The Wrong Girl

by QueenKLee

Summary

Crowded out of Arrow headquarters by Oliver's personal drama, Felicity resolves to prevent the plundering of the Queen family fortune. No longer protected by The Arrow, her investigation attracts danger, putting her in the merciless hands of Isabel Rochev and Slade Wilson. When Felicity disappears from her bloody apartment, Oliver must face the reality that his decision to deny his true feelings for her may cost her life.

Notes

Well, I'm at it again. This story has been rattling around in my head for a few months, so I'll post the opening chapter and see if there's enough interest to continue sharing it. Much of Arrow's 2nd Season seemed to relate to the theme of "The Wrong Girl" in Oliver's complicated personal relationships with women. So, I wanted to explore that idea and the deep, unspoken connection he has with Felicity that he can no longer deny when she is violently taken from him. Also, Oliver will arrive at a crossroads, challenging his understanding of how to be with his soulmate while protecting her from the fallout of his dangerous mission. Characters may be added as the story develops.
My inspiration to write depends greatly on your feedback, so if you find this story worthwhile, please let me know by sharing your comments.
Chapter 1

Felicity scans the row of neatly stacked pints of ice cream in her freezer, pondering which flavor suits her present state of confused denial.

So, Oliver and we-thought-she-was-dead Sara are hooking up. No big deal really. The man has needs. Needs that must be met by an endless string of badass chicks. The former castaway definitely has a type: confident killer women who happen to be muscly or named Laurel. And Felicity doesn't fall under either category, so here she is—alone in her kitchen, seeking the solace of Ben & Jerry as a reward for not bursting into sobs when she stumbled upon the Arrow-Canary make-out session earlier this evening. To his credit, Oliver was somewhat flustered by the awkward situation, although Sara seemed happy to continue their liplock in spite of having a mortified audience.

It's fine. All good. No worries. Nothing to see here. Everyone just keep moving along.

Felicity throws her hands up in surrender and grabs the closest container of ice cream, no longer caring about the variety. Digging a spoon from the utensil drawer, she schleps to her girl-cave sofa and palms the necessary remote control. She's in a Whedon mood because if anyone gets doomed relationships, it's the man who choreographed the exquisite, tortured dance between Buffy and Angel.

Lately, The Foundry is overly crowded with personalities and complications. Oliver is presently mired in drama, estranged from his enigmatic mother after finding out that Malcolm is Thea's father and caught between the feuding, jealous Lance sisters. Laurel is being a spoiled, drunken brat about Sara's return, especially after discovering her sister has resumed her torrid affair with Oliver. Roy is spiraling from a dose of Mirakuru. On top of that, The Clock King has painfully schooled Felicity in humility after breaching her firewalls and destroying her beloved computer system in Arrow headquarters beneath Verdant.

With Sara's return to Starling City, Felicity feels as if she's been swept into a forgotten corner. Apparently the lovely, lethal assassin is all things to all people: Sparring partner, vigilante/superhero, bisexual lover, defender of the helpless, science whiz, and competent IT girl, who also happens to be an adorable, strawberry blond. She can kick ass in a fight and seduce the survivors, regardless of gender. Worse yet, she has deep-rooted history with Oliver during his playboy and castaway periods. And now she's sharing his bed. Again. Felicity's not his girl, by any definition.

Some nights, there's just not enough ice cream.

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Sleep eludes Felicity, whose agitated mind scampers like a hamster on a wheel of worries and hurt feelings. A possible solution comes to her in the wee hours before dawn. It's time to be less invested in Arrow business and switch focus to her day job at Queen Consolidated, a place where her unique abilities can still make a difference. Felicity's bruised heart needs distance from the scorching passion simmering in The Foundry. Besides, she doubts she'll even be missed at Vigilante Central.

Felicity finds a measure of peace in her decision to shift her priorities. Despite her sleepless night, the bounce is back in her perky ponytail as well as her step as she exits the elevator on the 19th floor of Queen Consolidated. She's grown accustomed to Oliver's absence at his desk. It's been weeks since he's walked past Felicity's work station to fill his rightful role as CEO. Even though she no longer anticipates his arrival at the office, Felicity swallows a pang of regret, missing his daytime presence, their flirty banter and his affectionate closeness. Get a grip, she reminds herself firmly. It's a new day
for a new focus by a new girl.

Oliver's extended separation from the family business worries Felicity. Moira Queen's high-profile trial and subsequent mayoral campaign have effectively hijacked the clan from their own hemorrhaging corporation, making it a ripe target for a hostile takeover. There's blood in the water, attracting sharks like Isabel Rochev, who is not Felicity's favorite human being after warming Oliver's hotel bed during their shared trip to Russia. Felicity's importance to Team Arrow may have diminished, but her unique skill set might yet prevent the loss of the Queen financial empire. Oliver remains ambivalent about his family's fortune, but a nine-to-five girl like Felicity understands that his nightly crusade as The Arrow is dependent on the immense wealth he takes for granted.

And so she goes to work to protect Oliver from risks he has not yet fathomed.

The evidence, buried in encrypted company data, turns out to be damning — a systematic, intentional devaluing of Queen capital. Throughout the coming days, Felicity trolls and hacks her way into secret files that have Isabel's fingerprints all over them. She continues her relentless mission after hours, carrying the incriminating evidence home with her on an IronKey USB drive.

Since "her babies" at The Foundry have been blown to smithereens, she lets Diggle know she's working from her apartment if they need her. But the other team members seem absorbed in their own personal and family issues, confirming for Felicity that the choice to redirect her energies is the right path. And, she's privately relieved to be away from the nightly reminder that, once again, Oliver desires another, his actions plainly telling Felicity she will never be his girl. Yeah, well she doesn't need the front-row, R-rated seat, thank you very much.

After ordering Hawaiian pizza to be delivered, she lights a cluster of citrus-vanilla candles and sends her favorite playlist to her Bluetooth speakers. It's admittedly a nice change to spend an evening at home in comfy clothes, resuming her previous life. Before Oliver. Before The Arrow. Before she lost her heart to the enigmatic, closed-off vigilante and his relentless focus on the mission.

She's nose-deep in financial data when the quiet knock interrupts her concentration. Unfolding from her nest in the corner of the sofa, Felicity slides her laptop onto a side table as she rises, padding barefoot to the door.

"It's about time, Marco," she mutters, in happy anticipation of toasted cheese, ham and pineapple. Still focused on the complicated money trail she's tracking, Felicity opens her front door, forgetting to check the peep hole beforehand. It's an oversight that will haunt her in the mean hours to come.

Isabel Rochev crosses the apartment threshold, bold as brass, without pausing for an invitation or basic civilized greeting, marching into the room like the callous mercenary Felicity suspects she is.

"Don't stand on ceremony, Ms. Rochev," Felicity drawls in honeyed sarcasm. "Please feel free to barge right into my home."

"A thief doesn't deserve to be treated with respect," Isabel spits, as her manic eyes search the apartment with agitated scrutiny.

"A thief..." Felicity repeats in confusion. "Who? And what are we talking about?"

"Don't try that dumb blonde routine with me," Isabel accuses, rounding on Felicity. "Your short skirts and idiotic babbling won't protect you now."

Isabel's face invades Felicity's personal space, her eyes lit with a disturbing flame of fury that is all
too familiar. Felicity recognizes this specific glint of rage. She's seen it in Roy, when he's in a Mirakuru-fueled blackout, complete loss of anger control combined with supernatural strength. The first tendrils of genuine fear rise in Felicity's chest. Isabel is a dangerous woman under the best of circumstances, but if she's jacked up, then this encounter could easily go bad in any number of ways. Bloody, painful ways.

From past experience with Roy, Felicity knows that Mirakuru destroys the ability to reason and cope rationally. Typically, Isabel is a cold-blooded, manipulative ice queen, but that version would be so preferable to the ferocious stranger staring daggers through Felicity at this moment.

Felicity recalls the self-defense lessons she's accidentally absorbed during the long nights of Team Arrow training in the Foundry. She doesn't stand a chance of surviving hand-to-hand combat with Isabel, even when Mirakuru isn't a factor. If there has ever been a time to tap into her geek ingenuity, it's now.

Felicity falls back on stalling tactics as she tries to put some distance between herself and Ms. Corporate Crazy Pants. "And you think I'm a thief because..." Felicity suggests.

"Because you're stealing company files!" Isabel screams.

"Wow, Cranky Isabel is really loud," Felicity comments quietly, as an aside. Then, with a loveseat now between them, she asks, "But Isabel, I work for QC. I'm allowed to access company files, especially with my IT experience."

"Not all the files. Not my confidential files!" Isabel snarls, the vein in her forehead pulsing ominously.

"I've been auditing the company's financial records," Felicity explains with calm assurance. "Are you saying you are hiding financial files at Queen Consolidated?"

Felicity's question is more of an accusation than an inquiry, throwing Isabel off stride as she stammers with her answer. "Well... but no. There is ... There's information that's above your pay grade."

"As an IT specialist," Felicity counters, "I've accessed files in every department on every level of this company. I have top security clearance from Mr. Steel as well as Mr. Queen." Without breaking eye contact, Felicity's hand searches behind her for the aerosol can of compressed air she was using earlier to clean her laptop. Finally, her fingers clasp gratefully around the metal cylinder.

"Of course, Mr. Queen granted clearance," Isabel sneers. "You've been leading him around by his ____________".

"Hey," Felicity interrupts sharply. "Oliver and I are just... There's no inappropriate leading going on between me and Mr. Queen's ... personal parts. Just... stop being such a... such a Bellatrix."

Isabel's laughter is cruel and brittle. Felicity continues to increase the distance between them, now in sprinting range of her bedroom, which offers balcony escape.

Unfortunately, Isabel also seems to have a plan other than a hands-on takedown, drawing a small handgun from her bag.

"Oh, frack," Felicity sighs. She raises the aerosol can in her hand and points it at Isabel with her index finger poised on the spray button.

Isabel tilts her head in mock confusion and asks, "You brought a spray can to a gun fight?"
Suddenly, Felicity advances, grabbing a lit votive candle as she aims the aerosol at her feral foe's face. "No, I brought a flamethrower."

A fiery stream erupts from Felicity's extended arm, impairing Isabel's vision and aim, although that doesn't prevent the brunette from pulling the trigger. Repeatedly. A volley of gunfire forces Felicity to abandon her makeshift weapon and drop to the floor.

With tears streaming down her face, Isabel screams profanities as she shoots blindly, emptying the gun in Felicity's direction.

Scrambling toward her bedroom, Felicity nearly makes a clean getaway. She is so close to a safe exit. Before the 9mm bullet rips through the calf of her leg. Her shriek of pain draws Isabel's aim, attracting a second shot, this one grazing her temple. Felicity tumbles unconscious onto the rug of her bedroom floor, a slow trickle of blood darkening her blond hair.

"Idiot!! Your interference could ruin this entire operation! Besides that, it's the wrong girl."

"Shhhhh," Felicity whispers without opening her eyes. "Can we use our quiet voices?"

Why is Oliver shouting, she wonders. He rarely yells, especially with an Australian accent.

Wait. Not Oliver. She's not napping in The Foundry. Then Felicity registers a splintering pain on the right side of her head. Instinctively, she wants to keep her eyes closed, knowing that it will hurt like a mother when she opens them. But, since no one else is searching for her, it's up to Felicity to get herself out of this pickle. After all, she's managed to get herself shot and taken without any help, so how hard can it be to reverse those steps?

"Oh, ow, ow, ow," she hisses as the lamplight stabs her brain like an icepick, but her determination to be self-reliant keeps her eyes open. If I only had my phone, she mourns, craving the sweet, glass connection to her world. Focus on your surroundings, Felicity firmly reminds herself, taking in the richly-appointed room. She shifts her position slightly to look for an escape route. An unpleasant crackling noise informs her she's lying on a plastic tarp, which feels like a dreadful cliché — the doomed victim of a serial killer. And if there's any fate Felicity Smoak is hellbent to avoid, it's becoming a cliché. Plus there's the doomed thing. Definitely wanting to sidestep that label.

The only doorway from the sitting room leads to the voices of her captors, so Felicity crosses that option off her chances for escape. But the lovely bank of low windows seems to offer more promising choices. Until she attempts to move. Agonizing pain shoots through her wounded leg and she clamps her lips down on the yelp rising from her throat. Adding insult to injury is the ridiculous racket made by the plastic sheeting beneath her. She freezes in place, her face twisted in fear and misery as she listens for any indication that the noise has alerted her kidnappers.

In the distance, a simpering female voice pleads and apologizes. Isabel? When did she discover humility? And more importantly, who could put that kind of fear into She Who Must Not Be Named?


"Oh, frack," Felicity murmurs as darkness reclaims her.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Detective Lance visits a disturbing crime scene in Felicity's apartment. Team Arrow deals with her disappearance. Oliver loses control. Felicity's situation goes from bad to worse.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to those of you who asked for more of this story. This chapter is pretty dark as Felicity's violent kidnapping takes a toll on the team, especially Oliver. Your kudos and comments truly keep me inspired to write, so please share your thoughts.

Marco D'Angelo raps his knuckles again on the apartment door. He can hear Miss Felicity's music playing inside her apartment and she's usually so enthusiastic about the arrival of her supper that she greets him before he can knock. Tentatively, he twists the doorknob, finding it unlocked.

"Miss Felicity? I got your pizza," he calls out as he slowly pushes the door open. "Miss Felicity? You home?"

The pizza box clatters to the floor when his eyes land on the scarlet blotches of blood.

Detective Lance surveys the disrupted apartment. He's been here before so he easily tracks the signs of a disturbance, a violent one. His forensics team has already collected samples of the blood staining the hallway and living room. In spite of Miss Smoak's exasperating connection to the hooded vigilante, the veteran detective is troubled by his deep-seated instinct that she's the victim of whatever shitstorm happened here. Twelve bullet holes in the walls and floor. Scorched furniture upholstery. Her laptop dumped on the floor. IPhone broken and slid under a side table. And a beautiful missing girl who reminds him of his own daughters. This doesn't look good. And it feels worse.

With a heavy sigh, the grizzled cop reaches for the burner phone he carries for singular situations like this.

The ominous, distorted voice of The Arrow answers on the second ring.

"Detective?"

"You better get over to your girl's apartment," Lance growls.

"What's happened?" the vigilante demands.

"I gotta crime scene here and she's missing," the detective explains. "It looks bad."
As expected, the call ends abruptly.

By the time Oliver arrives, in hood and leathers, the SCPD investigators are gone, having framed their work in disturbing yellow strands of crime tape. With eyes adjusted to darkness, he enters the empty apartment, leaving the lights off and relying on the light from a full moon. His heart stutters when his intense gaze falls on the crimson stains. A long smear of blood leading to the threshold suggests that someone was dragged from the apartment. In the hallway, he drops to one knee where she fell, struggling to control his panic and dread. In his bone marrow, he knows Felicity went down here. In this very spot. Bleeding from what type of wound? Who was after her?

Jagged spikes of fear pierce his chest, causing pain so real that he presses his fist against his sternum. Not her. This can't be happening to her. Felicity. *His Felicity.* When was the last time he even spoke with her? Really noticed she was okay? He's punished by a flood of guilty questions, berating himself for abandoning her while he fell into old bad habits with the Lance sisters. Chaotic events of recent months have divided Oliver's attentions to the point that he let Felicity slip away. Was her shrinking presence intentional? Or did his erratic choices drive her away?

The sound of a footfall behind him causes Oliver to pivot in place, automatically pulling and nocking an arrow aimed at the shadowy intruder's chest.

"Hey, man. It's just me," John Diggle's familiar deep voice echoes from the open doorway.

Oliver relaxes his stance, letting the arrow slip down the taut bowstring.

"Digg," Oliver sighs. "You heard."

"Yeah, I recognized the address on the police scanner. Was hopin' it wasn't her apartment though."

Diggle slides his hand along the door jamb to switch on the overhead light, which throws a harsh glare over the room. The blood stains appear black in the jarring light and command their attention, however painful the implication.

"When did you last see her?" Oliver asks, keeping his voice flat in an effort to mask his twisting emotions.

"It's been a couple of days," Diggle answers, easing himself onto the edge of Felicity's turquoise sofa. "She said she needed time to work on some big project at QC. She seemed pretty absorbed in whatever it was."

Oliver reaches for Felicity's laptop. It bothers him that it was obviously slammed to the floor because he knows how much it would distress her. On closer inspection, he recognizes the bullet holes that have cracked the case and monitor. Oliver can't avoid the clear memory of another slug-riddled laptop and the dubious reaction it earned from her during one of their first encounters. He slides a calloused hand over the broken device, grieving its destruction on her behalf. Felicity *loves* this laptop that she calls Audrey because it means "strong." Felicity built Audrey from the ground up with components charged to Oliver's black credit card. Like Felicity herself, the laptop is a marvel of powerful, streamlined art. The ruin of her most valuable instrument is tantamount to the destruction of Oliver's bow. Violation has happened here, in this modest home of their partner. It cuts the two warriors to the bone as does the crushing reality that their Felicity is gone.

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She slips in and out of consciousness, losing all track of time. Hardened hands jostle her, pulling at her and she's vaguely aware of being lifted, carried through buildings, outside where cool night breezes play with strands of her hair. Felicity shivers weakly, feeling sick and chilled, as she's unceremoniously dumped into the backseat of a car. Great, more plastic tarp, she randomly muses.

Fighting for alertness, Felicity pulls a deep, cleansing gasp of air to clear her head and makes a resolute effort to open her eyes. She’s conditioned to expect the sharp pain in her temple and rides it out while taking in her surroundings.

Felicity carefully turns her throbbing head to check out the car. It’s your basic back seat of a moving sedan. She concentrates on sounds, deciding they're not on the interstate highway because the road isn't that smooth and there's little traffic. In a brief moment of recognition, she smells bread. The comforting aroma surrounding the Starling Bakery on the north side of the city. It's night and the infrequent streetlights flicker through the vehicle's rain-streaked windows as it carries Felicity through the darkness, farther away from those who love her.

