. “I don’t know what to do with this.”

Hand lifting, Felicity tried. “Thea-”

But she twisted away. “I don’t know who to trust right now! I-I don’t understand…”

“That’s alright. You don’t have to do or be anything right now. You don’t have to trust me or anyone. Just,” don’t blame Oliver; blame me. Just me. And maybe your mother, because, God, why had she kept it to herself for so long? “Don’t make assumptions until you know everything-”

-She offered in the small hope it would help him. “I made sure to say that it didn’t change anything for you or her mother, that it wasn’t something you deliberately kept from her-”

“But it was.” Hoarse, it came out the same way it went in. Like a solid blow to the abdomen. “I kept it from her to save her because I didn’t know how to tell her that her father was a murderer. Or that her mother- our mother, kept it from her the whole of her life because that’s that she does. She lies.”

She lies.

William.

Yes. She lies. And it was the perfect time to tell him, before - once again - he started offering her things she had little resistance to, but Oliver wasn’t done.

“I mean, how do I tell her that?” He asked the floor, the wall and then her as he shifted on the spot. Restless. His eyes near-blaring; shouting questions and begging for answers. Raw. “How do I tell her that her parents are liars and murderers when she already knows their parents are liars and murderers when she already knows they were adulterers?”

“It’s impossible…” she whispered, feeling for him; wondering why he wasn’t showing an ounce of anger at her except honest worry. Desperate hope that Thea wasn’t thinking right now, exactly what he thought she might be thinking. “An impossible choice.”

“It is.” He nodded, almost feverish. “I thought about it, but I didn’t know where to start.”
“It wasn’t your job to tell Thea who her father was.”

“No.” He immediately said, lips pressing together until they were pale. “It was mom’s.” Taking a breath, he waited a moment. Looking at her. Until something in him settled once more. “And you’re doing it again. You’re distracting me from you.” He clarified, face unchanging. Body still.

She let out such a heavy exhale, it echoed about them. “Am I? Telling Thea who her father is was one of my all-time low moments on this earth Oliver.”

“I’m glad it was you.” Stunning her into silence, there wasn’t a thing she could do about it except gawk at him. “I would have messed it up.”

“Pretty sure the way it came out of my mouth was ‘messed up’ too.” She shuddered. “No one should have to find out like that.”

“No.” And it sounded heavy. “They shouldn’t.”

And there you go. He knew. She’d told his sister the truth and he could only imagine the multitude of ways this could come back round to hurt him. She figured he was there right now; in that headspace where Thea lived. A despairing Thea. An angry Thea throwing verbal punches and him taking it all, hoping it was enough. Hopeing she’d forgive him-

“But it wasn’t your fault.” He murmured. “You didn’t mean for this to happen Felicity. You didn’t make Slade do any of this-”

“Oh each of these people I will exact a vengeance meant solely for Oliver. But you can save them all. Each time you choose me,” he made it sound so personal, like he was asking her to love him, “you’ll be saving them from pain, humiliation and terror. Oh, you’ll suffer for it,” he added, enjoying every twisted moment of how her eyes watered and enlarged, of her mouth remained open and silent, of each hill and valley of her face that screamed ‘help me’, “but maybe you’ll rise to the occasion knowing that you’re taking on this burden all by yourself.”

“You didn’t create him.” Oliver simply stated. As if it answered every question, absolved every sin. And he was right; she hadn’t done this to any of them, not really. “I did.”

Puzzled, her brow furrowed; her voice mellow. “What are you talking about?”

“I chose to kill him when I could have cured him.” There was a very real disgust on his face. A self-loathing which explained the anger coming from him. “I could have stopped all of this.” He shook his head once before admitting. “I didn’t.”

Cured him.

Mirakuru Cure.

She’d been right. “There’s a cure.” She breathed.

And Oliver hadn’t-

“Ok.” She whispered. “Alright. That’s fine.” The way his shoulders hunched told her it was anything but fine. He was waiting for judgement. “And there is clearly a history there that I know nought about but... you chose to kill him.” Say it aloud: make it forgivable. “Don’t you think that’s understandable?” It was as if he was holding his breath. “How were you supposed to know he’d survive?” She tried, aiming for logic. “He was a threat, right? I mean Slade, he’s... scary.”
Really? He’s scary? If he never divulged in her again, she’d totally get why.

His eyes made her hurt. “Don’t try to make it right for me.”

“Stop trying to make every single one of your past choices a sin.” She practically growled the words and the way he blinked at her… well, she was frustrated. And a little shaky come to think of it. “It’s like you’re still paying for something.”

He looked down. Bingo.

“Oliver.” He didn’t look back up, favouring shifting on one leg; his body precariously leaning, as if being brought down by the truth. “Everything that you lived through, everything that you might have done-”

“Don’t tell me it’s in the past.” He gruffly cut in.

“I wasn’t going to.” Thank you very much. “Your past is very clearly coming back to haunt you.” He winced. “And what little I’ve seen of it,” she shook her head because sometimes, late at night, she’d wonder about all the things he’d been through and quake for him. Fear for what it might have cost. Hope for his happiness because he deserved it. “It’s pretty terrifying.” And a strand of humour crept in at the end there because, understatement. “I’d be running for cover along with my bunny slippers.”

His chest - neck and shoulders, his head still tilted down - heaved once, his diaphragm contracting sharply. Incredulously.

He thought it was funny too.

There was something about it that made her smile: it was small and wobbly, but a smile nonetheless. “They’ve recently been replaced,” with thick woollen socks covered in bows and arrows, “and I assure you they are much braver than their predecessors.”

“Felicity.” Saying it just to say it.

She pushed on. “But what you are now, what you’ve been doing?” He needed to get this. “That’s despite five years in hell. Five years where wickedness prevailed, where you were completely alone and surrounded by the worst of the worst, people who taught you how to kill-”

And, maybe she shouldn’t have gone there because the way he just froze - how his fingers flexed, jerking straight, splaying rigidly - his head jerking ever so slightly up but stopping there as if he’d caught his own reflex, his eyes wide open as they looked down… afraid.

It shocked her… but it didn’t stop her. “And maybe you wondered, you know, if it was just a bit too easy. Falling into that.” Into darkness. And that was the crux, wasn’t it? That was his fear. “Maybe you thought,” she sniffed, sniffling as she pushed back the tide, “you were just as bad as they are.”

As bad as Slade and whoever else taught him the things he knows. “But Oliver, you came home. And you tried. For all accounts and purposes, you could have been - should have been - this monster who thinks only of himself, but you tried.”

And he’d succeeded.

He’d changed her life for the better and he didn’t even see it.

Whatever he was seeing just then - feeling - was making his every breath a fight. His chest expanding and contracting in large, hard segments. “I hurt someone tonight.”
Ok; blindsided. “Um… I’m guessing you don’t mean the usual ‘arrow to the shoulder’ gig?” For the first time in this wicked game, she was the one in the dark. She didn’t like it.

“I hurt someone.” He repeated. “For information. I told myself I was doing it for Thea, for you; but really, I just wanted to hurt him.”

Oh…

Oh.

The words painted a horror story. “Is this you trying to convince me that you’re no good?” She hesitantly asked because-

“You’re a good man.” She said, holding his eyes and the words were slow, as was the compassion she offered in her face, her smile. “No matter what you might think.”

-Didn’t he remember? What she’d said, it wouldn’t change, obstinate man.

A breathy noise left him. “No.” Head finally lifting - eyes tracing over the floor - the wrecked look on his face threw her. “No, this is me looking for absolution.”

“From me?” Say what? “For what?”

“For… I don’t even know.” His gaze hit hers and in it, she saw the kind of pain she’d never be able to imagine; even after weeks of Slade and his lessons. “Where do I even start?”

But… she’d had a taste. A tiny taste. So, she knew it could warp a person; the constant exposure. It didn’t matter how strong you were. The point now, was that he tried. Every day. The important part was how much he cared. How much he suffered for caring. How much he loved. It didn’t matter if he failed more than he succeeded; the point was that he gave a damn and wanted to do better.

He pushed forwards… like I do.

She wanted to touch him. To pull down his hood and drag her fingers through his scalp and scruff and say in all the ways she could; ‘It’s ok’ and ‘you’re not alone’.

Instead, she used some of that gentle compassion she’d been told she possessed. “There’s nowhere to start. I have no right to judge you.”

“You have just as much right as anyone else.”

Um, wrong. “That just means none of us do.” He fell silent at that. “Not even Dig could fathom what you went through and how it changed you. And knowing that you killed Slade rather than cure him? It doesn’t alter how I see you.”

Because that was the issue; how she saw him. She didn’t understand why it mattered or why he was telling her right now, but she figured it had plenty to do with her accepting his help.

“I’ve always seen a good man. A hero.” My hero. And he tried to scoff but she beat him to it. “A brother and a son. A friend. A partner.” Strangely, that made him glance to the side, which helped because her next words were entirely too something – a something she wouldn’t dissect. “A husband.” She whispered, but it might as well have been a shout for the way his head and shoulders went ramrod, his eyes shooting back to her own. Staring. “A father. A good man.” She repeated for the audience sitting in the back row: those pesky insecurities, the metaphorical and literal demons that waited for him during sleep. “Someone who’s missed. And loved. And wanted.” Not just needed
and she’d always felt like he understood the difference there, between needing someone and simply wanting them there and expecting nothing. Maybe he’d yearned but never allowed himself to hope…

“I saw all that, the minute you walked into my office. The things that happened to you, the way they changed you; they’re all just pieces of a man who’d go out of his way to make a lowly IT girl feel important.” She felt it everywhere when he started to smile. It wasn’t a happy smile. “A man who’d take a bullet for a stranger. And he’s scared, this guy,” her small smile was pitiful, but so was the way he pressed him lips together; shutting whatever he was trying to keep hidden, in. For the way his eyes glistened. “A little afraid to live, but I think that’s ok right now.” She nodded with it, sniffling. “Baby steps, you know?”

Eyes following the way she bit her lip after she sniffled, for the way she looked just then, his voice was rough. “That’s a lot of heart there.”

Her breath stuttered. “I am all heart.” She joked.

“That’s true.” He cleared his throat, shifting on the spot. “What about the man I tortured?”

If he kept blindsiding he like this, she’d get whiplash. Tortured. That was a lot more than ‘hurt’.

“How?” He needed to say it; to draw it out and get rid of it. Like poison from a wound.

“One of Slade’s men.” But there was no tell-tale twitch. No guilt. “A junky.” It didn’t matter to him this time. And for Oliver, that was… that was a lot. It was enough. “Stan.”

Stan.

Smoker, alcoholic, crack head, street wise, vulgar; kept himself to himself. He hadn’t touched her, but he’d been there sometimes...

Of course, Oliver caught her jerk.

That focus returned to his features. “Did he do something?” As opposed to Slade? “Did he hurt you?” Each word was drawn out; overly pronounced in a way that said he was going to hate the answer but was absolutely going to get it regardless.

Watching him carefully, she inhaled up her nostrils, then out through her mouth. “He didn’t really do anything at all.”

Oliver moved to take a step forwards but hesitated. “Can I come closer, please?” At her confused nod, he took the step. A second and a third, until all of him - every impressive inch - loomed over her. Maybe two feet away. The heat of whatever fire - or ire - in his veins hadn’t extinguished; she felt it on the skin of her face and neck, where his attention seemed to linger.

“He touched you?” There was a wealth of meaning in that. In what type of touch was outweighed by another. And he might as well have screamed for all the good keeping quiet did him, for all that was trapped inside him; hidden in the undertone of his voice.

She had a feeling she could have simply said that Stan touched her hair-

*He’d touched her. Barely a finger. Not even on her skin. But... it was there. The way his eyes moved over her, learning her; she knew he’d done that deliberately too. “Everything about you is soft.”* Slade muttered; his hand dropping as fast as it had risen. As if she had some contagious disease. But he’d still touched her.

-and Oliver would have gone off to shoot him up with Arrows instead of heroine.
“Nope.” Fast. \textit{Way} too fast. He tightened. \textit{Crap-a-doodle}. “He didn’t—” \textit{don’t complete that sentence}, her voice shook - it felt like her organs were vibrating - and it was telling. “N-no touching happening here. Or has happened- \textit{had} happened?” She gritted her teeth, \textit{focus}. “No touching happened.” They’d done a lot of things to her without really doing anything at all.

His throat worked as he spoke next, and her eyes dropped there; she really was easy prey. “He didn’t… what?” \textit{Oh}, that was deceptively soft. \textit{Clever Oliver, clever}.

\textit{Dig for strength}. “Oliver—”

“Felicity.” And she closed her eyes because that hit her right where it was supposed to. He knew it; he knew it did, that it would, that he could do that to her. \textit{Now} he knew. “\textit{Felicity}.”

“He didn’t do anything.” It was ground out because it took everything she had to not shout; for it to not come out as a wail, to not pull away. To bury the need to be alone and learn how to deal again before he saw too much.

\textit{Believe me. Please believe that I’m fine.}

Silence. Feeling the weight of his eyes on her, she didn’t open her own again until she felt leather trace her neck.

She blinked at him? \textit{What is he doing?} And he was looking a little past her chin for some reason.

“You’re still lying.” His voice was like sandpaper against wood.

“…Why aren’t you looking at me? You’ve never avoided eye contact with me before. In fact, you made it your business to let me know from the first time we met that you’re my equal. That you’re not looking at me right now tells me everything I need to know.”

There was no brace.

Flat out - balls to the floor - lying was impossible with him so close.

How could she have forgotten how much he saw; how much she’d come to realise he watched her, how much he noticed, how much he needed her to be okay. “I’m \textit{not}, not really.” She sounded exactly how Oliver heard her; desperate.

“You’re \textit{omitting}.” ‘I know you’, his tone inferred. “And I know that you haven’t told me things, things you’ve been holding back on. Stop it.” He commanded; eyes tapering, brows edged against them. “You don’t need to, not for me.” He shook his head. One shake. “\textit{Not ever}.” And there something there in him then that made her think he was hurt by her hesitance. “I thought you knew that.”

She sent him a look. “It is so much more complicated than that, Oliver.”

His glove was still touching her. “Then make it simple for me.”

“You can’t just ask me to \textit{unload} on you.” It was ludicrous.

Tempting.

He was offering. Again. Being infuriating. Being perfect.

“Your voice has been trembling this entire time. You were trembling when I held you.” \textit{God}, he could do it \textit{so} well; that whispered caress in his deep tenor that made her feel safe, wanted and
exposed all at once. “And you’re trembling now.”

It was dangerous. Every sense and every memory between them was an added layer of awareness that, for some reason, was demanding they pay attention to each other. And they were; seeing the world through the eyes of the other and it was… it was hypnotic. Terrifying.

Everything was changing, and it made her feel one thousand times more fragile than she already was. **Shut him up.** “I-”

“You’re standing there, like you haven’t spent the day with a monster. A monster I created.” He was speaking so much - feeling so much - like he’d kept a lock on it all day, maybe longer. “A monster who did this.” His hand touched the area where Slade’s had held her down; at the bottom of her neck, partially against her collarbone. “He held you down like this.” He murmured, his hand sliding further in, until his fingers were touching one side of the column of her throat.

Feeling him there, she almost forgot to breathe.

*It was all she could comprehend - wide eyed and frozen as she was - before a large hand, Slade’s hand, grasped her neck and forced her head under the water.*

Her diaphragm flinched inwards. “No, it wasn’t-”

“Dig told me.” He said, cutting off her attempt at another lie. An understandable one. But a lie nonetheless.

_John_… she wet her lips. “I know it looks bad, but I feel fine.”

It looked like the very last thing he wanted to hear just then. “Don’t do that.”

Don’t make light of it.

Conceding, she stopped her mouth before a second and third go at doing just that, could make it out. It didn’t matter what she might have said next: it wouldn’t have helped.

“He deliberately exerted enough pressure to bruise.” He added, and calm he did not sound.

“It doesn’t hurt.” She reassured.

His voice was so gravelly. “But it will.”

“It’s okay.” She reassured again, softly this time. “I’m ok.”

It wasn’t true. He knew that it wasn’t.

“He held you down.” He repeated to her, in a whisper.

…Her throat closing had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the memory of the *taste.* The flood of water pushing into her mouth, the lack of room on all sides, her bath tub keeping her in, keeping her from pulling away from the almighty hand that didn’t let up.

Maybe Oliver understood that.

Hands lifting to the bridge of his nose, he briefly held his fingers there, as if asking for strength. No, **control.**

Then, so swiftly it made her moderate anxiety shoot up a few notches, he pulled his hands down
only to yank off one glove, then another. “I don’t know why Slade took you. I don’t know why he had to do this. You won’t tell me.” Closer now, and it felt oddly staggering, his now bare fingers - the tips - traced, tentatively, across the bruise and the touch zinged down her body. “But I see this, and I know… you no longer have to imagine how bad it feels; seeing the evil people can be to one another.”

*Like I’ve seen,* went unsaid.

A wave of emotion slammed into her; the kind that ended in her wanting to throw herself at him. Needing to be held. To be loved and avenged. And seen. The kind that made her want to hide so that she could have a great big cry.

But she’d said yes 6 weeks ago-

“I’d give anything to protect you from that.” He spoke so vehemently.

“I don’t need your protection.”

“Probably not.” He hummed - husky, warm and uncompromisingly hurt by the sight of ONE bruise and she could only imagine what he might do if he saw the rest of her - as if the words were part of a lullaby. “But it looks like we’re more similar that I realised.”

She frowned up at him.

“You’re protecting me from you right now. You know I don’t want you to, but you’re doing it anyway. Like, second nature. And I hate it.” The irony made him smile. “I don’t want to be safe from the truth; I want to be with you in it.”

It poured into her like hot honey. How could she fight against that?

“Don’t stop.” *The undertone* - short - was imploring. *Please. Don’t ever lose that faith in me. Don’t go,* he licked is lips, *to somewhere I can’t reach.*

A small whine left her instead of the inhale she’d planned to steady herself. “Oliver…”

“I’m right here.” It was a whisper, like he wanted to press as lightly as he possibly could.

She exhaled, and it sounded breathy all over again. I’m ridiculous. “You’re not making this easy.”

If he didn’t look so fractured, his smile - the look in his - - would be roguish. “I know.”

*Ok,* she had shift backwards; to lean away from the ‘everything’ of her life that was stood in front of her. “I need to know something first.” Before they got into this, and she actually did. “Laurel, is she-”

“She isn’t anything.”

Boom.

Mouth open, she blinked at him like a demented owl. *I... what?*

Laurel. Isn’t. Anything?

“She isn’t part of this.” He insisted, an abrupt irritation laced in his tone and it was weird and, once again, it wasn’t directed at her, but at the name. *At Laurel. What did she do? What had happened to make him look like that?* “She never was; I never wanted her to be.” Felicity could tell; he believed
his words and he looked so puzzled by her not-so-sudden inclusion of the Almighty Laurel. “I’m not here for her; I’m here for you.”

She couldn’t take much more of the tenderness he was throwing at her after so long without it. “I wish you weren’t.”

She hadn’t meant to say that.

He lurched back at it, the whole of him struck dumb. He’d been moving closer to her as he’d spoken, trying to emphasise his point but now he was just… standing there. He’d heard the desperation so obvious in her tone and - in the same way she wouldn’t have let it go if the shoe was on the other foot - she just knew he’d stick to it like glue.

There was something there, something visceral and alive in him that had always been there, but never so present. It was very much so now, sensing the way her pitiful shield wasn’t any more barring than rain drops on petals.

He was as close as he’d ever been.

Realisation found him and the air about his person shifted, which was how she knew he’d found her. The heart of her. A place she’d kept carefully hidden, quiet. And he was trying to read it. Trying to solve it. To see why he recognised it without really understanding what it was.

Then his expression lost its edge and his mouth opened slightly, oh. It was so soft to look at.

It was violent.

Like he’d ripped open her lid, reached a determined hand inside and she couldn’t - wouldn’t - let herself be scooped up by him-

“Who else would I be here for,” there was a confidence to him now as he shook his head - his thumb barely touching under her jaw - but it wasn’t conceit: he’d hit one of her nails and was intent on hitting the rest, “if not you?”

Jesus, he was killing her; standing there in the leather pants she’d imagined ripping off him in every conceivable way the female mind could fathom and making her consider so many untouchable things: naked things. Wanted things. All the things that weren’t hers. “Thea.” She stubbornly forced out.

“But I knew you’d keep her safe.” Like it was that simple when really, it was everything. “I knew that no matter what happened you’d do everything in your power to keep her safe. Even though you shouldn’t have had to. Even if it was the last place I wanted you to be.” His words were fingers on her skin - added to his own that were touching places on her neck that would never forget - and his head tilted to gage her. “When she came through the door and you weren’t with her, I knew you were in here. Unsafe.”

It was barely audible, because she was having trouble speaking. “I’m about as intimidating as a pair of socks.” She felt so small.

But he was looking at her like she was a star in the sky. “Maybe not; you always surprise me.”

Being on the receiving end of the kind of compliments given to make you feel like a queen was like pulling the floor out from under her. “That’s nice.”

He was unnerving her, hacking away at shields whether Oliver knew or not, but his mind was
already elsewhere.

“Who was that before?” He gestured to the right, to where-

To where Frank had sped away.