Her situation can't be good, given how many times she's been moved between locations. Based on the limited conversations she's overheard, Felicity deduces that her fate is no longer determined by Isabel. There are obviously other powerful forces in charge. Her greatest worry is that she's become an unwelcome wrinkle in an unknown player's scheme. A player who declared she was the wrong girl. What the frack was that about?

The vehicle braking brings Felicity's musing to a rude halt. She closes her eyes, instinctively believing that she will be seen as less of a threat if unconscious. Once again, she's roughly dragged from the backseat and hoisted over a large man's shoulder. Felicity swallows the moan of pain triggered by movement of her lower leg. Her head hangs upside down, causing a wave of nausea as blood rushes to her pulsing head. She's fairly certain that spewing down her captor's back won't improve her predicament. Felicity focuses on his heavy breathing, the crunch of gravel beneath his lumbering feet and the swaying view of trees.

Then she is falling. The brute has pitched her into a ravine, where she rolls over rocks and leaves until finally being stopped by a tangle of tree roots. The last thing she hears is the crack of a rifle.

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"Find her!" Oliver roars, his anger and frustration vibrating against the Foundry walls.

"I'm doing all I can, Oliver," Sara huffs indignantly as she anxiously scans the bank of computer monitors. "I don't know how to track someone who's vanished into thin air."

"But we do it all the time," Oliver argues, striding forcefully towards her.

"We don't. She does," Sara counters, with quiet fury. "This is Felicity's domain. Not yours. And certainly not mine."

"What good is all this? Without her?" he thunders. Enraged, Oliver seizes the nearest monitor and slams it to the floor, where it smashes in a satisfying explosion of broken glass and sparks.

Sara stands and cautiously approaches him. Every muscle in his frame is tensed, his eyes shuttered. She places a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Hey," she says quietly. "We're not accomplishing anything here. Let's hit the streets."

A ghost of sorrow crosses his face as he looks down at the destroyed equipment at his feet. Softly, as if to himself, Oliver says, "She would hate it. That I did this."
"Yeah," Sara sighs, surveying the mess of wires, plastic and glass. "And it's brand new equipment. She's going to give you hell. First, we need to get her back."

"Where she belongs," he adds, his voice catching.

"That's right, Ollie," she affirms, stroking the taut muscles of his neck. "Where she belongs. With you."

Pain. Oliver Queen knows pain, his chronic companion through the better — make that the worst — parts of his adult life. Long after the wounds have healed, beneath the scars gone white, pain stays. Buried deeply inside joints. Lingering like phantoms in once-broken bones. Etched in subconscious memories too stark, too anguished, to ever truly forget. But this agony is new, excruciating in its unique connection to her, to Felicity. Losing her tortures him, excoriating him in ways that shock him. He hasn’t rested, or tasted food, or felt a minute’s peace since the detective’s call from the violent scene in her apartment. Oliver can't escape the meaning of those crimson stains that are permanently burned into his retina. The forensic tests gave no reprieve. The spilled blood, Type O Positive, was hers, a positive match to Felicity Megan Smoak, white female, age 25.

Before Felicity’s disappearance, Oliver had taken Sara into his bed. He had not given a name to what they were to each other. Being with Sara was familiar and the connection they had was rooted in their shared brokenness. Even they could admit that their relationship wasn’t the healthiest. But there was safety and simplicity in their alliance. Oliver didn't have to fear for Sara, didn't need to worry that she could be hurt because of him. She was deadly in her own right and not dependent on him — or any man — for emotional support or protection. Overshadowing Sara's and Oliver's complicated history was monstrous betrayal. Theirs was not a romance, but more a convenient, logical hookup between two highly-physical fighters who couldn't devote the time or energy to build a new relationship. In the basest terms, they were fuck buddies who found release and mutual understanding in one another.

Undeniably, there was the other thing about being with Sara: It kept him away from Felicity. Kept her safe from the inherent dangers that encompassed him as The Arrow. That's what Oliver had rationalized. Sara helped take the edge off of his desire for another. For the remarkable beauty he forbade himself to love, to touch, to have. Because of Felicity's innocent vulnerability in his dark, gritty reality, the only time he indulged his hidden feelings was at night, during the precious few hours he slept and dreamed of her — the wrong girl.

With every passing hour without her, Oliver's suffering ratchets a degree deeper, plaguing him with the realization that Felicity’s chances of survival are steadily, relentlessly dimming. Her life, beyond precious to him, is a flame being starved of oxygen. His innate compulsion to act — to fight — is useless. He has no direction, no purpose, no strategy for finding her, and it's destroying him.

"This can't go on," Sara murmurs to Diggle as they watch their tormented partner tackling a punishing run on the salmon ladder.

"I've never seen him this bad," Digg agrees with a frustrated sigh, at a loss for a way to help Oliver. "We need a break before he implodes. Before he's too far over the edge."

Sara yanks her leather jacket on, announcing, "I'm going out."

"To?" Diggle asks.

"Turn over some rocks and see what crawls out," she vows, a purposeful glint in her blue eyes.

"You could take him with," Diggle suggests, glancing at the feverish vigilante grunting above them.
"If you need the company of a maniac?"

After a moment's consideration, Sara thoughtfully shakes her head. "No, he's too dangerous right now. He's already put eight guys in the hospital. I plan to call on these contacts again. I need them alive. They're scuzzy, each and every one, but particularly useful in times like these."

And with that, she saunters away from John and up the Foundry stairs, the heavy security door banging shut behind her.

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"I've heard something."

Oliver freezes in place, his fist literally halting in mid-swing. His back is to Sara and she notices the tightly-corded muscles of his neck, coated in a fine sheen of sweat.

He's paralyzed, she realizes, his breath held in anticipation of her news. In terror? Maybe.

"It could be the break we've needed," Sara adds, relieved to see Oliver expel the air suspended in his chest.

Slowly, he turns in her direction, but keeps his downcast eyes from meeting hers. He's masking his fear, his pain. He presses a hand towel to his forehead, obscuring his expression.

"A young blond woman was seen. Carried out of the west end of The Glades in a maroon sedan yesterday evening."

She has his full attention now. Oliver's startling blue eyes bore into hers. "Who's your witness?" he demands.

"I won't tell you," she answers.

Instant fury radiates off him, not surprising her. Sara is one of the few brave enough to defy Oliver Queen. The other is lost to him.

"I want to talk to your source," he snarls, advancing on her.

"Oliver, your conversations can get out of hand, especially when you're emotionally... compromised," she explains sympathetically. She steps closer into his personal space, stroking his arm in a gesture of trust. "I know this is eating you alive, Ollie. I need you to believe that I got all the information that my asset knew. But it's a start."

"Was she... Did they say whether she was..." he chokes on the question, unable to voice the unthinkable.

Alive, Sara adds inwardly. Was it Felicity who was seen? Or her body? It's the gruesome possibility that catches in his throat, the thought that is gutting him. Because if Felicity has been murdered, Oliver will never recover from the bitter loss. Sara knows this as surely as she's certain that he will not stop his manic search for Felicity. Sara also accepts her instinctive understanding that, whatever this romantic dalliance has been between her and him, it's over. Oliver Jonas Queen will never again be her lover. In a classic case of history repeating itself, Sara's simply the wrong girl. And she's okay with that.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Felicity reaches out to Oliver. Diggle questions Oliver's sanity when he prepares to rescue their missing partner.

Chapter Notes

I'm posting Chapter 3 tonight just to get poor Felicity up out of that ravine because it's cold and miserable down there. But please don’t expect me to keep up this pace with future chapters. I will probably settle into a weekly posting schedule from here on out, if life doesn't throw me a curveball.

Thanks to a thoughtful question from Bluedove, I should explain that this story begins in the middle of "Time of Death," which is Episode 14 from Season 2 of Arrow. So if you’re curious about the drama going on between Oliver and the Lance sisters, you might want to watch that episode again to refresh your memory.

Now, let's rescue that adorable little woman...

By starlight, Felicity floats high above the trees, following the river's meandering path through Starling City into The Glades, free of fear, of burdens, of pain. The misery, fever and bone-deep chills are gone, replaced by a peace that surpasses understanding. Her journey is not aimless. Calmly and effortlessly, she searches for a singular heartbeat, his presence, uniquely separate from the other souls in her midst. She’s pulled to Oliver as a compass needle is to true north. As she nears him, lying in The Foundry, Felicity senses sorrow and anguish, almost overwhelming her in its intensity. He is alone in darkness, unable to rest and haunted by visions of... her?

As she always has, Felicity comes to him in times of distress. Drawing closer to Oliver, she covers and surrounds him with the innermost feelings she has previously withheld. Felicity lets down her barriers, allowing waves of tenderness and fidelity to wash over him. Responding to his innate sense of guilt, she caresses him with forgiveness, sending love's power to release his torment through her soothing spirit.

He calms beneath her, escaping exhaustion to find sleep. Felicity wraps herself around him as she has longed to hold him for so long. She lingers at his side as he slips into a dream state.

"Felicity," he murmurs in a sweet moment of subliminal recognition.

"Yes, Oliver," she affirms softly. "I'm here."

"I can't find you," he confesses, broken but still safe in the realm of dreams.

"Rest for me tonight, Oliver," she whispers. "I will wait."

"Where are you?" he pleads in a sob of desperation.
"I'm in the trees, Oliver. Near the river. Come for me in the morning."

Oliver falls further into the deepest, dreamless level of sleep with Felicity's name on his lips, her spirit watching over him, protecting and relieving his tortured soul.

Diggle's tread on The Foundry stairs is as heavy as his heart, weighted down with dread. Felicity has been missing for five days, the victim of a probable gunshot wound. Experience tells him that her chances of survival grow bleaker with every sunrise. And without Felicity, he can't see a future for Team Arrow and the mission they've shared. Hell, he's not certain whether Oliver will keep his sanity if this drags on much longer. Digg and Sara have seriously considered putting the archer down with a tranq dart for his sake as well as their own. On a good day, Oliver can be unpredictable and lethal, but an unhinged Arrow could wreak violence with grave and permanent consequences.

"Morning, Digg," Oliver greets Diggle from the medical bay.

Diggle is thunderstruck by Oliver's pleasant demeanor. It's downright unnerving. Maybe this is what a psychotic break looks like for an obsessive, broody vigilante?

"You got my text? You brought the Bentley?" Oliver asks, his eyes clear and rested for the first time in nearly a week.

"Yeah..." Diggle stutters, his confusion growing as he sees his partner assembling a large pile of medical supplies: blankets, IV tubing, packs of sterile needles, compression bandages, vials of drugs, bags of saline and blood. Diggle walks over to the growing stack and picks up a chilled plastic pouch of blood to read the label: Felicity Smoak, Type O Positive, Expiration Date 09/2014.

"We need to get these loaded," Oliver explains as he makes a few last additions to the assortment.

"What in hell are we doing, Oliver?" Diggle demands to know, a little louder than he intended. But he's just damned bewildered.

"Going to get Felicity," Oliver says, calm and positive, as if it's the most obvious and sensible thing to be doing on a Tuesday.

"Going to get..." Diggle repeats slowly. He seriously wants to slap Oliver who's obviously had some sort of separation from reality. They should have resorted to the tranquilizer plan. Like yesterday.

"Felicity." Oliver confirms with a nod, his hands busy packing the supplies into a heavy-duty duffle bag which he zips and hoists onto his shoulder. He strides past Diggle, clapping his shoulder with his free hand and adding, "Grab the blankets, will you?"

With Diggle at the wheel and Oliver riding shotgun, they drive north out of the city, following the river.

"Okay. Are you going to explain this?" Diggle asks forcefully. "How you suddenly know where she is after we've had no solid leads since she disappeared five days ago?"

"No," Oliver replies succinctly.

They trade an intense, silent glare until Diggle sighs and turns his attention back to the road ahead.

"You know, I'm tempted to turn this big-ass car around and take you to Starling General's psych ward." Diggle growls ominously.
"Diggle," Oliver sighs. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. For Felicity's sake, I need you to trust me. Please."

After a lengthy pause, Digg releases a deep breath of surrender. "I always do, Oliver. I always do."

With earnest gratitude, Oliver squeezes his friend's shoulder before directing his gaze out the side window. They're reaching the outskirts of the city where the landscape transitions to rolling hills and trees. The river lies to Oliver's right with the distance from the road rising and falling with the changing terrain.

They travel in silence until the trees monopolize both sides of the road. Oliver's eyes are trained toward the river. "We're looking for a place where a car might pull off to drop—" Oliver's voice breaks. "Where she could have fallen near the river."

Diggle raises a dubious eyebrow, but focuses on the road's right shoulder. After a few more miles, Oliver yells, "There! Pull over here."

Diggle brings the heavy, luxury vehicle to a stop, but Oliver is already halfway out the passenger door and walking a few yards ahead, where he kneels to examine the ground.

Diggle exits the car and joins his partner to scan the tiretracks pressed into a muddy area at roadside. Confirming his instincts, Oliver is immediately on his feet, headed away from the road and over the edge into the adjacent ravine.

They search for hours with Digg walking the upper incline as Oliver tracks the river level. The temperature climbs while their hope dwindles.

As the day began, Oliver had been so certain, almost jubilant, with the belief that he finally had an answer. The dream had been so real, Felicity's voice so reassuring and alive in him. He'd felt her presence, her comfort, her hope. And he trusts the words she'd spoken, that he'd find her in the woods north of the city where the river borders the road. Oliver can't bear to think of another night not knowing where she is, if she is...

Diggle abandons his stretch topside to descend to the riverbank, stalking in Oliver's footsteps. Oliver dreads his partner's approach and the inevitable doubts Digg will raise. Hell, he can't blame anybody who questions his choices at this point. Maybe they're right. That his cheese has slid off his cracker. Maybe he's had some kind of nervous breakdown and Felicity's voice in his head last night was just a lovely hallucination. If so, he wouldn't mind curling inside that particular delusion of peace for the rest of his days, listening forever to her promises that she waits for him.

"Oliver." Diggle's tone is steady, rational and firm.

"Don't say it!" Oliver orders harshly. "We're not giving up. Felicity's here. We're going to find her and bring her home."

Drawing on wisdom and experience, Diggle waits and watches his deranged, stubborn partner, who trudges in the opposite direction, away from reason and common sense. After traveling alone for another three miles on foot with no meaningful traces, Oliver roars in frustration, hitting his knees and slamming his fists into the merciless earth that has swallowed Felicity.

"Give her back! I need her back," he sobs, wretched in the crushing reality that he's truly lost her.

Her moan is so soft, it's a miracle he hears her above the sound of the river. Oliver's head whips around as he strains to determine the direction of her whimpers. He's immediately on his feet, his eyes scouring the rough terrain for any sign.
"Felicity!" he calls urgently. And then he sees a flying strand of long, blond hair, lifted into dappled sunlight by the wind. His desperate gaze falls to the ground where mud and leaves have effectively camouflaged the woman concealed there. Felicity is here, semi-conscious, her skin pale, dirt-caked and bloodied.

He has found her.

Oliver fights the compulsion to drag her out from the mud and crush her to his chest, never letting go. But he conquers his emotional needs and allows his past experience with trauma to rule his decisions. He palms his cell phone to call Diggle, who's nowhere to be seen, but curses the indication that he's got no signal in the ravine.

Kneeling at her side, Oliver carefully brushes leaves and debris from her upper body, looking for injuries as he reclaims her from the earth. She's lying on her side, wrapped in a fetal curl that chills him. He reaches for her hand, concerned by the coldness of her fingers. His touch travels to her neck, where he finds encouraging warmth and a faint, quick pulse.

Her right eye is black and he's horrified by the bullet wound grazing her temple. If the gun had been aimed at a slightly different angle, Felicity would be... He forces his attention back to the here and now, to the reality of her immediate needs.

"Felicity," he says softly, not really expecting a response, but it reassures him to keep her name on his lips. Pressing a lingering kiss to her forehead, Oliver worries over the hot dryness of her skin. How long has she lain here like this?

"You're burning up," he murmurs, more to keep himself grounded. "We're going to get you to a hospital, Felicity. You're safe now."

Oliver stands and shouts, "Diggle!!"

"What?" Digg answers with an exasperated tone as he suddenly comes into view. "Stop yelling like a crazy—"

The big man comes to a sudden halt when he sees her, still and deathly white in the riverbank. "Sweet Jesus," he mutters.

Oliver snags the duffle bag from Digg's shoulder and returns to Felicity's side, unzipping the pockets while Diggle, frozen in place, absorbs the unnerving sight before him. "You found her."

Oliver has discovered a second wound to Felicity's upper chest. "Digg," he barks. "She needs you."

That's all it takes to get John Diggle moving. He's instantly in Army field medic mode, stepping over Felicity's legs and crouching to slip his hand beneath her back to check for an entry wound. "It's here, Oliver. Above the shoulder blade. Through and through. Good news is I think it missed the lung."

Diggle and Oliver are laser focused, cutting away clothing, tracking wounds, checking vitals. The discovery of the third wound in Felicity's leg, badly infected, upsets Oliver but he pushes past it. Diggle starts an intravenous line of saline to counter dehydration. Both men shrug out of their jackets to wrap around her. There is some choice cussing over the fact that the blankets are still packed in the back of the Bentley, more than four miles away.

Against Diggle's advice, Oliver carries an unconscious Felicity up the ravine while his partner sprints ahead to meet him with the car. Oliver is grateful for the exertion because he is overwhelmed by conflicting reactions: the incredible relief of finding Felicity, anxiety for her condition and unbridled
fury against the heartless bastards who hurt her. A righteous demand for retribution burns in his chest. Oliver makes a silent vow. There will be a reckoning day for those who left her in the wilderness to die. And he will bring it to their doors with extreme prejudice.

Until he looks down and settles his focus on Felicity, frail yet beautiful in spite of the damage done to her. Her face is turned to him, a tear-streaked cheek nestled into his chest, her weight a sweet, reassuring burden. He'd come so close to losing her. But now, her heart beats inches beneath his own. Her skin is warm where it touches his. And hope floods his soul because Felicity is alive and in his arms.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Felicity hovers between life and death. Diggle placates an angry Detective Lance. Oliver accepts and relies on the psychic bond with Felicity.

Chapter Notes

I've enjoyed many thought-provoking comments about this story. It's always interesting to hear the variety of viewpoints regarding the plot and individual characters. It's impossible to predict the concerns readers may bring to the table which keeps the sharing process lively. So, dear readers, thanks for keeping me on my toes this past weekend!!