Eyes 100% focused on her own, he didn’t miss a step. “He was stood over you…”

Stood over her, pressing with words that sliced her open like knives; the root of his thoughts written all over his face with the smell of cigarettes and pungent aftershave making her relive all the little moments in between when he’d followed Slade’s orders to the letter. Whispering in her ear how sweet it would be to just-

“You’re so,” he sucked in his bottom lip, his eyes trailing down over her from, “fuckable.” His eyes came back to hers. “I’d like to fuck you.”

“-He was… just one of Slade’s goons. He has a lot of goons.” She babbled and uh, just stop talking, except Oliver’s head dipped a little, a deliberate move and utterly effective in the way it exerted a pull, in the way she couldn’t stop; wanting to push him away. “He thought intimidating a woman made him a man but it-” she swallowed at the silence, at the look in Oliver’s gorgeous eyes and why is looking at me like that, “it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.”

He didn’t smile back.

“I’m sure.”

Uh oh. “But Thea- No wonder she ran: I don’t exactly fit the bill as threatening.” She stated in the same vein as ‘aren’t I ridiculous’. “Not that I think she was leaving me behind or anything. She’s been so brave tonight Oliver; you’d have been proud of her.”

“Always am.”

That went right through her. Sibling love was precious, and she’d never seen it displayed so strongly before meeting the Queen’s. They were lucky in that, but she wasn’t sure Thea knew just how much.

“I almost forgot.” It was slowly said, as his other hand… his other hand moved to join its partner; both barely touching her skin but there. Like she was precious. “You showed me on Sunday that you make sure I see only what you want me to see.” On another’s lips, those words would have been a weapon. On Oliver’s, they were something quite different. “I’m not ignoring you anymore. You can’t make me.” But this time he smiled slightly, as if he was happy to see through the veil to the crapola beneath. “I see you.” And by the look on face, he liked what he saw.

And he was touching her - damn near holding her face in his hands - and if anyone walked in right now…

She felt shaky, ever more trapped and cared for all at once. “You make me sound like this amazing person.”

“You are.” His voice went from misty to full on guttural. “I’m not going to Laurel. I don’t care about Laurel right now. Or Sara. Thea is right outside with John. My mother is fine. And I am exactly where I want to be.”

Right here. With you.

After a second’s hesitation, he leaned in again. It was a very male lean - women, you know what lean
“I need you.” He was stripping her bare. “I’ve always needed you.” To be at her best. To be where he needed her to- “But I never thought you might need me.”

It was uttered so tenderly from him, like he couldn’t quite believe it. Liked it.

But for her… she felt naked.

“You’ve been telling me without saying a word, that you’re hurting. That you’ve been hurt.” And no, no, no, his voice started to break. Unsteady. He was too close, too emotional with her and he’d never been like this before. “And I didn’t hear you until it was too late. I wasn’t there when you needed me.” Eyes creasing, he looked and sounded on the verge of either exploding… or crying. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I-”

No, no, no-

She couldn’t handle this. He wasn’t supposed to be like this, he was supposed to be angry with her. He was supposed to rant at her. He was supposed to ask the other questions, the ‘why didn’t you tell me’s?’

“Wait. Wait.”

Suddenly he was right there; so far into her personal space she could feel the heat of him on her.

…Had she moved?

They were both in different places to where they’d been just now and something heavy landed beside her foot.

The gun.

She’d just dropped it. Luckily it hadn’t gone off but… she hadn’t even felt it slip through her fingers. Please tell me this isn’t a panic attack? She couldn’t black out here.

But then there was the scent of leather and soap, warm - so warm - hands holding fast to her, his fingers wrapping around her biceps, as he very slowly pulled her arms back inwards, towards his body and-

Everything in her screamed for him to let her go.

“Hey.” The skin of his palms moved down to her uncovered forearms and the difference in temperature - the simple fact that it was his skin against her own - made her shiver. What is he- this wasn’t like Oliver. “It’s ok.” She couldn’t stop looking at him; eyes wide, unblinking and begging for him to let. Her. Go. Even as she simultaneously wondered at how he was touching her, because he never had, not like this. “You’re safe. It’s just me and you’re safe.” He was so gentle as he reached her wrists; his thumbs pressing into her skin - and it was a most effective form of manipulation, touch - before lifting them to fit against him. “I know.”

He… knew.

Sometimes it’s easier to bury pain and hurt and let the ugly take root, rather than admit to it. Rather than put it on someone who cares about you. Rather than confessing to love.

Which meant Oliver was about as unwelcome as a knife to the gut.
Her heartbeat rocketed as his chest brushed against her raised arms, his hands tracing up. “I’m not letting him near you again.”

An empty promise and yet…

As much as she’d wanted to keep it secret, as much as she knew it was her own fault for not speaking up, Felicity had still hoped that someone would take notice. She’d ruined that by being a little too adept at covering everything up. But she’d still hoped. Even as she preferred that he feel anger instead of the guilt that plagued him, always. Deep down, she’d wanted someone to say something like that her.

But he couldn’t, not now. Every word out of his mouth was making the world tilt and blacken around the edges.

“I can’t make this right unless you let me in.” Searching her face, he made a sound in the back of his throat. “That scares you.” He realised, quietly. Surprised. Gaze travelling down, he had her pinned and he knew it. “Felicity, I know this is… new, but-”

Whatever he was going to say, died when his eyes fell on their hands.

His were holding hers.

Palms against the backs of hers, his much larger fingers were wrapped over her curled ones - fingernails tearing into herself, so as to not grip into his thin shirt - as they pressed the limbs to his sternum. The feel of him - the security in his size - made the trembling she’d felt inside, come to the surface. Made her shaky attempt at breathing feeling like a climb.

It was new. But it was also like coming home. It felt right. And it wasn’t allowed. She couldn’t do this with him. But obviously Oliver hadn’t gotten the memo; his hold was firm… but, judging how his eyes were gradually losing their softness in favour of something much more serious, it also wasn’t what stopped him.

“Those aren’t from today.” He muttered, confused; his hands shifting their hold further down to her wrists- to the bruising, blemishing and scabbed over skin of her wrists, oh no. “Felicity, these don’t look like they’re from today.”

Looking up at him - his face was so close - something inside her cracked, she’d been losing all resolve in the last ten minutes - and for the first time… she told him the truth. She hadn’t the strength to lie.

“That’s… because they’re not.”

His gaze shot back up to hers.

She shook, and his fingers tightened.

“When…?” He mouthed.

She tied to answer, she really did, but her jaw clamped down on herself and she shook her head furiously, please stop asking.

It was an answer in and of itself.

He lost his frown, something about his mouth and the way it lost the words he’d been about to say, making her ache.
His heart pounded once, twice, beneath her hands; jumping briefly before pounding again erratically.

His diaphragm very slowly contracted.

His broad shoulders slumped and curved in, as if curling about their hands… and when his thumbs caressed the purple, red skin, she forced down the urge to cry. Tried to ignore the pain in her chest, the instability she was feeling beneath her feet.

When her vision cleared, she looked into his face and…

“*Please* don’t do that.” She croaked out as one tear made its way down his cheek. She’d seen him close to tears before but he’d never actually… “Don’t, Oliver.” She pleaded - her heart breaking - but words were useless, and he knew that too.

Feeling ten different kinds of awful, she did something she normally wouldn’t have dreamed of daring to do and pressed her forehead against his hands. *Let today just end already.*

She felt dizzy too.

A halting sound caught in his throat; something that made her gut twist. “The blood on your shirt?” It was pure Arrow; a demand so low and quiet that, even though his voice broke midway, it was still quite menacing.

Just not to her.

It was a promise that he’d make it all better. And there was something deeply intimate about how close they were, that they weren’t looking at each other but were still touching.

*Nails dinning into his shoulders, mouth open wide, she pushed her face into the side of his throat and bit his neck. Deep. Hard. Like how a vampire might. Except this wasn’t about blood.*

“It’s not my blood.” She muttered. *Let that be the end of it.*

“Whose blood is it?” There was just no way she could answer that.

But maybe he didn’t need to hear it, or was simply making a point because he let go of her. It was so abrupt, loosing that warmth, that she would have stumbled - the black in her vision doubling fleetingly - save for the fact that he-

That he dropped down to his knees before her.

“And here?” He rumbled out and *oh god*, his palms were hot there. Burning. Wonderful. Wrong, *so wrong*. Her already frazzled, emotional brain, short-circuited. “What are these from?” There was a surprising lack of hesitance from him and she assumed that it was due to the sure anger in his expression now - the, *tell me this isn’t what I think it is because if it is, I’m going to kill someone* - the way it tightened everything: his shoulders, his jawline, his neck, his lips and the-
The red of his eyes on her own. The madness building in him. She was cutting him open.

And he wanted it. All of it.

And she couldn’t breathe.

They didn’t do this. He didn’t just touch her like this - they didn’t touch each other like this. He didn’t kneel at her feet, not for any reason and he didn’t look up at her like she was a waking dream. He wasn’t - not ever - comfortable with even semi-nudity from her and yet, here she was: standing in a makeshift shirt and shorts - having trouble with each breath - and he was utterly composed.

Intense.

Passionate. It looked like passion. Or maybe that was her brain, still on ‘make me forget the world’ mode. I was sure I’d switched that off.

When she’d been shot, out of respect, Sara had been the one to patch her up. Not Oliver. Not even John.

So, why did he look like that?

Like, he knew the contours of her and was ravaged at the idea that she’d been manhandled, brutalised even. Touched when she shouldn’t have been, when she hadn’t wanted it.

But I’d said yes.

And for the very first time, she knew he wouldn’t see it the way she did. He wouldn’t think she’d asked for it. I didn’t ask to be hurt. Not speaking up had brought her more pain and too much fear but she’d been more afraid of the consequences... Yet, whatever she’d seen his reaction being, it wasn’t this. This was a different kind of scary.

Looking down on him, the inside of her mouth went dry; she felt unbalanced and her hands lifted, raising high so that she wouldn’t - I will not - touch him.

It was just too tempting otherwise and then he’d know. And today, enough had been revealed.

But then his fingers pressed in, his blue, blue eyes set on her face and all she wanted to do was close hers, just to feel. To save the sight in her brain for the next time Slade decided to touch her in a deliberate attempt to make her uncomfortable. “Bruises.”

Bruises…?

Then it hit her. Sweet baby Jesus, you fracking idiot.

She should have been paying more attention, but you tend to miss things when you’re tired and hurt and alone.

Right at the top of her thighs - both of them - were the remains of one memorable night when Slade had lost it on her. This week past. He’d used the cane, for the first time, on her thighs. Leaving marks. Evidence.

And she’d been so good until now, at hiding it. No short skirts, no long-sleeved tops…

“These aren’t new either.” He ground out; undeterred. His hands slowly moving around - as if he’d done it a thousand times before - towards the bottom of her shorts and the muscles there jumped, goose bumps following. He felt it; he had to have felt it. “They’re not like… these.” The ones on her
knees. Accidental results of falling on the floor in a ridiculous - instinctive and therefore beyond her control - attempt at saving his sister and looking back on that, what the hell had I been thinking? Had I even been thinking? “Or these.” A welt from the stun rod to the right of her left thigh. “I know what this is.” He recognised the type of abrasion. “Someone hurt you there with purpose.” His fingers twitched against her - like he wanted to take hold and shake her into confessing - and she fought hard to resist but her breathing was shallow and fast. She was cold; trying desperately hard not to fall into the warmth of him. “And you didn’t say a word.”

His eyes continued where his mouth left off. You didn’t trust me. There it was. You didn’t tell me. He’d said it.

Her mouth opened… closed. There was no oxygen here. “I didn’t want…” her brain came up woefully short on, well, anything. “You- I mean, you had enough to-”

“To deal with?” Hoarse, she could still hear the incredulity in his voice. And the lo- “You didn’t come to me,” he whispered; his breath scoring against her legs, “he hurt you and you didn’t come to me.”

“I couldn’t.” She mumbled, sounding like a child and it was mortifying how she had to look away from him. “There are things you don’t understand-”

“Then help me to understand.” He breathed, and it threw her. The maniacal edge in his eyes… he was desperate. Desperate. “Did you feel like you couldn’t? Was it… was it me and Sara?” What? His hands were holding onto her like a life preserve, pleadingly. Where was his anger? “This?” They clenched around her upper thighs and she couldn’t help her reaction. How she gasped her hands fists, aloft as they were. “I’ve seen it before. This is torture. Deliberate.” Voice cracking again, he looked so very wretched and they needed to go, to get gone before she broke.

“We need to go, Oliver.” And she sounded so undone; miserable and so close to tears that he pressed forwards, hurrying.

“I can’t think that he tortured you,” he shook his head, “I can’t. Not you.” Knees brushing her feet, he pushed forwards onto his shins; his chin precariously close to her crotch and she had to look at him now even as it felt like too much- it was too much. “But if he did, if there’s even a chance… I need to know. I need to know Felicity.” He swallowed, licking his lips and he was right where she’d daydreamed he’d start if he was so inclined to, earlier. “I need to know.”

“Don’t ask me this here.” Please Oliver.

She couldn’t do this. Not like this. With him on his knees. With her feeling dizzy. With them both inside a hallway that Slade had dragged her down a few times before with a hood over her head.

“You won’t tell me later.” He knew her; she’d find a way. Or something would happen to make it impossible because, that was their luck. “I need to make this better. I need to know-”

“What, how far he went?” She inhaled, feeling something build beneath the surface. “The absolute nothing you can do to make it,” any of it, “alright?”

Like she’d slapped him. “I can take it.”

“It won’t do anything!” I can’t breathe. “It won’t help anyone.”

“You don’t know that.” He was basically leaning all his weight on her legs. “You have no idea what having someone you can trust, can do for you.” He promised.
She’d fight till the end, even as her vision started to blur. As her heartbeat rose rapidly. “But we need to-”

“To what? What do we need to do, right this moment, that’s so important?”

“Slade is out here!” She forced out and she felt like she was going to fall. “He did this, he-”

“He hurt us, I know! He took Thea; I know that too.” And it was possibly the kindest shout she’d ever heard from him which, for some reason, made the pressure on her chest multiply. “But all I want to do right now is listen to you. Is to be with you-”

“Stop it!”

Too much- it was too much. She couldn’t breathe, she-

He stopped.

It didn’t matter… she couldn’t breathe.

No, she was breathing too fast. Shallow breaths that weren’t helping. Face scrunched up, her eyes squeezed shut. Her heart, hurt. Her world tilted. She bit down on her lip, I can’t keep it together; she could feel herself slipping but her hands lifted anyway, covering half of her face as a wail of misery threatened to break her shield - her wall of near-non-existent strength - to pieces. Mouth open, panic mounting she just wanted- Get up Oliver.

But he didn’t move.

Don’t watch. She knew he was looking at her. Knew he was watching her, how she was losing it, how she gasped and clawed at her face for the right amount of air – for sanity.

I should have just kissed him.

Stunned him with the unwanted and the unthinkable; shut him up before he could touch her with his words, with his hands, before he could ruin her with all the soft that he was being so generous with suddenly. With the hard that made her feel safe and the promise that he’d keep her that way from now on when she hadn’t been for so long. When she knew he couldn’t possibly promise anything like that right now.

Before the love in him could attack her like this.

And then, before she could stop it… yup; she was pretty much sobbing her heart out. Reality was a bulldozer ramming into her. There was nothing she could do but feel it. Nothing she could do to stem the pain in her; the humiliation of being everything Sara and Laurel and the rest of the women in Oliver’s life, weren’t. Of crying like a new-born in front of the man she respected most, the man she was in love with.

Of gasping for air as childish tears started to pour down her face.

It hurt.

She was loud, uncontrollable; the crying unforgiving but she had to let it out right there, in front of him in big bawling chunks. Humiliatingly. Any man would be uncomfortable. Even John would hesitate.

But he didn’t say a word.
Didn’t move as she broke. As she bevelled at the waist with her arms wrapped about herself, *why isn’t it helping?* The breathing. The more she breathed, the faster her heart paced, and it wasn’t a relief, this so-called relief of burden. She was cracked and tainted and more she cried, the more she felt so.

Tired and sore and ashamed.

Literally breathless, alone and at breaking point. it was surface stuff and maybe he knew that, maybe… maybe he’d wanted this.

He’d *wanted* her to break. Just not quite so… colourfully. Or so much. Maybe. She didn’t know. Couldn’t care just then.

Hair cascading down her face, obscuring his view; she somehow felt strands fall against his face, but he still didn’t move, as if he knew that if he did, she’d fall. She would: he was keeping her standing with his hands lightly cupped around her thighs, gripping. Stability.

It didn’t help. His presence, his touch… none of it.

“All right?” She heard him in the midst of her heartbreak and even though she was in no state to reply, she could tell he thought they were weak. The words. *Felicity.* She heard him feel for her; as if he were making sense of the muddled anxiety, the crippling fear and pain of the last 24 hours, of the last 6 weeks because she was incapable. “I’m sorry.”

She tried. Her broken, hissing attempts at controlling her sobs made her sound ill. *Stop crying. Stop it.*

And, slowly… his hands slid up her skin, towards her shorts. Fingers splayed. Hesitant. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

It came out a *whine,* her fresh wave of tears; her simple, honest reaction to his tenderness. *Honey.*

*Honey.*

Was he trying to destroy her?

“All right?” He’d reached her hips and she could almost feel him on her skin – very thin pair of shorts. “Can I do this?”

*What did he say?* Do what? She didn’t know. Couldn’t make sense of-

“Hey…”

His hands were on her, he cared enough to watch this - to wait - and he’d just called her honey; he could do whatever he wanted.

But it sounded like he was asking her to take a risk. A big one. And she didn’t understand, wasn’t listening, because reaching for breath was taking up her attention.

Her hands moved above her eyes, her fingers into her hairline. *Help me.*

“Felicity?”

Nothing… no reaction, not even to his voice that tingled down her spine, making her shiver and think of a roaring fire, a shot of whiskey and ice cream.
She felt dizzy… was starting to sweat. *Why is it warm?* She’d been freezing just now, hadn’t she?
And her eyes wouldn’t open, which… wouldn’t make a lick of difference. Her vision had gone black with his *honey*. Her ears seemed clogged - like a rustling working its way through, his voice merging as white noise - and it felt like all the blood in her body was flowing at superspeed. It pounded beneath her skin, feeding the unpleasant fire in her. *I’m losing it.*

…Then there was something different.

A pressure. Light. *Feather*-light but warm like…

Skin.

Against hers… where it shouldn’t be.

Fingertips brushed over her cheek - *over both* of them - so softly it confused her. Never mind that it just didn’t fit with any of what was happening, nobody had ever touched like she was made of silk. Like she was worth the effort to be as gentle as the brush of a butterfly’s wings. Not Slade with his way of making a simple touch feel an invasion. Not Cooper, though he’d lavished attention on her in the way most young men do, when they think they understand what love means. Not her father, who’d left long before she’d discovered the difference between a father’s love and romantic love.

They slid in, these fingers, towards her hairline; until the palms of sure hands cupped her damp face between them, lifting it just a bit. A tiny bit.

And then-

There was a… a *heat* against her mouth. The briefest meeting of suppleness and warmth… lips against her own.

The whisper of a kiss.

Her body knew what it was before her mind did: it stunned into silence. Stopped her tears, cancelled out sound… and suddenly breathing was unnecessary because she stopped doing that too. Her eyes flew open, desperate to understand why the world had stopped spinning-

Oliver was right there, below her; centimetres from her face.

His lips… almost touching hers.

He’d kissed her.

She was so beyond shock, it didn’t occur to her to move or speak – or even to stop crying.

And he didn’t seem to care either.

He was looking at her lips - parted in shock - and his eyes were dark enough to sink into. There was a hint of emotional hesitancy, a worry that he’d hurt her.

A fragile fear that she’d take this the worst way, whatever *this* was. She’d read somewhere once that a person having a panic attack could stave off the panic, if they held their breath.

He’d kissed her, barely. She’d held her breath.

At any other moment it would be deeply embarrassing - how obvious her feelings are - but then his eyes were flickering up to meets hers and the tentative nature of his hands on her face, the way his eyes were screaming at her to let him near, became fear.
And… more.

He swallowed at whatever he saw in her face as a response. “Breathe.” But he’d just kissed her. “You need to breathe.” It was spectacularly husky, a little shaky, and all kinds of wanted. “Deep breaths. Before you pass out.”

Before a lack of oxygen replaces the ‘not enough oxygen’ panic setting. Anxiety is a heartless bitch.

She tried - she really did - to speak. “I—” it came out more saliva than anything else, ugh. “I’m sor—”

She was crying too hard to apologise for her ridiculous display and how anyone could cry even when they weren’t breathing - when they were so hurt inside it had to come out, screw biology - was beyond her ability to understand and she’d yet to find something she couldn’t understand.

He was still kneeling. But just because he was right there, being a million different types of wonderful, just because his lips had touched hers… it didn’t heal the broken in her.

“Ssh.” And why was that so soothing? “It’s ok.” His hands held her face there, neither of them touching what he’d just done. “I’m not letting go.”

That. Right there.

It’s what she’d secretly wanted to hear. He wasn’t letting her go. Despite the unsightly mess that she was, against the weight of the day, regardless of whether she’d told Thea the hard truth… he wasn’t turning his back on her. He wasn’t leaving her alone.