My plan at this point is to post a new chapter each Friday. I hope you enjoy Chapter 4 and invite (beg) you to leave your comments.

"You're not real."

Her voice is weak and croaky, but it still startles Oliver as he cradles Felicity in the backseat of the Bentley while Diggle speeds them back into the city. She's now safely cocooned in soft blankets and the car's heater blasts a cloak of warmth to counter her chills.

"I had this dream before," she murmurs, her eyelids falling as she shifts in Oliver's arms, a grimace of pain crossing her face.

"I'm here, Felicity. This isn't a dream," he assures her, a shadowed smile curving his lips, tears stinging his eyes. "We found you. You're safe."

Lifting her lashes again, Felicity rests her exhausted blue gaze on his and whispers with a sweet smile, "That's what Dream Oliver always says. But he's a big fibber."

And he laughs. The sound is so foreign that Digg cranes his head around with a questioning glance.

"Okay," Oliver concedes the point to Felicity, as her eyes lose focus and drift closed. "But this time, Dream Oliver is taking you to a very real hospital."

"Nuh-uhhh," she faintly protests, succumbing to peaceful sleep, warm and protected in Oliver's embrace, where she is finally safe from all the world.

Even though he understands the necessity, Oliver hates surrendering Felicity to the hospital's emergency team. And her moan of complaint when she is transferred from the warm security of his arms to a cold gurney nearly undoes him. But Diggle's efficient and calm report to the medics helps
pull him back to center.

"...twenty-five year old female, blood type O Positive, BP 180 over 60, temp of 104. Three GSWs. Signs of infection to the leg wound."

As medical staff surround Felicity, her panicked voice rises from the gurney, "Oliver?"

He surges forward, inserting himself in the wall of scrubs at her side and catching her outstretched hand. "I'm here, Felicity. You're at the hospital. You're going to be okay."

Her feverish, bleary eyes lock on his, fearful in these new, unfamiliar surroundings.

"They're going to help you, Felicity," Oliver promises, forcing a smile he doesn't feel. "I'll be right here waiting for you." She calms beneath the warm open palm he lays alongside her neck. He leans down to gently kiss her burning forehead. "You're safe now," he reminds her.

"We'll take good care of her," the ER nurse tells him as he straightens and steps back, reluctantly releasing Felicity's hand before they wheel her through a wide set of locking doors.

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Waiting.

And waiting.

Oliver Queen is among the world's worst when it comes to waiting. Maybe because he spent too many months and years fruitlessly waiting for rescue from purgatory as a castaway. Or as the alpha vigilante, perhaps he's too accustomed to setting the pace and agenda. Felicity is barely out of his sight when the muscles in his neck and shoulder begin to knot up, anticipating hours in uncomfortable chairs drinking stale coffee while fretting over her. Once more, she is beyond his help and protection, a situation he detests.

Diggle slaps his hands onto the rigid tendons of Oliver's back, kneading them briefly.

"Come on, Oliver," he entreats, "I'm starving. Let's go catch a bite in the hospital cafeteria. Also, we need to alert detective Lance."

"I'm not sure exactly how to explain this morning. How we found her," Oliver answers with hesitation.

"Yeah, about that..." Digg drawls, inviting more information from his enigmatic partner, who holds secrets better — and longer — than the grave.

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"Lance," is the detective's curt style of answering the line at the police station.

"This is Oliver Queen, Detective. Felicity Smoak has been found and is currently receiving treatment at Starling City General Hospital," Oliver informs the brusque policeman from his cell phone as he and Digg take a lunch break in the cafeteria.

Diggle can imagine the avalanche of questions and demands being spewed by the gruff detective who is without a doubt, going to be grumpy about any interference in an ongoing investigation. But for now, Digg prefers to give his full attention to his toasted club sandwich, soup and playing Farmville on his phone. Let Oliver deal with placating the SCPD.
"We... um... received a tip. It didn't seem that promising so we didn't want to send you on a wild goose chase. But yeah, it panned out." Oliver rolls his eyes as he tries to appease the detective. "Oh, it was anonymous. Yeah, no idea."

Diggle snorts in disbelief that Lance will swallow that line.

"Yes, of course we can do that. Okay. Yes, I understand. We will," Oliver ends the call and contemplates pitching his phone in a nearby trash bin.

"Sounds like that went well," Diggle comments dryly.

"As it usually does," Oliver sighs in frustration, snagging a bite of grilled chicken.

"So, we were acting on a tip..." Diggle probes for the truth behind Oliver's source. *How the devil did he know where to find Felicity?*

"Actually, that's exactly what we were doing," Oliver admits truthfully with a maddening smile teasing at the corners of his mouth.

"Alright, Oliver," Diggle says in surrender, "But someday, you're gonna tell me the whole story of what went down today."

“Uh-huh,” Oliver sarcastically agrees, glancing at Diggle’s phone before adding, “Milk your stupid goat.”

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In truth, Oliver can’t begin to explain the past twelve hours. But it’s not the first time he’s encountered events that simply defy explanation. Hell, the mystical tattoo that John Constantine magically left on Oliver’s flank proves there are forces beyond his understanding.

Deep down, *he knows* Felicity came to him in his dreams, that her life force was with him in the hours before dawn, around him, in him, as real as if she was lying in his arms an hour ago in the back of the Bentley. But to verbalize that makes him doubt his sanity. *Except it had happened.*

The words he'd heard in his sleep were the key to finding her in those god-forsaken woods. She had reached out to him in wretched darkness with her transcendent heart when that was all she had left to give.

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Detective Lance mutters to himself as he stalks the long maze of hospital hallways. God, he hates these places and everything that happens in them. Today is no different. He's found out that Ms. Smoak is in recovery after more than three hours of surgery. She's headed to intensive care in "guarded" condition.

Queen is exactly where Lance expects him to be: In the surgery waiting room doing a damned fine impression of a caged tiger. His bodyguard John Diggle coolly occupies a corner where he has a clear view of all entrances while fiddling with his phone.

The grizzled detective genuinely likes Ms. Smoak, but her circle of friends gets on his last nerve. So of course, they *would be* key witnesses involved in her assault and kidnapping case.

Oliver halts his pacing to deal with the arrival of the crime investigator.
"Detective," Oliver greets him with an extended handshake.

"Queen," Lance barks, making brisk business of the playboy's greeting. He shares a half-hearted wave with Diggle.

"So," Lance begins, "I hear she's out of surgery."

Oliver nods, his demeanor tense, and adds tightly, "She's pretty sick."

For a brief moment, Lance experiences a flash of sympathy for the guy who's apparently torn up over this girl, which is a new facet on the bulletproof billionaire castaway. However it doesn't take long for the detective's bitterness to return full force when he broaches the reason for his visit.

"Look, you two messed up," Lance accuses gruffly. "You removed a kidnapped victim from a crime scene without even contacting the authorities. Why the hell didn't you call SCPD before acting on this lead?"

Oliver turns his back on the policeman, his face a hardened mask of anger and exhaustion.

Recognizing Oliver's rising temper, Digg attempts to defuse the situation by volunteering, "We didn't put much stock in the information. It seemed pretty flaky." That much was true.

"But it wasn't flaky, now was it?" Lance snarls. "You should have called us the instant you found the victim."

"It was Felicity!" Oliver roars, pivoting to face Lance. "Not the victim. It. Was. Felicity. And she'd been shot and left to die like a stray fucking dog! Your police protocols were the last things on our minds."

The veins in Oliver's neck are distended. His eyes glint with tears of rage.

Surprised by Oliver's intensity, Lance backs up a step. Now on his feet, Digg steps in.

"Quentin, we had no cell service out there," Diggle explains. "Felicity was suffering from exposure and infection. Time seemed critical to her survival. We were forced to make a judgment call in a less-than-ideal setting."

Diggle's reasonable explanation and tone goes a long way in appeasing the detective, who grudgingly admits, "Well, I get that. But it's imperative that you take us to the site where you found her."

"Of course, Detective. I can take your forensic team there right now," Diggle congenially offers.

"Hopefully you haven't completely destroyed the crime scene," Lance grumbles.

"Thank you for understanding our overriding concern for Felicity," Diggle diplomatically says as he leads Lance toward the bank of elevators. With a friendly grin, he asks, "Okay if I ride with you?"

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"You have ten minutes," the ICU nurse informs Oliver as he strides down yet another white hallway, this one eerily quiet except for the regular beeps of monitors. He hears the subdued voices of medical staff. Most of the patients in this unit are unconscious, he reminds himself. Including Felicity.

She's breathing on her own, Oliver is relieved to see as he quietly slips into her room. She looks so small and frail in the hospital bed, the bruised skin around her eye appearing even blacker in contrast
to the snowy pillow framing her face. The blood that he donated in the last hour hangs in a bag above her as it steadily flows directly into her vein.

Oliver glances at the screen where digital numbers tell the story of her vital signs. A spiking fever. Erratic blood pressure and heart rate. Felicity, weakened by injuries, starvation and neglect, wages a solitary, internal war against serious infection.

He is helpless in this fight. Oliver's lethal skills, strength and lightning reflexes mean nothing on this battlefield. Tracking and killing every culprit who had a hand in harming Felicity can in no way save her. He desperately wants her securely back in his arms, cuddled into his chest, her skin pressed against his, as she was earlier today. Oliver craves the thrumming of her heart beneath his hand rather than coldly registered by sensors and monitors. But he settles for what connection he can make in this regimented, sterile place.

He leans in, bestowing a gentle kiss to her brow, murmuring, "I'm here, Felicity. Waiting for you. No one can hurt you now."

Oliver's large hands grasp her slender one, holding on as if she's his last connection to a sane world.

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Peace abides in this darkness. Felicity wonders when the sun will rise again, conflicted whether she will welcome another day. Having lost her understanding of time and place, she drifts within hushed twilight where she has escaped pain, loneliness, the struggle to survive. And she is so very tired, stripped of strength, her resiliency fading. Perhaps she will be forgiven if she just surrenders to this realm of tranquility, to a protected place of rest?

Felicity.

His voice tugs at her through the dense layers of shadow.

I'm here, Felicity. You're not alone.

Oliver's presence is suddenly everywhere, touching every one of her senses. The remarkable way her name resonates on his lips, in his voice, consumes her. The heady smell of spice and leather is intoxicating. His steadying gaze cuts through the mist. His outstretched hands pierce the void to lift her with ease, offering his heated strength, his protection and... something new. What is he expressing?

Respect. Tenderness. Dependence. Passion. Need. And there's love, certain and real, flooding her soul. Oliver Queen lights sacred, heart-borne beacons for Felicity as she wanders through oblivion.

Then, she feels secure in his embrace, his breath warm against the shell of her ear.

Rest tonight, Felicity. I'm sending you the strength you need to heal.

A new, warm surge of steely power infuses her.

I'm waiting for you. Felicity, come home to me with the morning sun.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Felicity awakens for an emotional reunion with Oliver. Detective Lance turns down a request from Oliver. Felicity reveals more details about her kidnapping. Slade sends Isabel to finish what she started.

Chapter Notes

Please note that I'm changing the rating from Teen to Mature due to language and adult situations.
This chapter has lots of "feels" now that Oliver and Felicity can interact while they're both awake and together again. I hope you enjoy their reunion!
Thanks for the enthusiastic response this story has received. I'd love to hear your feedback on Chapter 5.

Felicity's intelligent blue eyes are open when Oliver slips into her room at seven o'clock the next morning.

"Hey," he says quietly, barely covering his emotional response to seeing her conscious. It's been a long, harrowing 24 hours with her kidneys shutting down as her immune system struggled against the raging infection in her leg. Oliver kept vigil in the small ICU foyer throughout the endless hours until dawn, willing Felicity the strength and determination to live, to heal, to come back to him.

Pulling a chair to her bedside, he hangs on the seat's edge while enveloping her smooth, slender hand in his. Eyes flicking to the monitor, he's relieved to see that her fever has fallen from the dangerous levels of the past night. "Welcome back."

"Hasn't been much of a vacation," Felicity jokes weakly.

He's missed those dimples framing her smile although the purple shadows beneath her eyes tell him how very fragile she still is. She lies flat, her hair loose on the pillow, a golden halo around her pale, heart-shaped face while her wounded leg rests in a raised position.

There's an awkward moment of silence when neither of them knows what to say. Every ordinary phrase sounds so glib in his head. His calloused thumb rubs small circles over her palm, savoring its soft warmth. For a crazy moment, he actually entertains thoughts of lying down beside her just so he can indulge his craving to hold her — to keep her — safe in his arms.

"You scared me," Oliver confesses, the raw words coming out in a shudder.

His eyes shine with unabashed tears that stun Felicity, who murmurs, "Oh, Oliver... I'm sorry." She raises her outstretched hand, reaching for him even when she's barely able to move.

Oliver more than meets her halfway, leaning into her, pressing his scruff alongside her neck, his face
nestled in the silk of her hair. His hand has released hers to tenderly cradle her face.

"God, I thought I'd lost you, Felicity," he groans, the naked pain shredding his voice.

Felicity strokes the nape of his hair in a comforting caress, whispering, "Oliver, shhh, I'm okay. Hey, it's going to be all right."

Felicity’s taken aback by this unguarded display of emotion, by his brokenness. This is a side of Oliver she’s never seen. Realizing it’s his tears trickling through her hairline, she struggles to understand his reaction. What the hell has happened and how long has she been gone? Felicity’s still piecing together disjointed memories of the shooting and kidnapping with no way of accurately recalling locations or measuring the passage of time. There are simply too many black holes when she was delirious, hallucinating or unconscious. And at this point, it’s impossible for her to separate reality from the crazy encounters that were surely nothing more than fever dreams.

Oliver shifts, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple before facing her again. His deep-set eyes are intensely blue, fringed by spiky wet lashes.

“How are you?” he asks, his brows creased with concern.

“Dazed and confused,” she confesses. “What day is it? How long was I gone?”

“It’s Thursday,” Oliver answers, striving to regain his composure. “You were taken a week ago. You’ve been in the hospital for a couple of days.”

Felicity pauses to absorb the information, finally saying, “I was missing for five days.”

“I’m sorry,” he replies, his resolve cracking under the weight of his guilt. “I’m so sorry… I couldn’t find you, Felicity.”

“Oliver, wasn’t it you who saved me? I’d have died if it weren’t for you,” she protests, amazed at his overactive sense of duty. "I mean, you’ve done it before. And I don’t mean to doubt you, but this was pretty random as kidnappings go. It’s a funny word kidnapping. Do you think the kids are meant to be napping while they're kidnapped?"

Her familiar babble is returning, reassuring him that she's slowly coming back to him, with tentative baby steps. God, he's needed to hear her velvet voice.

"Felicity."

"Right," she acknowledges her ramble has veered off course. "Anyway, it's just that... I can't believe you found me. This time."

Oliver pulls back to tighten his gaze on hers, chasing his thoughts. Does she remember coming to him in his dream? Telling him where to find her? Is she conscious of the psychic connection they shared? Or perhaps, she was asleep and dreaming too?

"I had help," he cryptically admits, studying her expression for any glimmer of recognition, of understanding that it was Felicity herself who brought him to the muddy riverbank that nearly became her grave.

"Of course," she amends thoughtfully. "Diggle and Roy and Sara. I meant them too. It was a collective 'you.'"

"No, of course they tried. We all tried. Night and day. But that's not who..." Oliver's explanation
falters. He doesn't have the words to describe whatever the hell happened between them that night and, more importantly, he doesn't want to freak her out. Felicity has enough to deal with right now without learning she reached out to him using supernatural Bluetooth.

Her brow knits in confusion. "I don't understand," she says.

Oliver shakes his head and gifts her with a rare smile before kissing the crown of her hair. "It doesn't matter. Not right now. It's enough to see you here. Awake. Just rest and focus on getting better."

Felicity sees through him. As she always does. Oliver's not telling her something and it's important. But her eyelids feel so heavy and she's unable to deny her body's insatiable demand for sleep. There will be plenty of time to learn what has happened in her absence. The secret Oliver is keeping from her will wait.

"They're going to kick me out of here in a minute," Oliver says as he rises to stand over Felicity, his knuckles tenderly trailing her jaw. "But I need to know, Felicity. Who took you? Who shot you?"

"Isabel," she remembers, tears welling in her eyes. "Isabel Rochev. And Oliver, she's been dosed with Mirakuru."

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Isabel. Oliver has studiously avoided thoughts of the enigmatic, beautiful man-eater because he bears so much regret about their one night stand in Russia. Sex with her had been tempestuous, hasty and raw, more of a contest of wills than any semblance of human connection. It turned out she was a biter, leaving half-moon marks that stung Oliver with shame. And worse, their meaningless tryst had hurt Felicity, her face stricken when a smug Isabel brazenly sauntered past, out of his hotel room. Even now, he can't explain why he'd done it, done her. When the only woman in his fantasies is Felicity. Isabel is a conniving mercenary. And Oliver was the jackass who'd been complicit in her seduction. It was straight out of his former life playbook, one he'd intended to close forever.

If he'd only known why his mother had forewarned him to stay away from Isabel. Before Russia. Before he'd slept with the stone-hearted woman who he learned too late was once his father's mistress. Before his illusions of his parent's perfect marriage had been corrupted by old, poisonous secrets. Oliver would have been happy to go to his grave ignorant of Robert's and Moira's dysfunctional relationship, their affairs and pretense.

When he learned of his father's tawdry history with Isabel, Oliver's gut had twisted in shame, in self-disgust, in fury. Isabel's motives became perversely clear — she was exacting a cruel slice of personal revenge against the Queen family for his dad's past betrayal. Seducing Oliver. Trying to steal his family's wealth and destroy Queen Consolidated. The attempts on Felicity's life. What more would her brutal vendetta cost them?

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"Digg, I need you here at the hospital," Oliver commands on his cell phone. "No, she's better, but we still should hang close. It was Rochev. And there may be others."

As soon as Diggle assumes his post at the ICU, Oliver heads to SCPD to see Quentin Lance.