He was holding her face. The same man who shot Arrows into people, who gave threats and made good on, was looking into her eyes and was telling her without saying a thing, that he trusted her. That he cared about her…

A lot more than she thought he did.

Lips pressing hard together, she closed her eyes; new tears flowing but this time, there was no pounding heart of, no difficulty breathing. She didn’t have worry about falling over.

He wasn’t letting her go after all.

Blindly, her hands touched his shoulders before quickly seizing into the tight – also thin – material; her fingers digging into the black undershirt as she let it all out.

And that’s when he finally moved.

His hands didn’t leave her face, but she felt them press against her briefly as he stood; somehow managing it without wobbling. His legs - ridiculously taut - pressed into her own and she almost choked at that, almost tripped backwards but he was still there; his body pushing up, into her as he moved. She let her hands fall, trailing down his biceps - of which she’d very much like an hour or two appreciate in full but, you know, later - as his pelvis brushed her hips and even with the crying, her mouth opened in a soundless gasp.

It didn’t deter him.

When his chest shifted, pressing against her arms as her hands help his forearms like she’d lose him if she let go, she was sure he felt every bit of the shudder that rippled through her, knowing why it did in the process.
Knowing that he was crowding her into him, knowing that she liked it. Wanted it.

But then his hands were sliding into her hair, she was being pulled forwards and her face was in his pectorals before she could utter any garbled attempt at any thank you she could give or promise she could offer. She was pressed against him and his very solid self was all kinds of stimulating and so warm…

Arms around her… he started to rock.

The cracked pieces of her heart started to hum.

Long fingers massaged her scalp. “I’m here.” He simply whispered.

A wave of affection and gratitude made her melt into him; her face pushing further into him, concentrating on his smell on his little ‘left to right’ swaying motions, on the size and warmth of his hands…

Her arms reached up his back, feeling the musculature there and something inside her - something visceral and neglected - had her hands splaying out, her fingers digging in.

He didn’t seem to mind.

So… she cried.

He was quiet as her body bucked and shook - making constant soothing noises - but he was so strong, that even as his body moved with hers - like it knew where hers would lean and bend and dip - she couldn’t feel anything but totally safe. Dishevelled and dirty as she was, standing in a hallway where Frank had told her she was Slade’s fuckable toy.

She cried hard enough for her to miss, until it was almost too late, that his heart was pounding beneath her ear.

The hand in her hair, moved to her neck. Nudging. “Felicity?” It was barely audible, his voice, but it rumbled from his chest to hers. Does he have to be that male? And she shook her head, no, eyes still shut. Don’t make me look at you. “Can you look at me?”

“I was so afraid you’d hate me.”

The burst of honesty silenced him.

“That was the worst part.” She admitted. “Thinking that, every day.”

“How could I?”

How could this hero - this perfect make of a man - who hunted men and women who broke the law, who stood up to - and destroyed - people and circumstances that made her shake with fear, hate her for being less than what he’d thought her to be?

Oh Oliver.

“I don’t want to know how you ever could.” She eventually responded, sounding meeker than intended but… she was crying.

“You never will.”

She burrowed into him, feeling a secret thrill that - after 18 months - he was allowing her to do just
that. *Enjoy it while you can.* “Let’s not talk about that.”

“No, Felicity…”

“Please.” She pleaded, even as she tightened in preparation.

“…Okay.” Of course. Of course, he’d say ok.

She was pathetic. “I’m scared all the time.” And she was sick of it; of the fear and the lack of sleep, the aches and marks she hid… the comfort she yearned for, saw Diggle and Oliver give and take for themselves but never sought. Again, fear. “It’s useless.” She sniffed, even though the word was harsh, because it didn’t change the fact that she was- “I feel weak.” Her head shook, her nose bunched into his muscle. “I never was before.”

“Nothing about you is weak.”

Throaty. He couldn’t be throaty, not when they were alone. Not with the way it travelled down her spine, the same spine one of his hands was placed over.

But she had a point to make. “I’m not like you guys; I can’t stop bad guys in their tracks with a glare. Or shoot Arrows, wing chun my way out of a fight, dodge bullets…”

He made a funny, sceptical noise with his next exhale. “I can’t dodge bullets.”

“But I’m strong in my own way.” She continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I always felt that way, I always knew who I was and what I could do and… I mean, I wanted more than to just be an IT girl, you know?”

And then he’d come along and made her realise she really could be anything she wanted to be.

“Yeah.” There was a hint of nostalgia there that didn’t help the wet in her eyes.

“Now I… I’m unsteady.” She confessed, trembling with it. “I thought I was stronger than this.” Another sob threatened to break free. “I’m still crying.”

“You’re the strongest person I know.” A choked disagreement came from her. “Crying isn’t a sign of weakness.”

“You tell that to Sara.” Said the crying girl, wetting his very nice chest. *Sigh.* “You rarely cry Oliver.”

“That’s because I don’t want to feel it.” He whispered, and it was probably the most honest he’d ever been with her. “I don’t… I feel like I’ll break, if I let myself. I don’t know what will happened. So, I hide from it.” She felt him swallow, heard his oesophagus function. “People like me and Sara, we aren’t exactly the poster people for emotional wellbeing.”

“Did…” she couldn’t believe it. “Did you just make a joke?” She laughed tears, unable to help from lifted her head and looking up at it, despite the redness of her eyes now. “At yourself?”

His eyes were sad, even as they danced. “I have been known to do that on occasion.” There was still anger there.

“A very rare occasion. Almost never.” She insisted, teasingly which felt like such a gift right then.

“The point,” he emphasised, his hand pressing on her upper back to keep her still, “is that, out of all of us, you’re the only one who faces the things that have happened. You deal with them and you move on.” The way he was looking at her - the seriousness in him, the clear need to make someone
pay for the events of the day - made her want to run again, but there was no escape here. “You give me hope.” She’d never heard so much in so little before. He believed it. Believed she was strong, believed it enough to fight for it in her stead. “You help me believe.”

In… what?

Overwhelmed, her chin butted against his chest; leaning against it. Her shoulders bunching as if to hide herself.

Watching that, he curled over her again; pulling her gaze back up to his. “I was afraid today too. I felt… trapped. Useless and helpless because I can’t keep the people I care about, safe. It didn’t matter if I wasn’t alone, I felt like I’d failed.” He moved his head as close to hers as he could without bending at the knees. “Does that make me weak?”

Every word from him poured into her heart like something golden, solidifying over the awful blackness that was there and it took everything she had to hide from him, to not cry. “Not even a little.” Her eyes watered anyway…

And he watched them, those last few tears - god, please let them be the last - roll slowly down her face, watched them reach her chin and it was the longest Oliver’s eyes had ever been on her. In the past, after a particularly long staring contest, ahem, he’d make to look elsewhere until the surprisingly filled atmosphere was slightly less so.

But this…

He shifted; his arms moving from around her and-

No. The noise she made was muffled, her teeth biting down on her lip as her eyes shut closed; he was pulling away?

But his hands simply slid out from the back of her neck - slowly, as if a little taken with himself for doing it - so that the pads were pressing just under her jaw, his thumbs tilting it out into the open and the ripple of his muscles at the action - the way his biceps doubled in size - were fascinating to feel.

She sucked in an inhale like she hadn’t breathed all day, fingers immediately wiping under eyes because she’d done enough of that already, regardless of whether it was the healthiest option available to her or whether she still felt that pressure inside her and-

But she froze when she felt the stunning touch of the tip of his nose on the back of her hand. A, drop your hand, and she swallowed. Did he have to be so gentle with her all the time?

“Hey.”

She felt his breath there - on her damp now covering her mouth - on her chin and she forced her eyes back open only for her heart to press pause.

He was close again- too close. And his hands… oh, his hands were cupping her cheeks, pressing in this time and it had to be a record somewhere. She’d probably used up a lifetime’s worth of happiness points for Oliver to touch this way, more than once in the space of 20 minutes.

But he was holding her the way lovers do.

She wouldn’t have thought it but earlier he’d-

“Felicity…”
Time stopped again.

It was cheesy, so cheesy, but his eyes had captured her. Her breath caught in her throat.

He looked… he looked raw again.

There were different kinds raw and this one - his - didn’t match the situation. The unfathomable, unthinkable kind of raw. The kind she’d entertained only in her head over late nights with Netflix and chips but never thought she’d see shadowed in the lines of his beautifully masculine face. On Sunday. Sitting astride his motorcycle like it was her seat. Those moments where hope would knit itself together; earlier she’d wanted him all to herself, just to take away the acid taste of the day because he was the only man who could.

I can’t be seeing what I think I’m seeing. Nope; she was tired and emotional and pretty much pushed to the last letter. There was every chance in the world that she was misreading Oliver. However, she’d learned to hide this, her feelings, well.

His were blatantly, crystal clear to read. Dumbfoundingly.

And it was all brand new.

He didn’t… didn’t do anything; he just looked at her. Like he couldn’t get enough of her eyes; the way her lashes were blinking away the last vestiges of her tears or how her gaze didn’t stray from his and it couldn’t. She was under this spell with him.

But she’d seen that look before, in other people. Other men. Not Oliver.

He wanted.

And his ever-present control, his ability to lock away every intense thought and emotion, was nowhere in sight.

It made her shake; something inside her telling her exactly what he was silently telling her and not believing it. “Oliver?”

I’m reading this wrong. She had to be-

Then his mouth was on hers and she knew she wasn’t.

Squinting at the man who’d just cut his bonds - pulling the hood off his head and shoving out of the double set of doors at the end of the van - Quentin Lance sneered. “You’re letting me go?” He didn’t trust this for a second.

“Mr Wilson said to let you go.” The man in question held a shotgun and while Quentin could have taken it from him, he wasn’t so confident about the three burly men stood behind him. “I don’t make the orders around here.” No, he was just getting paid to carry them out. Happy little follower.

“What about my daughter?” She wasn’t his daughter. She was barely a friend. But she was invaluable. An ally, a powerful one who dressed in three-inch heels because she was diminutive in
size, but criminals didn’t need to know that. If they thought it was all ‘Arrow’ so much the better for her, she shouldn’t be anywhere close to the crosshairs.

She was supermassive in heart.

He liked her. A lot. And he’d pondered getting to know her more, simply on the basis of making sure she wasn’t alone the way a lot of women were in the city. Turns out, she has a guardian angel.

But did she have a father? A lover? Someone who understood the travesty of any harm coming to her?

It seemed… she didn’t. He’d hoped that maybe- maybe Queen might have…

No, he knew it was unfair to the kid. His daughter’s ex-boyfriend wasn’t at the heart of every problem in Quentin’s life or his own. But knowing that wouldn’t scrape away the images of the video his captor had forced him to see as a way of buying his ‘good behaviour’.

Just seconds of footage. Seconds that had made him give up any attempts at fighting a useless battle or getting word out to the Arrow. Seconds for him to fear for the life of his daughter.

Footage of Felicity Smoak, hanging from the ceiling as a man he now knew to be called Slade Wilson, shoved what looked like a wet sponge coating some kind of Picana or electrical conduit into various areas on her body and watching her jerk and shake and jump and cry out as god knows how many volts of electricity flowed into her body.

Right after this, he was shown a recording of his daughter strapped unconscious to a chair.

“You be good now,” close to his ear, Quentin absently took in the smell of cigarettes and overbearing aftershave as he stared, horrified at the screen in front of the chair he’d been forced to sit in, “or the boss will do to your daughter,” there was an inhale - a moment of suspense that the guy who’d taken him without a problem earlier, had probably thought would kill but Quentin had been too numbed by the sight of Miss Smoak in pain - before the man talking to him promised, “what he took such pleasure in doing to her.”

How any man could take pleasure doing that to anyone - but especially someone as good as Felicity Smoak - was something he didn’t, and never wanted, to understand.

“That’s none of your concern.” The man finally told him, and it wasn’t the same man who’d enjoyed watching the blood leave his face not too long ago. “We told you that if you didn’t do anything, you’d be freed soon.”

“If you think-”

“She’s fine. He let her go.” The men were already moving to get back into the vehicle. “She isn’t who the boss wants.”

He moved out of range, rubbing at his wrists. “What does that mean?”

“Ask your daughter.” The man called over his shoulder. “She thinks she has all the answers.”

She tended to do that. “So, you’re just letting me go?” He shouted over the ignition of the engine. “You know I’ll go after him!”

Inches away from shutting the side door, the man paused to peer at him through the gap. “Knowing what you’ve seen, you can’t think of a reason why that might be a bad idea?”
He hadn’t asked permission.

She was so thankful that he hadn’t asked permission.

She’d have said no. She’d have had to, thinking that his fear and anger and the desperate relief that she and his sister hadn’t been hurt (much) needed an outlet. That the twisted anxiety that had churned inside them both called to be changed, to be transformed into something dizzyingly wonderful. But she’d also know that he’d regret it later, passing that line he’d held so rigidly to.

Here, just in this moment, she could pretend he’d kissed her because he’d wanted to. That he needed to, because he had feelings for her; that he couldn’t wait another second because she’d been taken by an enemy and it had terrified him.

She could ignore that it was very much the way he’d been acting already, which didn’t make sense to her overstimulated mind and simply exist in it. In a kiss that stole her reason, that made her forget the world.

He was gentle. She couldn’t handle gentle. She’d break again if he did gentle. But his gentle was also fear. A heady build up of dread and want and a few other things too heavy to talk about and talking was the last thing on her mind.

He’d made any thought of resisting, of moving out of the comfort his hands on her face brought, mute.

No thought, just instinct. And heart.

His lips were soft, surprisingly so and it numbed her mind when he pressed them to hers. When his fingers trembled in the few seconds he held her there, she realised… he was affected. By her. A lot by her. And maybe that influenced the way she responded, she’d never know. It didn’t matter. But she didn’t freeze, didn’t stand there and let him hold her like she was made of glass, no…

Hands gripping into his shirt at his sides, she lifted onto her toes, and pushed up against his mouth.

Feeling his diaphragm jump in surprise, his head moved - almost jerking back - but not away. With. His mouth opened on a stuttered exhale, his lips moving with hers - widening and promising so much more than either of them had probably anticipated - before covering it with a hot, harsh breath that carried in the quiet.

Then he proceeded to really kiss her.

It was deep and searching, his mouth warm and wet and demanding, but the palms on her face were tender. Firm, but tender. Stay with me, they said. She dived in, wanting his taste but finding so much more. It felt like a connection.

And she needed more, needed to feel him, needed her hands to touch him as she tasted and maybe that was why her hands were pulling at him; at his hips, more. Moving upwards to his shoulders, her
fingers reaching into his collar and drawing him into her as her mouth fastened around his upper lips and tugged. Sucked. Loved.

With a sound that dropped like a stone into her gut, Oliver pushed her backwards; his hand leaving her face to smack against the wall before her head could crack on it and leaning in as everything just… melted away.

A roving heat beneath her skin made lights flash behind her eyes and she wanted to open them, to see him. But that would detract from her concentration of how his tongue, oh my god, felt sliding into her mouth, roving against her own and he was fluent really. He knew the language of making love with his tongue and was displaying it to great effect and-

And this was Oliver. Kissing her like this, like she was only the thought in his head, as if he’d wanted to for so long and she was kissing him back the same way… he didn’t seem to mind. If the desperate way he drank her in with every movement of his lips was any indication, he wanted more.

It shot down, desire a sharp twist of her internal muscles that had her stretching his shirt. Their breaths grew louder and more wanton with each movement, the hairs on her arms rising, making her soften into him.

Making her knees buckle.

Before either could think to stop for a moment - to talk about what the hell they were doing, another thing for which she’d thank God for later - Oliver’s hands left her face, moving down so quickly she didn’t have the time - nor the focus - to complain before he found that area just under her breasts. Without taking his mouth off hers, his hands secured tight beneath her arms and he took her weight, lifting her briefly into the air.

It didn’t shock her; it felt inevitable. They should have done this at the start. Better leverage.

And then he was fully against her and all thought went out of the metaphorical window.

Chest to chest, heartbeat to pounding heartbeat - oh - she allowed him entry, like they’d done this a thousand times before and would do so a thousand more.

His lips ripped off her hers in favour of dragging his teeth lightly over her jaw, until his face was shoved into that place between her neck and shoulder, her body held steady by his hands. He inhaled low and long as his arms moved to surround her back and she had to force down the wad of everything that made her chest tighten, made her mouth part and a gasp left her that sounded husky even to her ears.

Her hands latched onto the balls of his shoulders - tight and sinew musculature flexing as she did - though he was already exactly where he clearly wanted to be because he didn’t move, but she was having trouble catching her breaths, having difficulty understanding the why of this.

That being in his arms was something she wasn’t likely to get over anytime soon. If ever. At the knowing that he was seeing everything and would know more soon.

Arms surrounding his neck, they curled around his shoulders and he breathed in, breathed deep. Legs open, they rose - instinctively knowing where to lie on his hips - bringing him closer. A sound from his gullet vibrated into her as her thighs closed forcefully around him, not wanting him to leave; her feet landing just below his backside.

Like a key in a lock, they slotted together. Fitting in place. It scared her to think it. It scared her more not to.
He was so… big.

All-encompassing. Everything. Feet off the floor, she was surrounded by muscled heat: by steel wrapped in velvet, a beating heart that wanted to help her. Shield and protect her. Connect with her. Hold her.

Never, not ever… did she think Oliver would do this. That she’d have this, with anyone really but especially with Oliver.

She held him close; savouring and shuddering in the discovery of the shape of him there, at the back of his neck and loving it, even as she something in her knew that this would die. The ache inside her, demanding attention. The sucking vortex that she’d a kept a lid on, but it wasn’t enough for her to miss the very real comfort of his body on hers.

Purely primal; a man’s body pressing into a woman’s.

It would have taken the strength of Hercules to not give in, to not turn her head and press longing, sucking kisses into the skin of his throat; relishing the taste of sweat and leather and him before moving to his shoulder. Before biting.

Lightly. Always lightly.

But it made him shudder; made his fingers dig into her sides and his rib cage lift into her chest.

It would take the strength of Hercules to make her let go.

A ‘Felicity sandwich’ between the wall and him, her body registering the delightful male-female differences… She’d been afraid of this.

She’d never forget this.

Letting out a loud - shallow - noise, her hands slid over his neck, clasping around his head and her eyes near-fluttered at the surprisingly soft scrape of his hair and side-scruff against her biceps - finally knowing how it felt - and cheek as she snuggled into his neck. She couldn’t help it. He begged to be touched.

Tell me to stop, that I’m getting the wrong idea. She shuddered, a sound escaping her; a small, wretched appeal to him as her mouth touched his skin, to not stop. I shouldn’t be doing-

Fingers lacing through her hair to grip, his face turned in; another hot breath fanning over her ear, lips grazing her earlobe. It felt so good - his nose, from tip to bridge, nudging and nuzzling and the maleness of him, the hair at his virile jaw - and so wanted, needed, it made her thighs clench around him, made a hand sneak down to his back to discover a whole new area of muscles at work. As if in reward, his mouth pressed hard into her throat; as if the harder he kissed her, the more he’d know about her.

She hadn’t wanted this. She hadn’t wanted to feel the perfection of them together.

Eyes so tightly shut she saw colour, her fingers dug into his scalp, fingering through his deceivingly thick hair and it was such a small thing, barely anything to write home about. But she felt it; his throat as it moved. As he gulped something down. He shifted; cheek moving against her own until his breath coated her face. Until he pushed in. Breathed deep.

Until he kissed her again; his lips parting hers, tongue caressing over her own, hips pressing into her, his hand beginning to roam…
Her abdominal’s lifting into him automatically, breasts deliberately letting him know what she wanted. Her pelvis undulated against his stomach as she tightened around him, and he reacted; bending his knees ever so slightly and driving his stomach up into her - having his six pack flux against her like that, made her eyes roll back into her skull - and just barely brushing close to where she’d started to want more. And she felt him - one of his hands - on her shorts; his fingers dipping towards the skin if her thighs, bruises be damned, and she felt a thrill shoot through her. He wanted to feel her up.

It was beyond abrupt - almost offensive - when he yanked his mouth down from hers in favour of closing his eyes and letting deep gasps flood over her collarbone.

Legs clinging to him, she felt every breath he took. Felt the way the hand in her hair leave in favour of fisting on the wall beside her head. Felt his other grip her hip instead of her thigh. Felt his weight - that had held her up against the wall, oh boy - lift ever-so- slightly off of her. Felt his forehead touch her neck as he fought for some control… because she’d had none.

Staring at the wall opposite them, mouth open, eyes wide… she flushed.

Her heart immediately speeded back to life, thudding hard.

What did she think would happen?

Of course he’d pull back.

Of course, he wouldn’t-

Head still lowered, the hand he’d fist shot to his ear; slipping down to press a button. “What is it?”

She flinched.

He was talking to, presumably John. He’d stopped for John.

He was talking to John with her legs around his waist and his hand precariously close to her backside. He was talking to John seconds after they’d been kissing. To call it a kiss was an understatement.

Face so close to her breast, it was a place she’d always wanted him to rest. But reality was kicking in and it wasn’t meant for her.

Pushing down on his shoulders, feeling heat bloom over her chest as her thoughts shamefully fled to other images of when she might push him down by the shoulders, she lifted her hips and shirked her legs free from him.

Leaning back against the wall, her hand lifted, placing her palm over her mouth, closing her eyes. They’d changed everything.