"R-O-C-H-E-V," Oliver patiently spells Isabel's name for the detective, who makes notes on a laptop in his cramped, dingy office in police headquarters. "She works for Queen Consolidated."

Lance quirks an eyebrow at Oliver, sneering, "What is it with your family, Queen? Is everyone
connected to you a master criminal or the victim of one?"

Under his breath, Oliver admits, "Feels that way sometimes."

Lance shakes his head and reaches into a desk drawer to produce a sealed manila envelope, which he offers to Oliver, saying, "I’m turning this USB drive over to you to return to Ms. Smoak now that she’s been found. Our IT department couldn’t open it.”

“Thanks,” Oliver replies, slipping the small package into the pocket of his jacket.

“You should know that Ms. Rochev is highly dangerous,” Oliver warns, searching for an accurate report of the effects of Mirakuru without sounding like a kid describing a comic book character. “Your officers will need to exercise extreme caution.”

“As we always do,” Det. Lance replies dismissively.

Well, I tried, Oliver thinks sourly before turning to his main objective.

"I need a favor, Detective," Oliver says.

"I'm sure you do," Lance comments dryly, lifting his gaze from the laptop screen. "And what might that be?"

"I want you to announce to the public that Felicity's body has been found," Oliver announces.

"Her body!" Lance blusters. "You want us to say she's dead?"

"Yes," Oliver answers concisely. "If Rochev and her accomplices find out she's survived, Felicity will continue to be a target. These people are ruthless. They don't leave witnesses who can testify against them."

"You suddenly seem to know a lot about this case and the perpetrators. But let me remind you, Ollie, you're not law enforcement and you don't make decisions for us. I'm announcing Ms. Smoak's been found. Very much alive. And the SCPD investigation into the attempt on her life is underway."

"Please, Detective," Oliver pleads. "Don't let your animosity for me put Felicity in danger."

"The SCPD is quite capable of protecting Ms. Smoak," the detective declares, standing to yank on his suit jacket. "You and your people will stay out of our way. Or I'll have you locked up for impeding an investigation. For now, if you want to play detective, I suggest you and your little friends try a rousing game of Clue."

"But I thought she was dead. I shot that bitch after dumping her in the backend of nowhere. How in hell did they even find her?" Brother Gold's defense rises from a whine into a temper fit while being grilled by Slade and Isabel, whose frayed nerves buzz like exposed electrical wires.

"She's a witness, you idiot!" Isabel screams bitterly. "She can identify me. How can I take control of QC if I'm sitting in a jail cell?"

"Shut up. Both of you!" Slade growls as if disciplining petulant children. His acolytes assume postures of submission although the snarl remains on Brother Gold's face. "She's just a slip of a girl. She can't be that hard to kill." Then, turning a single burning eye on Isabel, Slade commands, "You! If you hadn’t gone behind my back and dosed yourself with Mirakuru, we wouldn’t be in this
fuckin’ mess. Clean it up."

"Blood says that SCPD is providing protection while she's hospitalized," a chastened Isabel offers.

"That simplifies things," Slade observes with a rueful smile. "Tell Mr. Blood to make sure our Officer Daily is assigned to guard her room tonight."

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"Why are you still here?" Felicity asks, eyeing Oliver as he restlessly wears a trail between the window and door of her narrow hospital room. Now that her fever has broken and her vital signs have stabilized, she's been transferred from intensive care to a private room in the surgical ward where visitation rules are much less restrictive.

Her pointed question interrupts his pacing, causing him to halt at the foot of her bed, one eyebrow arched above a steely blue eye. "I'm watching you, Felicity."

"Watching me do what, Oliver?" she counters, the lively spark having returned to her expression.

Frustration deepens Oliver's frown as he replies, "Watching you ... be safe."

"You realize Starling City's finest are posted at my door around the clock. I'm pretty sure they can handle ninety crazy pounds of Isabel, even if she is jacked up on Mirakuru. Besides, it's broad daylight," Felicity calmly informs the agitated vigilante.

"Mirakuru makes people extreme and illogical," he argues, adding, "And from what you've told us, she has friends."

Oliver's reply triggers a creepy flashback to the angry voices she overheard during her imprisonment. "Oh, she definitely has friends. Including a surly, loud Australian one."

"Australian?" Oliver echoes, his blood chilled. "Felicity, one of your captors had an accent?"

She visibly shudders, pulling her blanket higher. Oliver steps to her bedside, tucking a stray lock of her hair behind her ear.

"Did you see him?" he asks, his voice grim in spite of his gentle fingers.

Felicity shakes her head, wincing slightly and reflexively raising her hand to the bandage at her temple. "No, I just heard voices. And I was kind of out of it. But the Aussie thing stuck with me because of, you know, my problem with—"

"Kangaroos?" Oliver offers, affectionately remembering that she "gets the wiggins" at the mere mention of the large marsupials. He tries to hide the amusement her eccentric phobia always triggers.

"Laugh it up, Bow-Boy," she grouses. "They're freakishly big. And they bark like dogs and have a face like a reindeer. That's messed up."

"Bow-Boy?" he repeats with a slight tilt of his head.

"You heard me," she asserts with determination. "But there are other places you should be now. On the streets. Helping Digg. Then, with loaded meaning, she adds, "With Sara?"

"They're fine on their own. Roy is helping Digg and Sara work the streets," he explains without really answering her underlying question.
"It's not your problem, Oliver," Felicity says soberly. "I'm not your problem."

"Felicity," Oliver says, as he pulls her hand possessively into his. "I screwed up. And I'm sorry that you paid the price."

"Oliver—"

"It's my fault you were hurt. I got wrapped up in my own personal life. You were taken and I didn't even realize you were gone," he shakes his head as he looks down at their joined hands. "What I do as the Arrow depends on you and Digg. My mission makes you a target. I promised to keep you safe."

His steadfast gaze lifts to meet her eyes again.

Felicity gives him a fragile smile, admitting, "Oliver, I was working on a... an independent project. It was my choice to step back from our nighttime adventures." She pauses, mumbling under her breath, "Dammit, and I was doing so well up until now..." Felicity takes a deep breath and continues, "Oliver, I stepped back from The Mission because The Foundry got really crowded with heroes. I felt... redundant."

"Felicity—" Oliver interrupts, his forehead furrowing in protest.

"Let me explain, Oliver," she quietly requests. "I landed in trouble because of what I was doing at Queen Consolidated. It was not your fault. This was my own private undertaking."

"Did it have anything to do with the files on this jump drive?" he asks, pulling her IronKey from his pocket.

Sighing in relief, Felicity nods, saying, "My files! Yes! Oliver, those files might protect QC from a hostile takeover. I was following the money and the asset values. They led straight to Isabel."

"Felicity," he entreats, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy, Oliver. Gettin' busy. All over the place," she broadly suggests with a single raised eyebrow.

Mortified, Oliver cringes inwardly, remembering the night she walked in on him and Sara.

"I knew... I was in the way," Felicity confesses in a small voice as she averts her face but his gentle fingers on her chin lift her eyes to his.

"Never," he assures her, his palm cradling her cheek. "Felicity, I can't find my way without you."

Leaning over her, Oliver lightly kisses her cheek, whispering, "I nearly lost you. I don't ever want to feel that way again."

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Isabel's skin crawls inside the hospital scrubs that feel boxy and ill-fitting on her toned form. She adjusts the Starling General Hospital identification badge forged by one of Slade's minions.

Walking with purpose, she's driven to rid herself of the irritating complications posed by a player as inconsequential as Felicity Smoak. How had Geek Barbie managed to royally screw up Isabel's game plan? Even before Mirakuru, a paranoid Isabel saw Felicity as an interfering nuisance. Since Russia. Was Felicity's witch hunt at Queen Consolidated payback because Isabel had seduced the
company figurehead? She had to admit, it was a pretty sweet triumph, to ensnare the illustrious billionaire playboy. And Oliver Queen definitely lived up to all the hype about his prowess between the sheets. The guy was a five-star performer. Even better than his father, if memory serves. What did she care that he cried out the wrong girl's name at a pinnacle moment? Although that memory rankles Isabel, she is here tonight to ensure that annoying name will be carved on a gravestone. Soon.

Officer Daily readily steps aside to admit the petite assassin to the darkened hospital room. Silently approaching the patient in the bed, Isabel draws a poisonous syringe from her pocket. She takes cruel delight in this opportunity for vengeance on the sleeping blonde lying before her. Although it would be simpler to inject Felicity's IV line, Isabel savors a sadistic thrill at the chance to inflict a final piercing stab of pain, surging forward with the lethal needle in her raised hand.

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Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Isabel's attack takes a surprising turn. Felicity returns to The Foundry. Original Team Arrow bands together, realizing that the threat posed by Mirakuru is spreading. Oliver seeks Felicity's comfort after a haunting dream.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for leaving you in suspense all week. Chapter 6 will pull you back from the cliff. Because this story is more focused on personal relationships, there are fewer action sequences, at least at this point.

Some readers are curious as to whether Oliver's and Felicity's supernatural connection will be a continuing theme in this story. The answer is a tentative "yes" because it will be an underlying bond, although I cannot promise how prominent it will be as a plotpoint.

I beg you to share your thoughts and reactions by leaving comments. Yes, I'm that needy.

"Careful! Watch that leg. Don't jostle her."

"I've got her, Digg." Oliver peevishly asserts as he cautiously carries Felicity down The Foundry stairway. Under his breath, he mutters, "Could you be more of a mother hen?"

"What was that?" Digg asks, suspicion in his raised voice.

Felicity pipes up, "It's all good, Digg. Oliver said it's good to be home again!"

"Uh huh." Diggle replies dubiously, as Oliver crosses to their medical bay, which has been transformed to an open-air hospital room, complete with adjustable bed.

Astonished at the new acquisitions, Felicity sputters, "Where did this come from? It's all Grey's Anatomy down here."

"Apparently, you can rent just about any damn thing you need," Oliver explains as he cautiously lowers her to the hospital bed, gently lifting her injured leg onto a pillow as she settles into the sheets. "Are you hurting? Let me get you a blanket."

Diggle appears at her side, all business carrying IV bags, syringes, thermometer, blood pressure cuff and a clipboard.

"A medical chart, Digg?" Felicity scoffs with a giggle. "When did we get so official down here?"
"Since you're barely out of intensive care and you deserve professional care," Diggle comments, giving her arm a reassuring pat. "So we're doing this right. Aren't we, Oliver?"

"Whatever you say, Dr. Diggle," Oliver answers, respectfully stepping out of Digg's way as the field medic checks Felicity's vitals and notes them on his trusty clipboard.

"No magic herbs and duct tape?" she quips. "Somehow I feel like I'm not getting the trademark Arrow crisis experience."

"I think that's his point," Oliver remarks, giving her a wink as he spreads a soft, thick blanket over her legs.

Smuggling Felicity out of the hospital had surprisingly gone without a hitch considering it was against the advice of her attending physician, who had a dim view of releasing her to the care of a playboy and his chauffeur/Army medic. But to his credit, the doctor had eventually agreed to the subterfuge of hiding his patient's escape on the lower shelf of a sheet-draped gurney with only a few select staff aware of the switch. And her physician had provided the necessary prescriptions to meet Felicity's needs during her convalescence.

"Okay, I'm headed to the pharmacy. There's Jello and chicken broth in the fridge," Digg announces as he grabs his jacket and hits the stairs on his way out.

"Thank you, John," Felicity calls after him as Oliver reappears with her potted fern, which he carefully places at her bedside. Oliver's sweet, thoughtfulness never fails to touch Felicity, whose affected expression gives her away.

Misreading her emotional reaction, Oliver immediately hovers over her with concern, asking, "What, Felicity? It's too soon for your pain meds."

Ducking her head, she covers with a weak laugh, murmuring, "No, Oliver, I'm fine. I just... Um... I was worrying about the safety of the next patient they put in my hospital room." It's a transparent, spur of the moment lie, but if Oliver sees through it, he plays along.

Skimming his hand down her arm, he smirks in mischief, remarking, "Believe me, Felicity. Isabel is not prepared for the new occupant."

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As Isabel strikes, the downward motion of her arm is abruptly stopped by a powerful, young hand employing iron strength equal to her own.

Lying in the hospital bed, Sara Lance flings the blankets aside, springing from the mattress as her partner steps out of the shadows to tighten his grip on Isabel's wrist, slamming it viciously against the bed rail. It takes three hits of her forearm before the deadly syringe clatters uselessly to the floor. Isabel's Mirakuru rage finds its match in the eyes of her worthy opponent — Roy Harper.

Defying her league training, Sara recedes from Isabel's reach, letting Roy engage the crazed bitch with his enhanced stamina and mercurial reflexes. A swirling vortex of Mirakuru-powered combat erupts in the cramped confines of a little room crowded with medical equipment, soon to be destroyed by the flying kicks and jackhammer punches.

Isabel, accustomed to having the dominant advantage in a fight, quickly recognizes she's outnumbered and outclassed by her adversaries. Once more, her murder plot has rapidly devolved into mayhem, effectively switching her focus from attack strategy to escape. Desperate to avoid capture, Isabel's seriously considering crashing through the closed window in a blind leap. Although,
should she make it out of this trap, she's not looking forward to facing Slade's wrath over another failed attempt to deal with the exasperating, resilient Ms. Smoak.

It's then, when Isabel is seconds away from defeat, that Officer Daily joins the fray and forces the odds back in her favor.

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"Wuh-oh," Felicity blurts when the pair of walking wounded vigilantes limp past a frowning Oliver on their way to Digg for medical attention.

"We need more doctors," Felicity suggests from her vantage point, propped up in the hospital bed. "And more beds."

From the looks of her, Sara's taken the worst end of the beatdown. She's sporting several badly-swollen bruises, a split lip and a wicked slash from elbow to wrist. Diggle sets to work, assembling supplies to treat his latest patients although the damage Roy has incurred is already half-healed.

"Hey, Barbie," Roy greets Felicity with a wave and a mock tone of envy when he asks, "How come you rate the primo hospital treatment?"

"Because she's the brains of this outfit," Sara quips, giving Roy a playful shove, but she pauses long enough to squeeze Felicity's toes affectionately, murmuring, "Glad you're back, sweetie."

"What happened?" Oliver asks, his lips pressed in a grim line.

"Felicity's friends showed up," Sara answers while she settles on the steel exam table, hissing as Digg applies antiseptic to a deep abrasion.

"Who?" Oliver barks.

"Isabel. And we almost had her wrapped up," Roy explains as he cracks the seal on a bottled water.

"Almost?" Oliver prompts impatiently.

"Yeah, we had her on the ropes until the cop tapped in," Roy shrugs as he peels off his blood-stained shirt.

Felicity blanches, her face registering shock. "The one guarding my hospital room? A policeman attacked you?" she gasps. At her distress, Oliver crosses to her side, gathering her hand in his.

"He was no ordinary cop," Sara asserts, exchanging a meaningful glance with Oliver.

"He was juiced," Roy adds, swallowing the last swigs of water, saying, "Not on 'roids either."

Diggle lifts his focus from the sutures he's applying to Sara's arm to ask, "You're sayin' this cop was on Mirakuru?"

"They both were," Sara solemnly confirms.

Nodding in agreement, Roy remarks, "It was a shitstorm in that tiny room. Felicity wouldn't have stood a chance."

In awareness of Felicity's vulnerability, Oliver says, "Guys..."

"No, it's okay. They're right," Felicity stoically admits. Then, she squeezes Oliver's hand, murmuring
to him, "Thank you. For bringing me here."

"It's where you belong, Felicity," Oliver says quietly. With me, he adds silently.

"We barely made it out," Sara declares before smiling at Roy and adding, "Roy's strength made all the difference."

"Hey, it was fun not having to hold myself back for once," Roy comments with a lopsided grin. "Although we fuckin' destroyed that hospital room."

"That we did," Sara agrees, shaking her head at the memory of the wreckage left in their wake. "Ollie, get ready to write the hospital a whopping big check."

Securing the last bandage, Digg turns to his partners, Oliver and Felicity, crossing his enormous arms and sighing, "So, Mirakuru cops..."

"Which might be good news if they were fighting against the bad guys," Felicity remarks hopefully.

"Instead of with them," Oliver concludes, his forehead creased with worry.

The three friends, the original team within the team, absorb the latest depressing development, presently obscured by disturbing question marks. The growing cast of villains is quickly outnumbering and overpowering the tight-knit crew of vigilantes. Shaken by Felicity's brush with death, they're still no closer to nailing those responsible. Adding Mirakuru-dosed combatants and a mole within the SCPD to their mission just ratchets the risks to an acute level, putting all of their lives in the balance.

As their leader, Oliver Queen knows he's the one responsible for the survival of his friends in this clusterfuck.

The nightmare wrenches Oliver to full alertness, his heart thundering against his ribs as he slams his bare feet to the Foundry's cold, concrete floor. But that's where he freezes, clutching the edge of his cot, allowing his gasping breaths to slow as he reorients himself in reality. It was a bad dream. Only a dream. How many times has he awakened like this? Soaked in sweat, trying to convince himself that the latest horror is only a terrifying reflection of the dark incidents from his past. But the hurt is the same. As is the fear that rattles in its cage, threatening to break free and tear roughshod through him, trampling the fragile peace of mind Oliver has barely patched together.

Scrubbing his face with calloused hands, Oliver can't shake the violent memories dredged up by his nightmare from the night Shado was coldly executed by Ivo. In his dream, he'd relived her murder, although when he knelt beside her body, she changed. Raven hair lightened to gold, vacant brown eyes paled to blue. But the spilled blood was as red, the loss as dreadful. And, at the end, it was Felicity's lifeless body gripped by his useless arms.

Only a dream.

To reassure himself, Oliver abandons his bed to check on Felicity, needing the sight of her, safely sleeping in his sanctuary, the rhythmic lift of her breathing, the warmth of her rosy skin. He couldn't save Shado. And on his worst days, he assumes the leaden guilt of choosing Sara's life instead. But he had saved Felicity although it could so easily have gone the other way. That recognition — that it was a near miss — will haunt his night terrors for the unforeseen future.

"Oliver?" Felicity croaks as she squints at him, where he stands bare-chested in the semi-darkness.
Dragging a hand through her hair, she mentally swipes at the narcotic-laced web of confusion that is presently her life. "Are you okay?" she asks, her brows knit with worry. Without her signature glasses, she appears years younger.

He wants to lie to her. Hell, he should lie. Because her only concern now should be healing from her injuries and recovering her strength. But he's still too freaked by the nightmare and she'll see through any attempts to hide his truths. Even with opiates flowing through her bloodstream, Felicity is amazingly perceptive, especially when it's Oliver in her sights.

"Felicity."

Oliver can't frame his fears in words, instead surrendering to the compulsive need to hold her, to feel Felicity alive and warm against him. He's careful, hyper-conscious of her wounds as he keeps his weight balanced on the far edge of the bed while burying his face in the tender skin of her neck, inhaling her scent. He laces his fingers in the silk of her hair, finding the solace only her flesh-and-blood presence can give.

"Is this okay? Am I hurting you?" he mutters, his breath warm against her sensitive skin.

Curled on her uninjured side, Felicity faces him. With a slight shake of her head, she reassures Oliver by resting her palm along his jaw, lightly scratching his scruff. Shushing him with soothing touches, she presses a gentle kiss to his forehead as his ragged breathing settles and slows into the regular, deep rhythm of untroubled sleep where her spirit soon follows him.

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Three hours later, Felicity rouses to the warm presence of a still slumbering Oliver sharing her bed. He's wrapped around her with his large, calloused hand covering hers on her midriff. His broad shoulders tower above the mattress, blocking her view of half of the darkened Foundry. Felicity's hair haloes both their heads. Oliver's even, soft breaths escape his lips next to her ear.

Felicity studies the shadows of exhaustion evident in his face, raising a familiar specter of fear. In spite of Oliver's extraordinary skill and training, a tired archer is more apt to make mistakes, meaning injuries. Or worse. His frequent flirtations with peril have haunted her since the fateful night Oliver revealed himself as The Arrow, when she and Diggle struggled to keep him from bleeding to death in this very space. Literally bathed in his lifeblood, Felicity's baptism that night stained her soul with terror. From the beginning, part of her motivation to support Oliver's mission was rooted in a deep need to protect and defend him with the best information in traumatic moments of danger.

What puzzles her now is why Oliver seems so wrecked by her recent kidnapping. Exhibit A is currently clinging to her in a hospital bed, his large frame wedged snugly between the railing and herself. As she thinks on it, Oliver has scarcely left her side since he carried her out of that God-forsaken ravine. But it's not like they're a thing. Yes, they're close friends and have spent night and day together for almost two years. But, Felicity long ago accepted that her not-so-platonic love for him is strictly a one-way street. She's been on the sidelines, witnessing the parade of shapely girlfriends who eventually crowded her out of The Foundry.

And, where the hell is Sara right now, Felicity wonders? Shouldn't she be in Oliver's bed tonight, offering him comfort and cuddles after his night terrors?

As if magically summoned by the thought, Sara herself appears in that instant, quietly standing in the shadows of the med bay. Her silent presence spooks Felicity, who feels a rush of guilt. For her thoughts and for the impression that Oliver is sharing her little bed, his body pressed intimately against hers. Which he undeniably is.
The two blondes lock gazes across the dimly-lit space, Felicity's expression a mix of surprise, embarrassment and concern while Sara's face crumples in sad understanding. Slipping her hand from Oliver's loose grasp, Felicity waves Sara closer, her mind scrambling for the right words of explanation, but the younger Lance responds with a slight shake of her head. Felicity eyes slip closed to collect her thoughts, seeking composure, fearing there's no way anyone would view this scene as the innocent development it absolutely is. This is just a stupid misunderstanding.

Isn't it?

When Felicity lifts her lashes, Sara is gone.

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Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity wake up in the same bed, at different times. Queen Consolidated loses a giant centrifuge to thieves. Diggle has a heart-to-heart talk with Felicity. Sara offers another "wrong girl's" perspective.

Chapter Notes

I confess that the Russian phrase spoken by Oliver in this chapter is based on Google Translate so I apologize for any mistakes. Because Felicity is the central character of my story, this chapter stays with her in The Foundry, for the most part. Sara returns as a kindness to Felicity and shares her unique presence and perspective. I know Sara is a lightning rod character for some readers so I hope you'll forgive— or at least tolerate— my sympathetic version of her.

Please take a few moments to share your comments. They are helpful, a source of encouragement and deeply appreciated.

At sunrise, Oliver's day dawns with his face nestled in the soft, cozy curves of Felicity's neck and shoulder, her flaxen hair tickling his ear. Pressed closely together in the small bed, the rail at his back serves as the only thing to keep him from falling out while he slept. And yet, despite the cramped sleeping arrangement, he lingers, content to let his eyes rest on the lovely, relaxed lines of her profile.

If Oliver's honest with himself, even he doesn't fully understand this undeniable, compelling need to keep Felicity close. To touch her, hold her, savor intimate contact with her skin against his. But she's here. Not missing, not lost, but safe within his embrace. And now that he's given in to his craving to claim her, Oliver doesn't want to go back to pretending he cares for Felicity only as a friend, merely his platonic partner.

Beyond the sanctuary of his lair, the world requires that he leave her, to unwrap his limbs from hers and resume his self-appointed mission as The Arrow. Starling City is rife with corruption and criminal activity even without considering the troubling introduction of Mirakuru. Plus, Oliver has a score to settle with Isabel and all those heartless bastards who attempted to murder Felicity.

Oliver's uncanny sense of time tells him he's got to move now, before Diggle shows up in The Foundry and discovers him cuddling with Felicity. How could Oliver explain this situation? Especially to Digg, who has an unnerving habit of seeing through Oliver's bullshit with a single, perceptive glance.

But before he leaves her, he hovers over her, memorizing the relaxed planes and curves of her face, so close to his own. With a sigh, Oliver presses a chaste, gentle kiss to her soft lips, whispering, "YA khochu zasluzhit' tvoyu lyubov'."

The buzzing of Oliver's phone is the final push, forcing him to abandon Felicity's side. After
dressing, he waits for Digg's arrival before responding to his mother's repeated phone messages regarding a break-in at the QC Applied Sciences Division. A visceral part of him welcomes the diversion, a chance to hit the streets and go on the hunt. His gut tells him last night's theft could be related to Isabel and the menace of Mirakuru.

When he reaches the ASD building, city police are inspecting the scene of the burglary. SCPD officers immediately gravitate to him with questions, recognizing that he represents Queen Consolidated. As he fields their inquiries, Oliver walks the premises, stunned to see the giant centrifuge has been crudely ripped from the cement where it was securely bolted with huge steel hardware. He's itching to scan the security video to confirm his suspicions that the thieves were empowered by Mirakuru. Of course, the average local cop has no point of reference for a serum capable of creating an army of super criminals.

Once again, Oliver is reminded how crucial Felicity's skills are to him. Getting the security footage of the robbery would be a snap for her flying fingers. But he's forced to deal with the QC IT department which is burning time he can't afford to lose. By mid-afternoon, a very nervous technology geek confesses to Oliver that the incriminating video seems to have been corrupted, leading Oliver to suspect one obvious insider — Isabel.

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The next time Felicity wakes, her bed is back to single occupancy with Oliver nowhere in sight. The only trace he's left her is the faint scent of his aftershave lingering on the pillowcase. The bed feels cold and empty without his protective presence. If she was still under the influence of morphine, she'd be certain that the Oliver sharing her bed was just another wishful dream. Heaven knows, she'd had plenty of fantasies featuring Oliver Queen in her bed. But, there's no denying this episode was real. He'd come to her in darkness, definitely needing her. Maybe even wanting her? Felicity abstractly wonders if her brush with death caused a factory reset of Oliver's hard drive.

Tempting aromas and routine sounds from the Foundry kitchenette indicate someone — probably Digg — is in the spacious Foundry preparing breakfast. For the first time since she was shot and left for dead, Felicity inhales the rich aroma of brewing coffee without feeling nauseous.

To her disappointment, her breakfast tray arrives with a homely offering of oatmeal, a boiled egg, toast, juice and sadly-decaffeinated hot tea. But it's served by Digg, who brightens her morning with a genuine smile, gentle hug and a happy clutch of daisies.

“No coffee?” Felicity asks with a pitiful pout.

“Not just yet,” he replies, as he raises the head of the bed. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“So where is everybody today?” she questions between crunchy bites of toast.

“There’s been a robbery at Applied Sciences so Moira asked Oliver to look into that, “Digg reports. “Roy is upstairs helping Thea stock the bar. The low dose of viper venom seems to be keeping his Mirakuru in check. And Sara’s taking care of family business.”

Sitting a little straighter, Felicity perks up at this last bit of news, suspecting there's more to the story. “Spill it, Digg. You know I’m bored out of my skull down here. I’m in serious need of some buzz.”

“Well…” Digg pauses, a conspiratorial spark in his dark eyes, before divulging, “Sara and her dad have decided it’s time for a come-to-Jesus showdown with Laurel. They’re planning to place her in a drug rehab facility in Central City.”
“Whoa! So they’re doing the whole intervention thing? Because I’m getting the visual and it’s not pretty,” she remarks, shaking her head at the idea of a Lance family face-off. “I can’t believe Oliver wasn’t dragged into this.”

“Oh, Laurel’s already smelled a rat and she begged him to come with her,” Digg admits. “Repeatedly. But he told her ‘no’.”

“Shut the front door,” she gasps. “Oliver didn’t roll over like a spanked puppy when Laurel called him?”

“He told her that he was focusing on your needs now,” he answers, glancing up at her to assess her reaction.

“Well, butter my bottom and call me a biscuit,” Felicity mutters to herself, absorbing this astonishing turn of events.

Diggle chuckles as he finishes taping the new dressing on her leg.

Watching him studiously, Felicity asks, "Digg, is he okay? I mean, over and above the usual Oliver sturm and drang? He seems..."

"Off balance?" Digg suggests as he inflates the blood pressure cuff on her arm.

"Yeah, like he's a little lost and...." Felicity shakes her head in denial, "I can't believe I'm using this word to describe Oliver, but he seems almost clingy."

Diggle makes notes on her medical chart while considering Felicity's question. Finally, he hangs the clipboard at the foot of the bed and returns to her side. "Has Oliver told you how we found you that day by the river?"

"Nuh-uh," she answers, warming her fingers on the mug of hot tea. "I just figured he put the fear of God in some lowlife snitch."

Affectionately resting his large palm on her shoulder, Digg remembers the hopelessness of those desperate days when Felicity had vanished. "Felicity, we had nothing to go on. All we knew was that you were seriously hurt and missing. Oliver was... He was unhinged. Not sleeping. Not eating. Violent even by his standards. But we were dead in the water."

Searching his face, Felicity asks, "So what happened? How did you guys find me?"

With a shrug of his powerful shoulders, her friend chuckles, admitting, "I have no idea, Felicity. One morning, Oliver just suddenly said he knew where you were. His whole demeanor was changed, like he was a new man."

"There’s just something different about him," Felicity ponders, adjusting her eyeglasses. "Digg, has something happened between him and Sara?"

"Now, Felicity," Diggle cautions as he affectionately pats her hand, "The state of Oliver's love life is a minefield that only a fool dares to tread. But I'm not blind. And the day will come when Oliver finally accepts he can have the woman he truly wants."

"Well, he certainly has plenty of babes to choose from," Felicity retorts with a sardonic roll of her eyes. "It's like a Tim Burton episode of The Bachelor around here."

"Oh, he's already chosen. I have no doubt about that," Digg says earnestly. "But now, he has to
believe he deserves her. Believe he deserves you, Felicity."

If she was hearing these words from anyone else, Felicity would have scoffed and done a spit-take at such nonsense. But this was John Diggle, her insightful and trustworthy friend, who has a long-term relationship with both of his Arrow partners. Because he's always in her corner, Digg's opinion carries as much weight as... well, as Diggle himself.

"Digg... I wish I could believe that," Felicity sighs.

"He's at a crossroads," Digg asserts calmly. "Oliver had convinced himself the only way he could protect you was by pushing you away. That denying his feelings for you kept you safely out of harm’s way. But then, he very nearly lost you. We nearly lost you. And now, he’s searching for a new way to keep you."

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"So you think Isabel's the mastermind of all this?" Felicity asks, now that Oliver has returned to plot their next move. "What about the other voices I heard? The Aussie sounded like the alpha villain."

"You should be resting," Oliver fusses, typing in a search phrase at her work station.

From her bed, Felicity watches him nervously, protesting, "I slept all afternoon. What are you doing at my desk? You realize those are new systems. And they’re delicate. I haven’t had a chance to sync our data yet, you know? Or set up firewalls… Oliver, if you’ll just leave that to me and bring me my tablet? Please. Please. Please."

"Felicity."


For a ridiculous stretch of time, their eyes lock in a power struggle, blue burning into blue, with matched intensity.

They might still be there, linked by their piercing stare-down, if it weren't for Diggle's arrival.

"John?" Felicity calls sweetly while keeping her fierce focus on Oliver. "Will you please hand me my I-Pad."

Diggle takes a moment to study his partners with hands on his hips, sighing, "Oh, this again."

Scowling fiercely, Oliver grumbles, "It's too soon. She needs more time to heal."

"I'm sure," Diggle reasons as he reaches for the tablet in question, "Felicity understands her limits and can manage a few minutes of sliding her fingers across a little glass screen." He ignores Oliver's indignant huff of disapproval.

Digg hands the IPad to his patient, who flashes him a tiny triumphant grin, before he quietly admonishes her with a wink, saying, "Don't push it. Or we'll both be on his shit list."

With a subtle nod, Felicity happily seizes her tablet, whispering, "Thanks. Now, get him away from my brand new computers."

While Felicity's fingers skate across the tablet's slick surface, Digg strolls to the training mat, cracks two Escrima fighting sticks together, and challenges, "Come on, Oliver. Let's go."
An hour later, Felicity has ferreted out a license plate from a suspicious utility truck that was caught on a Starling City traffic camera one block from the Applied Sciences building. Further investigation unearths a vehicle registration name and address, prompting Digg and Oliver to suit up. As they're heading out, Felicity's surprised to see Sara descending the stairs.

"Oh!" Felicity murmurs, her lips suspended in a tiny circle.

"Hey, cutie," Sara greets her with a dimpled grin as she closes the distance.

"Sara," Felicity fumbles, saying, "You're here. And Oliver's not. They just left. So there's only me."

"I know," Sara assures her. "He called me. I'm here for you. If that's okay?"

"Oh, you're my sitter," Felicity sighs, trying to decide whether to feel guilty for being a burden or embarrassed that Sara found Oliver in her bed this morning. So she opts for an awkward stew of both. "I'm sorry. That you had to come. Not that you shouldn't be here. Because you are. All the time. I mean, this is where you belong. Whenever you want to be here with your man ... friend."

"My man friend?" Sara repeats, amusement written all over her face.

"It just doesn't sound right to call Oliver a boy. Because there's no mistaking all of that man-ness for a boy. Although he is a boy. Of course. A grown-up boy," Felicity muses, mostly to herself. "Why don't they have a more mature term for boyfriend?"

Sara begins to giggle, a light-hearted sprinkle of laughter that dissolves Felicity's nervousness, allowing her expression to relax. Sara perches lightly at the foot of the hospital bed.

With a friendly squeeze of Felicity's hand, Sara asks with genuine concern, "So, hey, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, you know, like I was shot and left for dead," Felicity feebly jokes.

"I do know," Sara admits with touching honesty.

"Yeah, I guess I'm the last one to join the club," Felicity comments. "The scarred-for-life club."

"Yeah, we should get t-shirts made," Sara quips before adding, "I was thinking, if you're comfortable with it, I'd offer to help you with a bath?"

"Oh, that would be heavenly," Felicity enthuses. "I mean if you don't mind?"

"Hey, I've been where you are," Sara relates. "Let me just get some stuff out of the car."

Felicity's still adjusting to her appalling weakness. Digg and Oliver have taken turns helping her out of bed to stand for brief moments. Struggling to reclaim her sense of balance, she's trembling with exhaustion by the time they gently lift her, returning her fragile and battered body to the bed.

Sara provides everything a wounded woman could crave in recovery: pretty privacy screens, steaming water, a soft loofah with lightly-scented soap, thick towels, luxurious skin cream, hairbrush, nail files and clippers. Because of her personal history with injuries, Sara skillfully demonstrates the finer points of a sponge bath.

"I heard you had a rough day," Felicity sympathetically says while Sara washes and kneads the muscles of her uninjured leg.
“Yeah, it was exhausting, but at least now, Laurel’s where she needs to be,” Sara sighs. “Where she can get the professional help she needs.”

After Felicity's bathed and dressed in a fresh, cotton gown, she sighs in utter contentment while Sara brushes her hair, using the soft bristles to massage her scalp.

"God, you're good at this," Felicity says, her eyes closed in blissful contentment now that she's clean and pampered.

"I was laid up after a League attack that put me down for six weeks. Nyssa took care of me. I just figured no one at this sausage party would offer a real girl bath," Sara jokes.

Laughing, Felicity remarks, "Like that wouldn't be awkward?"

With a suggestive wink, Sara adds, "Not necessarily. Oliver gives a damn fine bath."

Instead of her usual jealousy, Felicity feels a flash of kinship with Sara. They're among the sisterhood of women in love with a tortured man who's imprisoned his heart behind iron bars of self-denial. They are so alike in appearance, these two blue-eyed, petite dimpled blondes with curvy figures. But their personalities have been shaped by vastly different experiences, truly difficult for the other to grasp. And yet, they're friends, bound by the unique life they share with these powerful, driven men, who rely on them every night in indefinable ways.

Once Felicity is settled and comfortable, Sara sets about cleaning up and gathering the bath supplies into baskets, which she intends to leave in The Foundry for future use.

"Thank you, Sara. I feel like a new woman," Felicity says, covering a yawn and nestling deeper into the comfortable bedding.

Returning to her bedside, Sara smooths Felicity's hair, responding, "Hey, we girls have to stick together."

"Yeah, about that. I need to apologize for this morning," Felicity starts, "I'm sorry for how that must have looked. I didn't want you to get the wrong impression."

"I got the impression I was seeing a moment of truth between two people who deeply care about each other. You've got nothing to apologize for," Sara quietly says, her eyes leveled on Felicity's.