She felt him shift, felt his head lift. He didn’t move closer. Didn’t-

“What?”

Jumping, she blinked open her eyes at the timbre in his voice - like he’d switched on his modulator - a far cry from his murmuring and gasping - gulp - earlier.

His voice was thunder.

But his eyes were fire; an earnest fire, mere inches from her own. A fire… for her.
...What?

Slowly, the hand at his ear met her cheek again.

It trembled.

*Oh god*, he was regretting it.

But he shook his head once; *appeal* laced into every aspect of his features. *Wait*, he mouthed before speaking to John again. “Why would she-” A furrow at his brow appeared and it made something savage in him spark to life. “She can’t just…” then he was looking away, into nothing again and she could only see the side of his jaw. “Fuck.” Her brows arched.

He *never* swore. He never had to; not with *that* voice.

“Where is she now?” He was so still - her hand still over her mouth - and again, she was reminded of the predator he could be to people. “Tell her to stay at the Precinct.” Another pause. “Right. Make sure Sara sees that she gets what that means.” He bit out, his jaw flexing as he ground down. “I don’t care about any Press Conference; my mother can hurdle that. No, I want to talk to her.” He demanded. “We’re coming out.”

Hand leaving her again, he cut off his side of the com, bringing his arm back down. There was a pause where he seemed to gather himself; simply breathing out and in, before another slice of *blue* seared into her.

Her heart clenched.

He looked *pissed*. Controlled anger, and it was different from earlier. This felt more like the buzzing of dozens of bees; like he was irritated- no, infuriated, but the liquid metallic way that irritation seemed to harden into something resembling ice, she knew a thaw would only unleash *magma*.

What had John told him to make him so angry?

His eyes flit over her face, landing on her mouth. “Breathe.” He reminded her.

*Oh.* She’d been holding her breath. Letting out, she looked at him… then glanced down.

There was a red tint in his cheeks, his hair was a mess, his mouth was puffier, and he sounded like he’d run a mile.

No, she couldn’t look at him, knowing he’d see the same.

“*We... we need to go.*” He muttered and, like earlier-

“*We have to go.*” *And was it just her or did that sound like the very last thing he wanted to do?*

*She found herself nodding before giving him a quiet, “okay.”*

-He didn’t sound like he wanted to.

She nodded - lips pressed together - anything to escape this was welcome.

But-

“Hey.” Again… he was tender *again*. Loving and it hurt, because she was so far from being used to this new side of him. New to *her*. But he wasn’t soft. Not even when she glimpsed him step back
and dipped down, picking up his forgotten jacket. Not when he came close, when his large welcome hand gripped her shoulder and pulled her into him. Not when he placed it around her shoulders allowing her to shuffle her arms into them and this time, she felt she had no choice. It was as if he’d used it all up, his soft, on that phone call and what he said next came as a command. “Not this.” He used a single finger - as if suddenly afraid to touch her - to lift her chin. To make her look at him. “Never this.”

Never shame between us.

As unbalanced and uncomfortable as she was, she nodded.

“I don’t regret this.” He said, as if she had to know. “I want…” he searched her face. “I can’t do what I want to do right now. There’s no time.”

Guh. And that mean… what? Kay.

It crashed over her. The day, everything. “We have to go.”

“We do.”

“You know I hurt someone tonight too.” She blurted out, not knowing why. “I had to get around him, but he was really big.” Her eyes widened comically because, her so-called guard had been pretty fracking huge, height wise.

Still, Oliver froze… his face, hard. Uncompromisingly fierce.

Sexy.

She sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth, I’m ridiculous, looking at him - wanting to kiss him again and allowing that desire to show on her face because nothing in a long time had felt as good as his hands on her, as his lips savouring her own - her pretence of being supremely unaffected, visibly thin. “I don’t even know if he’s alive.” She rasped, remembering the nail she’d shoved into his neck with ease.

For several moments, Oliver just looked at her.

She could see it in him too; a need to touch and be held. Something close to that word they both feared with a passion.

“I’m glad you did.” He eventually admitted, nodding. “I didn’t want that for you.” For her to ever feel that; helpless in knowledge that the only way out was through. “But it was you or him.” Rule of the jungle; he knew well that sometimes it was that simple. “And… I’d like to talk about it more.” He licked his lips and her eyes fell there, knowing his taste now and maybe that was why his voice was gravel when he finished. “Later.”

She nodded too, taking a deep breath. Later.

As if in they were thinking the same, they turned to face the exit and he kicked open the door - she noted the lock that had malfunctioned, ooh; the prototype arrow – and, before she could summon words, he twisted back to her, every so slightly stepped into her-

Uh.

-dipped down, wrapped an arm around the bottom of her back - just over her butt - and his other behind her knees before lifting her into the air once again, avoiding any bruises he’d seen; his hands
hot on her skin.

It happened in seconds, too quick to process.

“Ah!” She wobbled in his hold - hands latching onto the back of his neck - eyes darting about, as he moved to the entryway, “wait, um… Oliver?”

He looked up at her and her breath caught. “Felicity."

She felt it - what was in his voice and his eyes - in her womb.

For once, just once, she let herself cave.

He strode through, taking her with him and what she saw, made her gawk.

Glass, bullet casings and… blood. Guards – they hadn’t stood a chance. Other things. It littered the floor and being shoe-less, well, she understood why he was carrying her, not that it wasn’t humiliating.

The whole night had been really.

It was fully dark outside and every time she blinked, the low light in the hallway flashed across her vision. There were no streetlights - the creepy den of serial whack-a-moles would never be so kind - but she couldn’t mistake the large black van, Dig’s baby, parked behind the three cars it had clearly trashed on its way in. It flooded the area with header lights.

And the man himself was revving the engine - half in, half out of the vehicle - armed, wide awake and very dangerous. Thank God.

A foot higher than Oliver, it must have shown on her face - the sweet relief, the yay - or maybe he just felt the same because John’s determined gaze slipped into something much more human. Much deeper, far more fragile. Pain, anger and regret filled his expression, but a smile softened it, lasting all of two seconds before he slipped fully into the driver’s seat. “How’s our girl?”

“Ask later.” Oliver answered as her mouth puffed out to do just that. “We need to go.” He said as he passed by in wide strides, his neck clenched.

“Right.” Looking to Dig, she made to speak but he nodded at her like, not the time, though his eyes screamed for answers to questions they’d been saddled with all day.

Confused at their speed, she just caught the look he sent to John - some unreadable man thing she couldn’t hope to decipher - as Oliver moved steady and sure towards the back of the van. She caught the ripple of fuck that ran over Dig’s face.

Yeah; that wasn’t good. Ignoring that.

“Anything?” Oliver - The Arrow; he’d turned on the modulator - called out and the two back doors to the van opened as they neared. Out-popped Sara.

She’d placed her staff to the right of the interior, already hoping down to open the second half. “Nothing. They were the only ones.”

Modulator on the same as Oliver’s, she eyed Felicity with beautiful blue concern but didn’t say a word.

That is an issue to deal with later.
Sara tore her gaze away. “Get in.” She said, holding out a hand to her, but Oliver was ten steps ahead.

“In you go.” He muttered; his hands shifting round, one to her hips and-

“Ooh!” It must have been so easy for him - lifting her an extra two feet higher, just so that she wouldn’t have to - manoeuvring her into the bed of the van where two lights shone a little too brilliantly, yeesh, and to the bench on the right.

It was… kind of hot.

And proof that not even Oliver’s worst enemy could stomp out her appreciation for the things she loved the most.

“I don’t regret this.” He said, as if she had to know. “I want…” he searched her face. “I can’t do what I want to do right now. There’s no time.”

OBVIOUSLY.

Sit here, his fingers said as they pressed lightly on her shoulders. “I need to talk to John.” He whispered in her ear and with the modulator on - oh admit it; I don’t need the modulator to be on - it made her shiver. “Where are you hurt?”

This again. “I’m not hurt.”

“Where else?” He pressed.

But, technically, she wasn’t hurt; no open wounds here. But underneath her skin, a continuous throbbing made her want to ask for all the painkillers. And she didn’t like to think what his reaction would be to that.

So, no can do. At least, not in the van.

She felt him there for a second, his eyes on her. Watching her. Debating whether to argue.

But Thea caught her eye on the opposite bench. Her knees were up, her arms wrapped around her legs… she looked completely done. And hungry. In need of a shower.

A hug.

And the rest of the truth.

The Arrow shifted beside her, seeing Thea as she did. “It’s ok.” He murmured to his sister; his voice a husky rasp of warmth. “I’m taking you home.”

Eyes lifting as if it took everything, Thea stared at her brother like she wasn’t sure what she was seeing. She didn’t say anything.

Shock?

Closing the doors with a loud clap, Sara stepped towards them. “We need to go to the SCPD.”

“They’re no help here.” He dismissed, and being so close to him, Felicity could feel his steadfastness in this. His irritation. What else have I missed?

“But-”
“Slade Wilson is there. We need to plan this, and I don’t want either of them,” he gutted his chin to Thea and it went unsaid that Felicity was the second party, “with a half mile of that place.”

It was all Felicity needed to plonk down on the bench opposite Thea and she tried not to yelp at the cold beneath her thighs.

Slade Wilson is there.

At the SCPD… but strangely, all she could think was that she needed clothes asap. Whether Oliver liked it or not, she had to go too.

Slade Wilson held all the cards? Nothing new there.

Exhaling, closing her eyes; her hands joined on her lap, the top of her body curving forwards to lean over them-

Fingers touched the side of her head where a stun rod had, well, stunned her. It made her still. “Let me see that.”

She almost groaned, almost told him to go away like a petulant teenager because they’d been here but since there already was one sitting in the van, she swallowed the urge. “I’m fine.”

Still, it thrilled her, the shift in the air above her bowed head and suddenly his voice - his breath and the gruff of his jaw trapping pieces of her hair - was at her ear. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your choice.”

Eyes flying open - his thighs were right in front of her face, his body bent over her own - she leaned back to see him, feeling oddly angry herself. Excuse me?

Only to find his arm - his hand - on the bench next to her, almost pinning her in place.

His body was right there and everything inside her wanted to fall into him again.

Her lashes literally fluttered down the urge. “Not here.” She didn’t see him move, but his fingers were cupping her chin before she had a chance to squirm away. “Oliver…”

He lifted her face and turned it slightly; his own peering in to see better under the night light in the van as he crouched to the floor, squatting in front of her.

He was silent as his other hand swept aside a curtain of her hair - uncaring that everyone was watching; Sara, as she made sure Thea was belted in correctly, John who’d twisted in the front to see what was going on in the back, Thea who was staring at her brother - his cheeks and his mouth… thinning in distaste at finding another injury.

“I’m ok.” She whispered, feeling his care and leaning into his hand; unable to help herself.