"Oliver isn’t mine, Felicity. He never was."

* Google Translation of *YA khochu zasluzhit' tvoyu lyubov' -- I want to deserve your love.*
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

With pieces still missing, Team Arrow tries to sort out the Mirakuru puzzle. Despite an out-of-control Isabel, Slade furthers his plan for retaliation. Oliver puts Felicity to bed. Twice.

Chapter Notes

Technology issues and the scourge of Daylight Savings Time are working against me getting the latest chapter posted, but I'll keep trying.
Just a note: The dialogue concerning sugar/blood/Mirakuru is pure blarney (nod to St. Paddy) but it's loosely drawn from the TV series, so I'm blaming the "alternative" science facts on them.
I hope Chapter 8 provides you with a satisfying Olicity fix for the weekend. If so, please share your comments!

"Sugar?"

"That's what we found, Felicity," Oliver reports as he, Diggle and Roy clean and stow their weapons in The Foundry. "Your intel led to a warehouse of sugar."

Propped up in bed, Felicity's forehead crinkles in concentration as she factors in this latest discovery, relying on her trusty tablet. Out of habit, she compulsively taps in the random bits of information they've gleaned so far. She considers last night's unusual theft— blood stolen from a local blood bank.

After shedding his hood and jacket, Oliver begins to remove the dark grease paint around his eyes as he walks toward her.

"What have you found?" he asks, waiting patiently while her fingers dance across the I-Pad.

Without raising her head, she comments, "We need to get you some baby wipes."

"Some baby... what??" he sputters in confusion.

Glancing up at him, she confirms, "Baby wipes, Oliver. For your face. You're ruining the hand towels."

Oliver glances at the incriminating, stained towel in his hand.

"We were discussing sugar," Digg prompts, as he checks the dressing on Felicity's lower leg.

"Yep," Felicity agrees, pointing her nose — and attention — back to her screen.

"What does sugar have to do with stolen blood and a big-ass centrifuge?" Roy wonders out loud.
"Serum!" Felicity and Digg exclaim together, briefly high-fiving before she feeds more data into her search and he returns to checking her vital signs.

"A centrifuge extracts serum from whole blood," Felicity reads from her screen.

Digg volunteers, "And... glucose from sugar serves as a medium."

"Meaning?" Roy prompts, not following their line of reasoning.

"Someone's trying to manufacture Mirakuru," Oliver concludes darkly, his expression tense.

Digg counters, "Whoa, how did you make that jump? They could be making any kind of street drug. I'm just sayin', Mirakuru is an awfully obscure World War II vaccine?"

"That we already know is spreading here in Starling City. That poisoned Roy," Oliver replies with heat.

"But that doesn't necessarily mean—," Felicity reasons before Oliver cuts her off.

"And we can assume Isabel corrupted the video of QC centrifuge being torn from cement by someone with super strength," Oliver argues convincingly, bringing the rest of his team to the same sobering conclusion.

"Dammit, someone's making Mirakuru," Felicity concedes before plunging on, back in full research mode. "How does that fit with what else we know? Isabel was systematically devaluing Queen Consolidated holdings to initiate a hostile takeover—"

"Which you’ve prevented," Oliver quietly interjects. "My mother called an emergency meeting of QC's board of trustees. Of course, Isabel’s gone underground since you were found—"

"Thank you very much," Felicity happily interrupts.

"Welcome," he murmurs before continuing, "The Board has officially suspended Isabel and ordered an investigation of QC’s finances. She definitely hurt my family’s business, but it looks like we can recover from the damage. Thanks to you, Felicity."

"Welcome," Felicity adds, flashing him a sincere smile. "Although I didn't do it for your mother because she scares me more than Isabel... But my little side project also led to the unfortunate — and painful discovery — that Ms. Rochev is under the influence of Mirakuru and that she has partners, as yet unknown. This evening, I found out that our Izzy is also on retainer with an impressive influx of cash from a corporation called Gulong, Inc."

"What?" Oliver gasps. "What did you say?"

Noting his stunned expression, Felicity asks, "Which part? The cash? Because it was major cheddar. Like a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive... Or ... the Gulong thing?"

He's pacing now, his hand gripping the back of his neck. "That can't be. That was their name. It was... her name."

"Who, Oliver?" Felicity questions him, concern written in her eyes.

"Yao Fei. And Shado," Oliver remembers, sensing their ghosts in the shadows. "Their name was Gulong."
Two hours later, Felicity has researched the origins of Mirakuru and is hot on the legal trail of the Gulong corporation.

She's still madly digging through layers of cyberspace when Oliver's fingers grasp her tablet and firmly pull it from her grip.

"Hey!" Felicity objects, indignation flashing in her eyes. "I'm not done."

After placing the device out of her reach, he gently removes her glasses from her face to fold and set them on a side table.

"Now you're just being rude," she huffs as he presses buttons to lower the head of her mattress and dim the surrounding lights.

"Oliver, I was making real progress. I found out that—"

Oliver interrupts her speech, saying, "Felicity," as he skims his knuckles along her jaw. Leaning down, his face a whisper from hers, he says, "You're recovering from three gunshot wounds, not to mention infection, dehydration and exposure. Your brilliant discoveries can wait until morning. Because you're more important to me than any mission."

"But," she argues weakly, suddenly aware of his intimate closeness, "What... about—"

Oliver stills her lips with his own, a tentative kiss that is sweet and lingering, asking nothing more than she is able to give in this hour. But hinting of a desire to know more of her, on another night, with these tantalizing lips. And in that radiant moment, the earth ceases turning for two souls who've stopped running from an affinity that will not be denied.

"You sure know how to shut a girl up," Felicity murmurs, her eyes still closed as she savors his nearness, the sweet sensation Oliver's lips left on hers and the subtle shift in his attentions. Finally, she's received the kiss she'd stopped hoping for, from the man she's long loved without regret.

"Goodnight, Felicity," Oliver whispers, kissing her forehead softly, before he leaves her to rest, to seek him out in their dreams.

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Without the Mirakuru surging through her bloodstream, Isabel would have been killed by Slade's vicious blow to her throat. In response, rage instantly roars within her. She retaliates without thinking, slashing her adversary's face with sharpened fingernails. But Slade towers over her, giving him a distinct advantage. He easily neutralizes her attack, carelessly throwing her into a nearby wall, damaging the sheet-rock.

"Stay down," he growls, as she rolls to face him, but doesn't rise. "Good girl."

Isabel snarls in reply, her eyes sizzling with anger.

"You made a choice to eat the dragon. Now it burns inside you, a fiery hate capable of scorching the earth," Slade says as he marches forward to stand over her. "There will come a time to let your rage burn this city to ash. But for now, you get control of it. Or I will put you in the ground."

Slade's beautiful plan to imbed Isabel as a corporate raider within the Queen empire is crumbling now that she's crazed on Mirakuru. For years, he's feverishly plotted epic revenge against Oliver Queen, hoping to shatter every aspect of his life, in retaliation for Shado's death. The failed attempt to bankrupt the Queen family is a bitter pill for Slade to swallow. But for now, he focuses on the
other pathways to ruin Oliver while creating an army of super soldiers to bring down The Arrow’s beloved city. And the final coups in Oliver’s destruction — slaying the beautiful girl in the treasured photo, Laurel Lance.

Last night. Cyrus Gold backed up Slade, disguised as Deathstroke, when they hijacked a prison transport van, recruiting twenty convicts for their mission. With help from Sebastian Blood, Cyrus now stands ready to activate the massive centrifuge, stolen from QC, to mass-produce Mirakuru. In the meantime, Slade needs something from The Arrow. He's long-overdue for a reunion with his nemesis, “The Kid” — Oliver Queen.

"I won't let you fall," Oliver promises, his hands securely positioned at Felicity's waist as she takes her first tentative steps.

Groaning with effort, Felicity has a death grip on Oliver's shirt as he slowly walks backward while facing her. "I owe you so many apologies," she mutters, gingerly lifting her injured leg.

"Why is that?" he asks, keeping his eyes on her feet as she limps forward.

"Because I have not been nearly as sympathetic as I should have been. When I think about all the times you've been shot, stabbed, tortured, bruised, poisoned, cut, skinned, burned, sprained —"

"Felicity."

"But there's more," she babbles on. "Hit, bumped, pummeled, bitten, punched, run over—"

"Felicity. I get it," he grins, turning her in a wide circle back towards her bed.

"Well, now I get it. How much this hurts. Because it... really hurts," she admits with a grimace.

"I'm sorry," he says, strengthening his hold as she falters.

"No," she softly protests, "That's not my point."

"You feel my pain, Felicity?" Oliver asks, a playful smile on his lips.

_Oh, those lips. She knows so much more about them now that they've actually touched hers._

"In a whole new, not-virtual reality way," she assures him with a fervent nod of her ponytail.

They're halfway back to the bed when her legs give out, an eventuality Oliver is prepared for, catching and lifting her to his chest.

"I've got you," he assures her, his kiss brushing the crown of her head before adding, "That was a good effort for your first steps." Oliver lowers Felicity into her bed and she collapses against the pillows in sheer exhaustion.

"What a wimp I am," she huffs in frustration. "I feel like I just finished an Ironman race."

"You're stronger than all of us, Felicity. Where it matters," Oliver says earnestly, snuggling a cozy blanket around her. "Each day will get easier. But healing takes time and patience."

Opening one accusing eye in disbelief, she retorts, "And this pearl of wisdom coming from a man who hasn't even stopped bleeding before he's back in the field."
"Felicity."

"Oliver."

There's a long period of silence, their inner thoughts shared by their linked blue eyes.

*I'm so glad I'm alive and here with you,* Felicity realizes, profoundly grateful to have survived Isabel's wrath, that she didn't die alone in unblessed ground, that her life wasn't senselessly cut short, her disappearance forever shrouded in mystery. She's returned from death's door, awakening in Oliver's arms and, to her astonishment, he's staying at her side, cherishing her presence. Something has changed between them. Or at least broken the surface, allowing them to emerge together in light of day, to share the same space by night. Allowing them to *be.*

*I'm so glad I found you in time,* he thinks, remembering his dark desperation to track and rescue her. Has it only been a week since your spirit touched mine, since I found you, half-buried in the riverbank? Since I got a second chance to be with you in reality, not just in the netherworld of my private dreams? He's so tired of chasing all the wrong girls to keep him away from the only girl he wants. To have and hold her. To explore and know her as a woman. As *his* woman.

"Will you do me a favor?" Felicity requests, her voice small in the open stillness of The Foundry.

"Anything," he promises.

"Hold me?" she asks. "'Til I fall asleep?"

"If I could, Felicity," Oliver vows quietly. "It's how every day would end." And he lies down, his broad chest warm against her back, his arm encircling her waist. He skims her hair away from her neck to press a lingering kiss in the soft skin along her pulsepoint before nuzzling his head next to hers on the pillow. Felicity pulls his hand beneath her tank top, just below her bare breasts, craving the touch of his skin against hers as she surrenders to the comfort of his solid presence, the allure of sleep and the shelter of love answered.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Deathstroke descends on Team Arrow, taking a prisoner and proving The Foundry is no longer secure. Oliver reveals his tortured history with Slade.

Chapter Notes

I'm barely skidding under the wire with this new chapter, but hey, it's still Friday! When writing Chapter 9, I wrestled with the logic of why Team Arrow continued to use The Foundry as their base of operations after it was breached by Slade. Perhaps, I'm missing something on this point, but since my story is AU anyway, I'll be moving Arrow and Company, so you can expect lovely, wicked Moira to appear in the next chapter. I owe my heartfelt thanks to those readers who continue to follow this story and inspire me by sharing their comments and kudos! If you're new to my writing, I'd love to hear from you. That said, let's get on with it...

"Miss me, Kid?"

The gravelly, sinister voice forces time to stand still in The Foundry. The looming, ominous figure who's suddenly materialized may be disguised as Deathstroke, but Oliver Queen faces a nightmare from his tortured past—Slade Wilson. The final terrible piece falls into place, revealing that Oliver's longtime nemesis is very much alive and the likely mastermind of a systematic plot to ruin him.

"What's wrong, Kid?" Slade goads him. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

If he was alone in this dangerous encounter, Oliver would have the privilege of engaging Slade on his own terms. But Roy is his only backup in protecting Felicity, who is a vulnerable target as she stands frozen in place, leaning heavily on her new walking cane. As Deathstroke, the intruder bristles with weaponry, including a matched pair of katana swords crossed at his back, assorted firearms and body armor.

Roy looks uncertainly to Oliver, ready to follow his lead if a vigilante melee is about to breakout. Sizing up the tall invader, Roy regrets that he's already had his daily dose of viper venom to temper his Mirakuru rage. If ever there was a prime time to uncage his inner badass, this seems like it.

A chill runs down Felicity's spine as she remembers the trespasser’s distinctive, rough voice and Australian dialect. When she lay bleeding and disoriented on a plastic tarp, this was the singular villain that she heard berating Isabel and another man. The flashback to her kidnapping unnerves Felicity as she struggles to regain her mental footing. Clearly, Oliver's horrified reaction to this masked assailant means they're in trouble. It's rare for the Arrow to be rattled by the appearance of any thug, no matter how bizarre or lethal they may seem. What history does Oliver have with this gigantic creep? Exactly how many epic, bad guys did he piss off in those five lost years?
Remembering the cell phone in her pocket, Felicity punches in "911- Foundry" in a flash text to Digg and Sara, who are out patrolling The Glades. It's a minor effort, in the grand scheme of things, but for now, it's the only help she can offer.

Despite his initial shock, Oliver's ready when Slade raises his nickel-plated pistol and begins firing. As a volley of bullets sprays the Foundry, Oliver vaults over a table, taking Felicity to the floor, his arms tightly banded around her, absorbing their combined impact with his broad shoulders as he rolls them beneath the stairwell.

"Oooof," Felicity gasps in surprise as the air's knocked from her lungs.

Oliver's eyes skate over her in concern, but she gives a quick nod to reassure him she's unhurt.

The noise is deafening as Slade empties the 9mm handgun. Oliver and Felicity huddle under the stairs, effectively shielding them from the relentless firepower. On the opposite side of the lair, Roy has taken cover behind the solid structure of the salmon ladder, placing him closer to their weapons stash.

When Slade pauses to reload, Roy and Oliver surge from their hiding places as if on cue, launching a coordinated attack. Roy, who's closest to their attacker, snags a pistol and immediately fires as he advances, but the bullets are deflected by Deathstroke's armor.

"Stay back!" Oliver yells at Roy, who continues to approach Deathstroke as the Mirakuru rage pumps adrenaline through his bloodstream. Roy pivots and strikes, slamming into Slade with brutal force. Nonetheless, Roy's quickly overpowered by his target's superior skill and size. Before Oliver can engage, Deathstroke lifts and hurls Roy into a solid concrete wall, knocking him senseless.

Now armed with a pair of short metal pipes, Oliver attacks. Defending himself with the katana swords, Deathstroke answers blow for blow in a blur of lightning fast action. The Foundry echoes with the staccato pings of clashing steel as the two skilled fighters wage their deadly dance.

Oliver grunts in pain as his fist contacts the sharp edge of a sword blade. Blood spurts from his hand, breaking his rhythm and concentration. Taking advantage, Deathstroke slams the hilt of his sword into Oliver's temple and he goes down, unconscious before he hits the floor.

With both vigilantes down and out, Felicity wrestles with her limited choices. She's terrified for Oliver and Roy, now completely at the mercy of their attacker, so her priority is to protect them by any means at her disposal. She's close to the main power switch for the lair, but not certain her still-healing leg will allow her to quickly jump up to reach it. Plus, she's creeped out by the prospect of being trapped in total darkness with this jacked-up freak.

From her vantage point, Felicity nervously watches as Deathstroke stalks toward Oliver, towering over him with a sword dangling above his chest and mutters, "I could kill you now, Kid, with a song in my heart. But you don't deserve an easy death. And there's still more to take from you."

Felicity's nerves fray as Deathstroke lingers over Oliver's prone form, as if he's mesmerized in this triumphant moment. He slowly circles the fallen archer, his sword swinging dangerously closer to Oliver's limbs, his throat, his face. At the first nick, the first spurt of blood, Felicity reacts.

"Hey, Bowser!" she shouts, levering herself up until she can shift her weight to the cane. "I hear your girl Isabel's looking for a job? I saw where they're hiring at Banana Republic."

Disconcerted by the interruption, Deathstroke swivels toward Felicity in curiosity, as if he'd forgotten her presence. Or, perhaps she was not worthy of his notice. "You?" he growls, taking a step in her
"Yeah, it's me. Again. Only now I'm standing," Felicity blurts, gesturing without purpose. "You're probably thrown, seeing me here, in a place you don't expect, but you can't figure why you should know me, because I'm sometimes somewhere else... where you've seen me... on a plastic tarp..."

Deathstroke keeps coming, the tip of his sword dragging against the concrete floor like fingernails scraping a chalkboard, raising the fine hair on the nape of Felicity’s neck. She tries to back up, which is freaking difficult with a cane, so she ends up just stumbling until her back collides with the wall.

There's a prolonged silence, now that Deathstroke has invaded her personal space, looming above her with pure menace. Felicity's so frightened that she can literally feel the throb of blood pulsing in her veins. Slade’s expressionless mask compounds her terror.

"That mask... I gotta say, it works for you," Felicity rambles on, to distract the intimidating brute. "It's terrifying when you can’t see a face... or make eye contact. Kind of has that Jason vibe. You know, from the Friday the 13th movies?"

Felicity's grateful that she's successfully pulled Deathstroke's attention away from her boys. But now would be a really good time for Sara and Diggle to distract this Australian psycho from her.

His black-gloved hand encircles her throat when Roy's moan breaks their concentration. Roy's rising from the Foundry floor, quickly regaining his faculties.

"I'm not here for you," Deathstroke states, dismissing Felicity before turning his back on her and charging Roy.

"Oh, frack. But wait... no. Come back," Felicity wails plaintively. She's torn by her compelling need to protect her guys and her outright terror of this monster.