He grunted an agreement to the unspoken stalemate, but it was more a cracked rendition of strength that sounded an awful lot like breaking.

For all intents and purposes, completely fine and dandy. Well, not really but as long as everyone else was fine, then she could pretend to be just that too. Except, Oliver really wasn’t.

She didn’t know what else to say, so she went for crappy humour. “Just another bump on the head.”

Oliver’s head swiftly lifted; his eyes dark. “It’s not funny.” He whispered.
Her mouth closed. Opened… closed.

No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t funny at all. But she’d live. She was fine. But as usual, hurts inflicted were always felt the most by the people who you love… and who love you back.

“I’ll clean you up.” He murmured under his breath; a statement of fact. “Take care of you.”

Then he stood - letting her go - like he hadn’t just blown her mind, striding towards the front towards Diggle, and Felicity cleared her throat. That was going to be a problem. A problem for another hour in the night.

This hour already had so many, one of which was moving passed her. Goodie. “Sorry we were late.” Sara - Canary - told her. “You doing alright? Both of you?”

For some absurd reason, it made Felicity laugh. Aloud. It was small but noticeable and it probably made her look like she was going nuts, especially for-

“You ready for that whiskey and ice cream yet?”

-For Dig to worry like that.

She smiled towards the front, seeing Oliver stood there in the shadow of the front seats, leaning towards Diggle who was looking over his shoulder at her. “Vodka?” She squinted an eye, biting down on her lip; pretty much done with the clandestine and inclusive male club thing they had going.

“Sure.” And she was sure John was itching to come over; to talk, to hug her; something. “Anything you want.”

Anything you want. He and Oliver were made of the same stuff it seemed.

“I think we could all do with something.” Sara breathed, seeing Felicity’s weary smile. “We’ll get you both to the precinct and-”

The van rumbled into life beneath their feet; shuddering once as Dig pulled it out of the vacant lot.

“We’re not going to the SCPD yet.” Oliver called back with a finality that belied the defiance in Sara, even as her hand reached up to the roof of the interior for something to steady her. “I’m taking them home first.”

And where was home?

The Foundry?

The Queen Mansion?

It certainly wasn’t Felicity’s apartment. Not anyone. Not even before she’d been drowned in her- A phantom rush of water in her ears - the memory if it flooding her nostrils - had her stomach violently clenching, her throat closing, her torso convulsing until she was forced forwards again to retch into her open hands.

Memory was a heatless bitch.

But to have it affect her so strongly, surprisingly and in front of everyone?
Like her body was done and was deciding for her: TELL THEM.

No.

“Whoa.” It was silly to hope that Thea might not have seen it when she’d been keeping her eyes on her since she’d sat down, probably in an effort to not see her big brother in his green leather pants. “Are you ok?”

Honestly, Felicity was more shocked Thea was talking at all.

“What is it?” She heard Sara shuffle closer, her hand reaching the wall at Felicity’s back. “What do you need?”

“Nothing.” She croaked, her hand on her mouth, willing the nothing in her stomach to stay right there.

But then he was there.

Even his footsteps were slow, gentle on the floor of the moving vehicle. His hand was cautious, barely touching her as he pulled back her hair from her face and she felt his eyes on her. Maybe he knew that she’d flashed back, that she’d - for a single second - relived her partial drowning, her near-death, because he didn’t say a word.

Instead, he let her hair fall to one side and - as he sat beside her - the same hand cupped to the back of her neck; as if he knew she didn’t want to be pulled into a hug. Didn’t want to be held or constricted or put in a box.

There, his fingers pressed into the back of her spine. Massaging.

Oliver knew how to handle her.

Did she want to be handled? Her heart squeezed itself in her chest. I can’t… she couldn’t believe he’d do this. In front of everybody- his sister. But she knew him; he hated that she hadn’t told him everything. He’d hate it more if she didn’t let him do this.

Letting out a sigh, oh well, she rolled her head, giving him further access… and he was really good at it. “Wow.” She whispered.

She heard Sara choke on something resembling a chuckle, but she was too far- she was too far to care just then.

She opened her eyes to glance at her.

Head tilting - like, really honey? - Sara’s lips upturned. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“Am I?” She didn’t feel it.

“Oh yeah.” Leaning over her, Felicity was stunned for a moment - in fact she jolted; Oliver’s fingers briefly pausing - at the feeling of Sara’s lips at her brow. “I’m glad you’re okay.” Sara muttered; the artificial hum of her modifier deepening the sound into something resembling a soothing hug.

Felicity smiled despite herself. “Me too.” And sniffled, because, hey; moment here.

Pulling back, Sara made her way to the opposite bench, a little up from where Thea sat and plonked down. Elbows on knees. Posture alert.
Relieved, puzzled as to the way no one was asking her anything - save Oliver who’d demanded what he’d had a right to - Felicity pondered down into the metal flooring, her lips puckering. *How do I do this?*

How could she bring up Quentin? How could she bring up any of it?

“How aren’t you telling them what he did?”

The words rang out - damning - in the hollow interior of the van.


Until Oliver’s now still hand lifted from her neck.

“No.” Passionate, angry, fearful - pick one - so very overwhelmed with the *everything* of her day, Thea’s voice was penetrating, Clear. Convicted. “He hurt you. He *enjoyed* it; he told me he did.”

*Oh God, shut up. Shut- “Stop it.”*

“He said you were his special friend.” She hissed, and Felicity knew; she *knew* that it wasn’t a reflection of how Thea saw her. It was the depth of Thea’s disgust for Slade, for the man who’d scared her. But *God*, now was not the time. “He-” Thea twisted suddenly, her eyes reaching her brother’s form sat behind Felicity’s bent-over form. “He said he took her because of you.” She near shouted… and Felicity would have given anything for Thea to take that back, for the way Oliver tensed; the way his fingers *flinched*. Then still. Listening. Silent. “He took us because you’re…” the words caught in their haste in Thea’s throat…

A sob.

“Y-you-” Beautiful tears - honest and thick - rolled down from Thea’s eyes. “You’re my brother. The Arrow is my *brother.*”

She heard Oliver’s whisper. “Thea…”

Sara settled back against the wall; trying to be as small as possible. An unwilling witness.

“Thea.” He repeated, and Felicity was surprised he didn’t stammer. “I… this wasn’t how I wanted you to find out.”

He sounded so small. Quiet. Like he was waiting for chastisement.

“To find out that you’re a hero?” Thea uttered just as quietly, and - if his choked breath and the jerk from him was anything to go by - it was as if each syllable had hit him like punches.

And thank *God.*

Thank Thea.

*Thank you.*

Oliver had been sure she’d reject him. Think him a monster.

“Told you man.” Diggle’s voice sounded from the front. “Oh, Ye of little faith.”

*John*, she smiled because they all had. She and Diggle; they’d believed in Oliver all along, *Monster*
my foot. Good men could commit acts of evil.

Felicity peered back over her shoulder.

Oliver was swallowing, gaping back at his sister like she was exactly what she was: cherished. “I-I thought…”

“You thought that I’d hate you?” Thea said for him, her hand darting under her nose as Oliver sat there looking kicked and encouraged at the same time. “Yeah, well you’re not out of the woods yet.” She sniffed again, her expression a fluxed and confused mix of angry, happy and thrown. Betrayed. “I don’t even know how to figure this out.”

“What is it?” Shifting forwards on the bench, Oliver sensed where to stop, but it looked like it was hurting him not to go to his younger sibling.


He let out a shallow breath. “Ok.”

“Can we do this later?” Sara asked, low too; as if respecting their space. “We’re almost at the precinct.”

Oliver turned to her. “We’re not-”

“We are.” Felicity cut; in no way in the mood for another Sara-Oliver conflict. “We have to.” She added, when Oliver twisted to frown at her. Worried. “He has Detective Lance.”

But he didn’t seem surprised. None of them did. Uh oh. “I’ll deal with it.”

“You can’t.” She knew that as surely as she knew what Slade wanted now. “Not alone.”

“And I’d like it if my dad doesn’t get shot tonight.” Sara gruffly interrupted.

“Remember what I told you, Oliver?” Diggle threw from the front, his tone a level of knowing Felicity didn’t understand. “We need to do this now.”

Tense - his body clenched from head to toe - Oliver glared into the interior front of the vehicle.

Long night indeed.

Dig pulled the van in towards the side of the SCPD which was just as well: there was a circus of reporters and photographers waiting at the front and- scary.

“They’re here for the Queen’s.” Thea muttered beside her, frowning at the throng.

*If you say so.*

Felicity’s hand was already on the van doors.

She heard Sara move behind her, changing into something that didn’t scream ‘I beat perverts and
criminals into a bloody pulp with my trusty stick. “That’s not all they’re here for.”

What?

“Actually, Felicity,” Diggle called back to her as Oliver - beside him - shirked out of his black shirt in favour if a white button up, “there’s something we need to-”

She moved before they could stop her.

She heard them shout her name as she bolted form the car, towards the back door. Too fast, Diggle was slamming his side door closed, shouting, “Felicity,” and she heard Oliver call her name too - heard his footsteps in boots still green - dammit - as she punched in the code to the building at whirlwind speed: a code the police changed on a weekly basis.

“I told Laurel we’d come in through the side entrance.” Sara shouted at the guys as Felicity disappeared into the building.

Well, she thought as she scrambled up a few flights of stairs, at least one person knows we’re coming. One person on their side in a precinct where Slade Wilson sat.

Don’t think. Don’t think.

If she’d come in with Oliver, he’d never allow her to do what she was planning. Not in a thousand years would he let her talk to Slade, alone.

Bursting through a door she knew led to Detective Lance’s desk, she slipped to a halt when she saw Laurel Lance standing close by, as if she’d been waiting for her - she had - with her arms folded.

Her stare… cold. Brutal.

Triumphant.

Um, Felicity’s eyes flickered about the room: a room filled with far too many officers of the law, all of which were staring at her. Some curious, others confused… several angry.

A few with their hands on their holsters.

What’s going on? “Laurel?”

The woman in question scoffed. “That act won’t work here.” When she moved backwards, behind two approaching officers, Felicity felt a shot of trepidation crawl into her stomach. “You’re finished.”

Huh? “...I am?”

Laurel nodded to a man to her left. “Do it.”

The man stepped forwards. “Felicity Smoak, you are hereby under arrest for aiding and abetting a criminal.”

What the actual frack?

Chapter End Notes
REVIEWS ARE MY FRIENDS.
Also, this sort of scared me to write but I did it and it's done and boy do I hope you enjoyed it! *I say from far away where nobody can catch me*
The next chapter... I mean, Laurel's going to show her worst traits.
And um... other things I'm going to enjoy writing.
Thank you all for liking this sorry. Hoping to write more soon for my other stories - and things my brain won't leave alone :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!