Roy makes a valiant second stand but he's simply out-matched. With tears in her throat, Felicity watches helplessly as her friend is mercilessly beaten down and carried like a broken doll up the Foundry stairs and into the night, to Google knows where.

She pushes away from the wall that's been keeping her upright and hobbles to where Oliver lies. Falling to her knees at his side, Felicity reaches for him with shaking hands.

"Oliver?" she cries, tilting his face to check the angry bruise forming along his hairline. Pressing her fingers to the side of his neck, she's reassured by a strong, steady pulse and the warmth of his skin. For the sake of her shredded nerves, Felicity rests her head briefly on his chest, needing to feel, to hear, the visceral, even thrum of his heartbeat, as her tears slip into the soft weave of his Henley.

At his deep gasp for breath, Felicity pulls back, whimpering, "Oliver?"

His eyes flying open, Oliver suddenly sits up, lost and disoriented. "Where..."

Felicity lays a calming hand on his arm, "Oliver, are you okay?"

The memory of Slade's attack returns with a vengeance, jolting Oliver to action. Jumping to his feet, he's on full alert, his head pivoting sharply as he searches for his attacker.

Felicity struggles to rise, finally reaching for Oliver's hand. "He's gone, Oliver," she relates as he helps her stand. "He took... Oliver, he took Roy."

"Roy? What? But why?" Oliver demands in frustration. "How does he even know Roy?"
"I don't know. He just turned away from me and went after Roy," Felicity admits sadly. "I'm sorry."

Oliver's full awareness returns to her, his hand lightly caressing her arm. "Felicity, you couldn't have done anything to stop Slade," he assures her. "Hey, did he hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," she answers, a bit cranky that he's fretting over her, considering he was laid out minutes ago, dead to the world. "You're the one who got cold-cocked." Tenderly touching his bruised temple, Felicity asks, "Are you okay?"

Thundering footsteps above them erupt as Diggle and Sara storm the Foundry, not realizing the danger has passed. They're both armed and geared up for a fight, racing from the streets they were patrolling before Felicity's emergency text.

"Stand down!" Oliver shouts to his team members. "It's over."

"What's happened?" Digg asks, quickly descending the stairs as he scans the lair for signs of an attack. "Is everyone okay?"

"No," Oliver sighs, sounding every bit as defeated as he feels.

"Where's Roy?" Sara demands, yanking off her domino mask as she joins her team.

"Gone."

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"But he's dead, Ollie," Sara argues with fervor. "You killed him."

"It was him, Sara," Oliver defiantly vows. "It was Slade."

"But you said he wore a disguise! It could be an imposter," she counters hotly. "How could Slade have survived?"

"Why does it matter?" Felicity interjects quietly.

"She's right," Digg agrees as he bandages Oliver's lacerated hand. "I don't know your history with Slade, but for now, we need to accept that he's back and we're in his cross hairs. We've got to secure the Foundry—"

"And rescue Roy," Felicity insists, pressing a cold rag to Oliver's throbbing head. He leans into her comforting touch.

"Tomorrow, we're going to abandon this site and relocate," Oliver soberly suggests, glancing to each of his team.

"But, Oliver, we can ramp up our security," Felicity suggests hopefully.

"It's the second time we've been breached," Sara remarks sourly, "If we count Tockman?"

"We do," Felicity grumbles, still sounding bitter over the destruction of her beloved computer system.

"It's not safe here," Oliver declares, sliding off the exam table and slipping a nearby chair under Felicity, who's getting shaky on her pins. "We'll move our critical equipment to the mansion. There's already layers of security in place. Since she's running for mayor, my mother can hire more guards without raising suspicion."
"It's your call, man," Digg agrees as he pulls on his jacket. "I'll bring the van first thing in the morning. Oliver, there's ibuprofen in the cabinet."

Oliver nods and murmurs, "Thanks, Digg," as John heads out.

"I can stay, if you guys think there's any chance he might come back?" Sara offers, her brow creased with worry.

"We'll be fine, Sara," Oliver assures her. "Go on home."

"If you're sure? I do need to check in with my Dad," she admits.

"How's he doing?" Felicity asks, having a special fondness for the grumpy detective.

"He's okay," Sara replies. "We got a good report on Laurel from Rehab, but he still worries."

"Yeah, dads do that," Felicity comments with a wry smile, "Or so I've heard."

"Only the good ones, sweetie," Sara replies, patting Felicity's shoulder as she passes on her way to the stairs. "Call me if you need me, guys!"

As her footsteps recede to the second floor exit, Felicity rises to reach for Oliver's hand, murmuring, "We need to talk."

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"So, this man, who was like your brother on the island, why does he detest you now?"

How can Oliver explain his twisted past with Slade Wilson? It feels impossible to describe the reality of Lian Yu, the desperation of his life six years ago when every day was rotten with new threats. When survival was his sole agenda and fundamental needs — food, fresh water, shelter from the pervasive cold — could never be taken for granted. The spoiled playboy who crawled onto the island's rocky beach had no skills to cope with deprivation, to say nothing of the evil acts of men like Anthony Ivo, Billy Wintergreen, Edward Fyers.

Thankfully, Felicity doesn't know Oliver as he was when The Queen's Gambit went down in the North China Sea. And she has limited experience with the madness fueled by Mirakuru. Would Slade have blamed Oliver for Shado's murder if he hadn't been exposed to the experimental Japanese serum? Should Oliver have tried to cure Slade instead of attempting to kill him? Oliver wishes he could let go of the questions haunting him. In the same way, he wants to bury the ghosts of Yao Fei and Shado. But tonight, Slade's return, driven by his unbridled thirst for vengeance, resurrects the brutal memories that will stalk Oliver in his nightmares.

"Oliver?" Felicity asks softly, her shadowed eyes searching his face with concern, understanding how grueling it is for him to talk about his past.

"Felicity..." he sighs, grappling for an answer that will make sense to her, without dredging up too many horrors from his Pandora's box of pain. "So many bad things happened. Slade believes I caused Shado's death."

"But Shado— I thought she was yours?" Felicity questions delicately, aware that she's treading on a tender memory.

"She was," he concurs, avoiding her scrutiny. "She was mine." His voice breaks, however he plows on. "But Slade — he loved her too. When Ivo forced me to choose, between Sara and Shado—"
"Oh God, Oliver," Felicity whispers in horror as she fully comprehends what happened that terrible night when Oliver chose life and death for two women he loved.

Felicity pulls him to her, cradling his head to her shoulder, opening herself to his unrequited grief. Oliver's arms wrap around her, surrendering to her inner strength, her feminine comfort.

"The Mirakuru," Oliver continues, his voice raw with emotion, his breath intimate against her neck. "It drove Slade mad. It destroyed his soul, leaving nothing but hate. For me."

Straightening again, he locks his steady gaze with hers, saying, "And that puts everyone I—Everyone I care about in mortal danger."

Felicity counters with a small grin, remarking, "Then it must be Tuesday."

Oliver huffs in exasperation, saying, "Felicity," as if her name alone is sufficient rebuttal.

Resting the palm of her hand on his chest, just over Oliver's heart, she asserts, "As your partners, we know what we signed up for. We're not going to run just because the new menu may contain peanuts."

"What?" Oliver blurts, thrown by her logic.

"Well, that analogy only pertains to me. But food allergies can be just as deadly as a madman on Mirakuru," she insists with a finger poking his pectoral for emphasis. "The point being, you need us. You need me."

Gathering her in his arms, Oliver slants his head to lean gently on hers, murmuring, “God, forgive me, I do.”

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Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Moira Queen's past ambition and deceit have fractured her family, causing Thea to run. Slade's obsessed with the wrong girl. Felicity balks at moving into the mansion, requiring Oliver to use his words — and lips.

Chapter Notes

Moira has arrived, in all her mysterious, deceptive glory! Because she is such an enigmatic yet crucial player in Oliver's life, this chapter begins with some of her backstory and character makeup. I promise to have her interacting with Felicity in the next chapter, but there needed to be some emotional issues resolved before that can happen.

I am blown away by your enthusiastic responses and interest in this story. You've really reinvigorated my inspiration and woken up my Muse, so thank you for the wonderful expressions of support!!!

One note: I've taken a second job so I don't know how that will affect my posting schedule, but I promise to do my best to update each weekend.

It was always a point of pride for Moira Queen — she was an ambitious woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. As a beautiful, educated debutante, she'd set her sharpened sights on Robert Queen, the handsome heir-apparent to the massive Queen family fortune. Moira's attraction wasn't just about the money; she was no common gold-digger. In fact, her family was successful in its own right, so she was already fluent in the lifestyle and expectations of a cultured, young woman marrying into the Queen empire. Rather, she was motivated by a deep-seated belief that she was fulfilling her destiny. Moira was a matriarch in the making from the moment of her well-bred birth.

In the beginning, Moira was enamored of Robert, during the honeymoon phase, before his indiscretions gradually chipped away the gilding on their fairytale romance. As the years passed, their power marriage evolved into a polished partnership, projecting the image of a devoted couple while masking the hollowness at the core of their union.

Moira had no understanding of genuine love until the birth of their son, Oliver Jonas Queen. From the glorious moment that Moira first gazed down into the fathomless blue of her beautiful boy's eyes, he opened and captured her heart. A sweet-natured child, he was blessed with his parents' good looks, physical grace and the Queen charm. His parents doted on the toddler. When Oliver's little sister, Thea, was born six years later, Moira was equally smitten. There was nothing she wouldn't do for the sake of her precious children.

Moira was fully invested in the notion of dynasty, in building a framework of perpetual success for her son and daughter, who she was grooming for greatness. With Robert's blessing, Moira had mapped their children's journey to adulthood, to assume their rightful positions at the head of the
enduring Queen empire.

A life of privilege and social prominence allowed the devoted mother to indulge her offsprings' every desire. When they reached adolescence and their escapades began to cross acceptable lines of behavior, Moira magically made the consequences go away. As a powerful woman in the community, she knew which strings to pull and how taut to hold them. It was simply a matter of maintaining control and bending circumstances to her iron will. As her kids' entitled conduct worsened, Moira upped the ante, making police records disappear, replacing destroyed property, settling lawsuits behind closed doors, buying off a pregnant girl, lying when it served the primary purpose of shielding Oliver or Thea from the fallout.

The Queens had it all: money, power, a 40-room mansion, a fleet of expensive cars, Gulfstream jet, family yacht, personal charm, social prestige and heirs with bright promise. The perfect family leading the perfect life.

Until Tempest blew away the meaning of it all, like ashes on a careless wind.

The private group of tycoons, dubbed Tempest, had existed in Starling City for years, operating in secret to keep a platinum grip on their considerable holdings, which translated to unbridled power, their birthright. It seemed innocent in the beginning, when Robert earned his seat at the granite table. Like-minded, wealthy capitalists securing their fortunes, having one another's back, as it were. The group rotted from the inside, each obsessed with greed for more — more property, more influence, more control. Corruption seeped in slowly, corroding Tempest's purpose, extending their reach into dark, ugly places. Eventually, every member's hands were blood-stained, their moral compasses reoriented to accept unforgivable choices. They became prisoners of each another's sinister secrets.

But the day dawned when Robert Queen could no longer accept Tempest's unholy agenda, when Malcolm Merlyn outlined his plan to destroy The Glades in retaliation for his wife's murder and to "cleanse the community." Robert's revulsion for the outrageous scheme wasn't helped by Malcolm's secret, tawdry history with the Queens. Thea had been conceived during Merlyn's brief affair with Moira, who was punishing her husband for his compulsive infidelity. So, after Malcolm proposed The Undertaking — the leveling of the Glades — Robert quit Tempest. His insurance was the hidden book of transgressions he'd faithfully recorded, listing every black-hearted member of Tempest. It never occurred to him that his undoing would be wrought by the striking woman at his side, sharing his bed every night, that Moira would bow to Malcolm's pressure and betray her husband.

At heart, Moira was a practical woman. One who knew how to get what she wanted. When Malcolm threatened to tell Thea the truth, that he was her father, Moira was willing to cut her losses with Robert. It would hurt, losing him, but then The Tempest would back off. She and the children would be safe, protected by other powerful men. Somehow, lost at sea seemed to be an abstract death. Almost clean and blameless. If only she'd known that her wild, willful son was planning to sneak aboard The Gambit for an impetuous fling with Sara Lance. Tragically, Moira's deal with the devil — to sabotage Robert's yacht — would demand a devastating price. The loss of her firstborn, her beautiful boy, her beloved Oliver.

"She can't have simply disappeared."

"Slade, I've watched her apartment for the last forty-eight hours," Isabel protests. "Her car's parked there, but she's nowhere in sight."

Slade drags a scarred hand through his silver-streaked hair, scheming for a way to smoke out Oliver's
sweetheart, the lovely Laurel Lance. "Contact our Brother Blood at City Hall. Maybe he can shed light on her whereabouts."

"Are you sure this chick means all that much to Queen?" Isabel complains, privately questioning why she's never seen Oliver in Laurel's company.

"No one knows him like I do!" Slade roars, slamming his palms down on his massive desk. "She's the one. The love of his life."

Slinking away from her mentor, Isabel grumbles under her breath, "Okay, Okay. Don't have a bitch fit."

Slade pours himself a shot of bourbon from the crystal decanter on the sideboard to settle his nerves before asking, "How's our boy?"

"Torqued," Isabel replies casually. "I gave him an extra dose of the good stuff. To make sure he's totally off the chain."

"Fine," Slade approves with a satisfied sneer. "We'll turn him loose on the streets. That should keep our Oliver busy."

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"What do you mean, she's gone?"

"Oliver, Thea and I had words," Moira patiently explains, attempting to placate her obviously agitated son. "You know how she is. She packed her things and left yesterday."

"Left for where?" Oliver demands to know, infuriated by his mother's calm, patrician air.

"Well, you're not going to approve," she coolly comments, sidestepping his question.

Gritting his teeth, Oliver presses his enigmatic mother, tersely asking, "Just tell me. Where is Thea?"

Sighing dramatically, Moira surrenders, replying, "She's with Malcolm. I believe they were leaving the country. She took her passport."

Unfazed by Oliver's reaction, Mrs. Queen turns a deaf ear to the explosive cuss words tumbling from her son's mouth. He stalks away from her, punching Thea's contact screen on his cell phone. When his call goes straight to voice mail, he wheels around, striding back to confront his mother.

"I want the truth. For once," he commands. "What did you fight about?"

"What do you think, Oliver?" Moira responds, her volume rising in a rare display of irritation. "She's still angry about... about Malcolm and ... what I kept from her."

Oliver stares at his mother in amazement. Who is this woman? In the past year, it's as if every belief he had about her was based on a lie. Did he ever really know her? And how many secrets is she still keeping? Not that Oliver can condemn others for hiding the truth, but he at least feels guilt about his deceit. Moira simply can't seem to fathom the depth of betrayal her daughter feels. Oliver earnestly regrets that Thea left before he could confess to leading a dual life as The Arrow, leaving another secret twisting between them, betraying her trust.

However, it occurs to him, at this dangerous time, Thea is probably better off — safer — with Malcolm, especially if they've left the city. It takes his sister off the board and out of Slade Wilson's
reach. Oliver is hurt that Thea would leave without telling him. And, he thoroughly despises Malcolm, but in this instance, Merlyn's lethal abilities assure that he's quite capable of protecting his newly-claimed daughter. Once Slade has been neutralized, Oliver intends to find his little sister and deal with The Dark Archer.

Oliver's volatile conversation with his mother has yet to touch on the main reason for his visit. The simmering tension between them isn't an auspicious beginning for converting Moira's home into the headquarters for his team of crime-fighting vigilantes. Oliver hasn't decided how much to reveal to his mother about Arrow activities and his secret identity, but it may be impossible to hide his mission while operating under her roof. He's considering coming clean with his mom, especially after seeing the misery that lies and subterfuge have already inflicted on his family.

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa."

"What, Felicity?" Oliver asks while loading workout gear into sturdy boxes.

"Just slow your roll," she says, tying and coiling computer cables for packing. "I'm not moving into Queen castle."

"It's not a castle," he persists, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

"It's a monster of a private residence, Oliver. Is it enclosed?" she inquires with a feigned air of innocence.

"Well, there are stone walls," he concedes.

"Gated, of course?" she presses with a flip of her ponytail.

"You know there are gates, Felicity," Oliver reminds her, stooping to pull out empty storage cases.

"And it's fortified?" Felicity suggests, with a single, raised eyebrow.

"Yes, you could say that."

"Then it's a castle," she concludes, pinning him with a blue stare over the top of her eyeglasses. "Moira Queen's castle. The same Moira Queen who blames me for spilling the beans. And those were some very bad beans. So, Oliver, I'm not moving into a castle with yo' mama."

"Felicity."

"Besides, I need space. And clarity," she announces firmly, powering down the last of her networked hard drives.

Oliver shifts to the weapons cache which he begins stowing in cases, questioning, "Clarity about what?"

"You and Sara," Felicity answers, studying his reaction.

His hands momentarily still while he listens. "What about us?" he asks.

"Oliver, when I was taken, you were with Sara," she prods, knowing that he is fully aware of where this conversation is going.

"And now I'm not," he answers, his steady gaze connecting with hers in a clear sign of candor.
"What changed?" Felicity counters, wanting — needing — more from him.

Oliver's attention returns to securing weapons. Resuming her work, she gives him time and room to dwell on her question while choosing his words. In some respects, he doesn't owe her an explanation, but before Felicity allows herself to fall any deeper, she's compelled to know Oliver's truly free. So much time passes in awkward silence that she decides he has no intention of continuing this conversation. When he finally speaks, she jumps in surprise.

"It was never like that. Between Sara and I," Oliver confesses quietly. With silent steps, he's moved closer to her, standing just beyond reach. "We had an understanding. Between two lonely friends."

It is Felicity’s turn to pause, to absorb the loaded meaning of his words, the relationship he’s describing. She recalls Sara’s private confession to her just days before. “She’s in love with someone else,” Felicity suggests, with little doubt in her tone.

“Nyssa,” he confirms with a subtle nod.

“But to be with her means going back to the life of an assassin?” Felicity assumes, her brow furrowed in concern.

“Yes,” Oliver agrees with a sigh of resignation. "Sara would have to return to the League."

Wistfully, Felicity murmurs, "The course of true love—"

"Never did run smooth," Oliver interrupts, finishing the literary line by adding, "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

She's a bit taken aback, not expecting him to be quoting Shakespeare.

"Hey, surely you haven't forgotten? I have an Ivy League education," he adds with an impish grin. "I went through the best schools in the nation. Rapidly."

Felicity laughs at his self-deprecation.

Oliver basks in her lightness, the music of her mirth, the shiny little sparks of happiness she unintentionally revives in him.

"So, Felicity, where do you plan to go?" Oliver inquires, "Now that we're bugging out?"

"My apartment, of course. Where I live, Oliver," she rationalizes.

"The apartment where you were nearly killed by a very dangerous woman who remains at large and is in league with Slade Wilson?" he glibly summarizes. "That apartment?"

"I thought she was the pizza guy," Felicity clarifies in a tiny voice.

Oliver kneels to crouch at her side. Lightly stroking her arm, he looks earnestly up at her. "Felicity, I understand you want to go home, to your place. But it's not safe there. Not right now. Just like the Foundry's not safe for us anymore. I know the mansion's not ideal. Believe me," he says, shaking his head, "I don't want to live with my mother either. But for now, it's our best option."

"Well, it is a big house," she admits, slowly reconsidering as she toys with the collar on his shirt.

"It is."

"And Moira's probably gone a lot of the time. Since she's running a mayoral campaign," Felicity
reasons.

"Mom's rarely home."

"Okay," she surrenders, but with a resolved stipulation. "For a little while. I'll give it a chance."

"Hey, we will deal with the people who hurt you, Felicity," Oliver vows quietly, touching her face. "I promise you, I'll make your home safe. So that it's yours again."

"Seal that promise with a kiss?" Felicity suggests, her dimples returning.

He does. With one hell of a kiss.

"Felicity."

"Hmmm?"

"Sara and I, we're friends. That won't change. But we've always known, it could never be more."

"Can we?" she asks, commending her heart into his hands, risking every breakable part of herself in this moment. "Can we be more?"

"Yes."

There's no hesitation in Oliver's reply, reminding Felicity of his confident, rapid-fire release of arrows from his quiver, his aim unerring. His answer was that quick, that certain. True.

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Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Team Arrow arrives at the mansion with Moira and Felicity indulging in a bit of name-calling. Roy falls deeper under the influence of Mirakuru, wreaking violence on strangers and friends alike. Slade sends a rebellious Isabel on a new mission. Felicity and Moira discover a common cause.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry to be late with this chapter. Hopefully it was worth the wait. Let me know what you think!

"Welcome to our home, Felicia."

"It's Felicity, Mom," Oliver corrects Moira. His eyes narrowing, he's fairly sure that his mother's slip-up is completely intentional, a calculated choice.

"Of course," Moira smiles graciously. "I apologize, Felicity. Oliver has brought so many girls through here, it's hard to keep them all straight."

"Is it?" Felicity asks with a curious tilt of her head. "I would think you'd remember me from our last conversation?"

For a brief moment, Moira is disconcerted, unaccustomed to being challenged. Then the subtle barb hits home. The last conversation between the two women was when Moira threatened Felicity, warning her that Oliver would never forgive her for revealing that Malcolm Merlyn was Thea's father.

Oliver perceives the cold fury behind his mother's gray eyes, even though her features remain deceptively pleasant and smooth.

Clearing his throat, Oliver breaks the uneasy silence, saying, "I'll put Felicity in the suite across from mine."

"No, Oliver," Moira instructs, in an overly-maternal manner. "The ventilation is better in the east wing. She'll be more comfortable there."

He sighs, ready to argue his viewpoint, when Felicity pipes up. "The east wing is fine, Mrs. Queen. It's very kind of you to let me stay."

"Of course, it's my pleasure," Moira responds, exuding hospitality. "It's not the first time I've had to rescue one of Oliver's girls who got in trouble."

"Mom!!" Oliver rebukes his mother sharply.
She purrs and yet the claws are out, Felicity thinks. "I'm fine, Oliver," she murmurs, appeasing him with the touch of his forearm.

"Working for your corporation got me shot, Mrs. Queen, not pregnant," Felicity declares with a dimpled smile. "Now if you'll point me in the right direction?"

"I'll show you," Oliver offers, deliberately turning his back on his mother, who realizes she's overplayed her hand.

"Please," Moira implores, suddenly seeming insecure. "Please, Felicity, make yourself at home."

Felicity leans heavily on the arm Oliver offers. She had stubbornly refused to walk into "the queen's castle" with her cane, so her steadiness is tentative at best.

"I appreciate that, Myrna," Felicity quips, as she and Oliver stroll toward the mansion stairs.

As soon as Moira departs for a campaign meeting, Team Arrow invades the lowest level of the sprawling mansion, tucking into a spacious storage room that originally functioned as stables. Felicity squeals with delight at the discovery of a nearby climate-controlled wine cellar, served by a large bank of updated power lines. She's also thrilled to find she can piggyback off the Queens' sophisticated security system for her "networking" (i.e. hacking).

"I can't tell if she's more excited about the wiring or the wine," Oliver remarks to a bemused Diggle. "It's a toss-up, but if you've got a stash of chocolate down here, she's never leaving," Digg predicts, setting down the last heavy box of gear.

Oliver turns away, a phantom smile skimming his lips.

"Okay, we're live!" Felicity exults, her small fist raised in triumph as a panel of monitors lights up with images from a variety of digital platforms and cameras. She rapidly scans the array of screens, locking her attention on one in particular.

"Guys, looks like there's a one-man riot on Porter and Fourth. Multiple injuries, according to SCPD dispatch," she reports, tapping in coordinates as she searches for a possible feed from nearby traffic cams.

"Let's suit up," Oliver directs, grabbing his leathers and bow.

Digg pockets a spare cartridge of 9mm bullets and slips his steel Glock into a holster.

As the two armed men leave the mansion, they encounter Sara, just as she's arriving.

"You already headed out? Need backup?" she asks, pausing in the underground passageway.

"No, we're good," Oliver responds. "Stay here with Felicity."

Sara doesn't need directions to find her way around the mansion's sub-level. As teenagers, she and her sister were frequent visitors to the hidden areas of Ollie's home. The wine cellar and old stables were a favorite haunt for them, away from adult supervision, where they were free to hang. Easy access through the private entrance at the back of the estate made it the perfect teen hideaway, and now, vigilante lair.

Following the winding corridor, Sara calls out, "Marco?"
"Axelbender!" Felicity's voice echoes from around the corner.

"Axelbender?" Sara repeats, puzzled, as she enters their new headquarters, where she spots a familiar blond ponytail.

"It's from Cars," Felicity elaborates as she splits her focus between multiple screens. "One of my friends from MIT works for PIXAR."

"Oh, cool," Sara comments, surveying the rapidly-changing images on Felicity's monitors. "What are we tracking?"

"Still unclear," Felicity replies with a frown. "Violent perp is tearing up the south side. Leaving a trail of casualties. Our guys are on the way."

"Yeah, I passed them a minute ago," Sara volunteers, squinting at the grainy, black and white images caught by a traffic camera. "Any idea who we're dealing with?"

"Not yet. He's moving fast and hasn't shown his face. I really get why Oliver wears a hood," Felicity notes, studying the mysterious figure in the dark video.

They see a police car braking at the scene with two armed officers charging into the fray. They struggle with the suspect, who effortlessly lifts one of the cops with one hand, callously pitching him through the windshield of the squad car.

Sara and Felicity exchange a look of dreadful recognition.

"Mirakuru?" Felicity guesses.

Sara responds with a grim nod.

Transfixed by the violent drama unfolding in real time, Felicity gasps as the hooded figure snatches an incoming arrow from mid-air flight. Fisting the arrow, he ruthlessly stabs it into the chest of the remaining policeman, who sinks to the pavement, mortally wounded. Pivoting to face his new opponents, the perp's hood falls back, revealing a tragically-familiar face.

"Roy!" Oliver shouts, imploring, "Stop! Don't do this!"

Seeing the carnage left in Roy's wake, Diggle raises his pistol, aiming for a lethal head shot.

At his side, Oliver yells, "Digg! Don't! I can reach him."

Diggle shoots his partner a doubtful glance, but relaxes his finger on the trigger.

Advancing toward Roy, Oliver searches the young man's face for any sign of recognition. "Roy, it's me —Oliver. You don't want to hurt anyone else. Let me help you."

Roy stands stock still, his face contorted in a mix of anger and confusion. Oliver interprets his inaction as a good sign, that a fragment of Roy's humanity still survives.

"Put it down, Roy," Oliver calmly commands, inching closer.

Roy stares at the bloody arrow in his own hand, perplexed as if he doesn't remember how it came to be there. He loosens his grip, letting the weapon clatter harmlessly to the pavement.
"That's it," Oliver reassures. "I won't hurt you, Roy. We're going to get you help."

As soon as Oliver touches Roy's shoulder, the younger man explodes in a violent burst of flying kicks and strikes. Switching to a defensive posture, Oliver fights back, stunned by Roy's intensity and the soulless fury burning in his eyes.

Digg instantly resumes his shooter's stance, but can't get a clear shot without endangering Oliver, who he suspects is staying close to Roy as a means of shielding him. "Damn it, Oliver," Digg mutters. "Pull back, man."

It's a testament to Oliver's combat skills that he lasts as long as he does. He never stops calling Roy's name, trying to connect with the boy blinded by the virus. But even The Arrow can't defend himself against Roy's cheap shot, a vicious stomp of Oliver's knee from a wicked angle. Oliver goes down with a scream of agony. And stays down.

It's the moment Digg has been waiting for. His bullet slams into Roy's shoulder, Knocking him back on his heels. The second shot clips his ear, scaring him enough that he elects to flee.

"Yeah, you better run," Diggle grunts in anger, holstering his Glock so he can carry his fallen partner to safety as the approaching sirens split the night.

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"Blood says she's staying at The Palisades in Central City."

"Palisades?" Slade growls. "What is that? Some kind of a resort?"

"She's in rehab. Drying out," Isabel reports, not even trying to mask her boredom.

"How long?" he questions, impatient over this irritating development.

Isabel shrugs with indifference, commenting, "Could be a month. Or longer. Who knows? Or cares."

Slade mutters to himself, a habit that's becoming more entrenched, now that he's closer to his endgame. He has an unnerving way of staring at empty corners, as if seeing ghosts in every shadow. Isabel hears his disjointed mumbling. "Too long. Only one more to kill. I know you need this from me."

Watching him lost in his obsession, Isabel wonders if her alpha partner is going ape-shit crazy. So far, Slade's managed to hold it together, but she's beginning to see cracks in his shiny, happy plan to wreak vengeance on Oliver Queen. The first seeds of rebellion take root in Isabel's fevered brain, tempting her to seize control, to end Slade so that she can lord her power over others. The Mirakuru pounding in her veins floods her with a sense of omnipotence. And she likes it.

"You. You go get her," Slade demands, his one dark eye drilling her in place.

"What?" Isabel blurs in astonishment. "You want me to go all the way to Central City to break Laurel Lance out of rehab? Are you nuts?"

Slade's crooked grin is more disturbing than if he'd struck her. He waits her out. With the hellish smile and the singular stare. Isabel squirms beneath the leering madman's scrutiny.

Finally, she stands and stomps from the room, surrendering to his bizarre will. For now.

Raising his bourbon glass in a mock toast, he rumbles, "Have a nice trip."
"He needs a doctor," Diggle sighs, scrubbing the back of his neck in frustration.

Sara, Digg and Felicity had lugged Oliver to their makeshift medical bay beneath the mansion. Ashen, Oliver was silent, his jaws clenched against the searing pain. Unable to lie still, he writhed on the steel table until Diggle had given him a merciful dose of morphine. Now sedated, he drifts between reality and twilight sleep.

Felicity hasn't let go of Oliver since helping him crawl out of Digg's SUV. Her fingers circle his wrist, to comfort Oliver and to keep herself anchored, because a part of Felicity is crumbling. She can't escape the stark image of Roy's features, twisted in hatred as he rammed Oliver's steel arrow through a man's heart. She's grateful that the vicious attack on Oliver had been off-camera, that she wouldn't be haunted by Roy's graphic acts of violence on his mentor, his friend. It's wrenching enough to witness Oliver's suffering after the fact.

"Do you think anything's broken?" Sara asks, her expression unreadable.

"I can't tell," Digg admits tiredly. "There's so much swelling. He wouldn't let me take him to a hospital."

"Then we bring the hospital to him."

Moira Queen's clear, decisive voice paralyzes the team, each of them thunderstruck, absorbing the shock of her sudden appearance in the Arrowverse. Her son, lying in the center of their circle, still wears the unmistakable green leathers of the city's most famous hooded vigilante.

Diggle recovers first, at least able to acknowledge her entrance. "Mrs. Queen..." he greets lamely, but then looks to his blond teammates for help.

"This isn't what it looks like," Felicity gamely asserts in a losing gambit to protect Oliver's secret world. "Unless you think it looks like something else... that might be better than what this... actually... is."

Striding toward Oliver with riveted purpose, Moira's has eyes only for her injured son, causing Digg and Sara to scatter out of her path. Felicity stays rooted in place, keeping Oliver's relaxed hand clasped surely between her own.

Moira tenderly touches Oliver's forehead, trailing her fingers through his hair, a maternal gesture she's made a thousand times. It's the muscle memory of a mother's hand, the familiar, necessary skin-to-skin connection of solace, of assurance. Oliver doesn't stir. Perhaps he subconsciously senses her presence, knows her fragrance, recognizes the slight pressure of her fingers.

Moira's experienced eyes scan Oliver's prone body, lingering on every scrape, each bruise, before settling on his mangled knee. Digg has cut a section of the stitching of the Arrow's leather pants, freeing the ominous swelling of his damaged leg.

Grief mars Mrs. Queen's fine features as she absorbs her beautiful boy's pain. Her precious child. That's who Oliver will always be in Moira's misty gray eyes, Felicity realizes, gaining a sliver of insight about this mysterious woman whose devotion to Oliver makes them unlikely allies.

Tears well in Felicity's eyes. This unmistakable love that Moira Queen poignantly bears for her son is her redeeming grace, a vulnerable side of the matriarch that stuns Felicity. In this moment, their hearts share the same ache for the one lying beneath their hands.
Moira raises her face to Felicity’s, gray eyes meeting blue, each woman appraising the other in a startling recognition of their intrinsic, common bond.

*I know exactly how you feel, how much this hurts, how you’ll never let him go.*

Clearing her throat, Moira reins in her emotions, reclaiming her dignity before saying, "Mr. Diggle?"

"Ma’am?" Digg responds instantly, easily stepping back into his role as a billionaire’s bodyguard.

"We need to get my son out of his leathers and moved upstairs so I can have him seen by our private physician," Moira calmly instructs, adding, “He’s very discreet.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Diggle replies with a polished tone of respect.

As she regally sweeps from the room, Moira announces, “I’m installing a small X-ray machine down here tomorrow.”

And then she’s gone, leaving Team Arrow slack-jawed in her wake.

“Seriously?!?” Felicity sputters. “This is the worst-kept secret in history. How does Batman do it?”

"Moira remind you of anyone?" Sara whispers, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Must be a Queen thing,” Diggle agrees as they kick into gear to tend to their fallen partner. "But I can’t wait to see the look on Oliver’s face when he finds out we’ve been busted by his mom.”

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Oliver reacts to his mother's discovery of his secret life. Felicity is determined to keep him in bed. Laurel is the unwilling guest of Slade, who has special news for her. Isabel's latest mission takes her underground.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for my absence on AO3 and my tardiness in getting this chapter written. The good news is that I've mapped out the coming chapters so hopefully this story will have more regular updates. Although I'm making no promises because that would be pure folly.

I'd love to hear your reaction to the latest developments in this story, so please feel free to share your thoughts and comments.

"Mom did what?!?"

Felicity jumps to Oliver's bedside where he's struggling to rise. "No, Oliver! No getting up! You've had a lot of drugs and you absolutely have to keep your weight off that leg," she orders firmly, placing both hands on his bare shoulders and strenuously leaning in, but to little avail. Even though he's heavily sedated, Oliver's strength easily out-matches hers and he manages to swing his good leg over the edge of the mattress.

"HEY!" she exclaims, using her loud voice and a pointy, lacquered fingernail to his chest. "That is not cool, Oliver. And so help, me, I'm keeping you in this bed no matter what it takes. And you can just put that evil eyebrow down because ... You. Know. What. I. Mean."

"Felicity." Oliver's voice is rough, reminding her of the scream that tore from his throat when Roy's full weight crashed into the side of his leg.

"I promise to tell you everything, Oliver," Felicity says, her tone turning plaintive, "But if you want to avoid surgery, you have to stay put."

Standing over him, Felicity cradles his jaw, gently tilting his face up to hers and murmuring, "Please?"

Oliver's hands clasp her waist and his head comes to rest against her midriff as her arms embrace his shoulders. Felicity pets the back of his hair, letting her eyes drift closed as they lean into each other.

Oliver asks tiredly, "So, how bad is it?"

"The ligaments are badly bruised, but Dr. Barnes said nothing's broken," she answers, refocusing on him. "You're going to need a brace to keep the kneecap in place while it heals," Felicity explains, her
eyes shadowed with worry.

A hard crease divides Oliver's brows as he absorbs the news, considering how the fuck The Arrow can fight wearing a knee brace.

"What about Roy?" he asks gruffly. "Were you able to track him?"

With a sad shake of her head, Felicity replies, "Sara's monitoring the scanners and screens, but nothing yet."

Releasing his hold on her with a sigh of surrender, Oliver tries to scoot back on the mattress, but every movement is sluggish due to the narcotics in his system and the limited use of his injured leg, protected by a nest of pillows. Heavily wrapped, his dislocated kneecap was pulled back in place hours ago by the doctor Moira summoned to the mansion.

After smoothing the bedding over his legs, Felicity massages the back of her neck and for the first time, Oliver recognizes the exhaustion in her posture.

"How long have I been down, Felicity?" he demands to know.

She slips her phone from her pocket to check the time and replies, "It's just past noon, Oliver. Are you hungry?"

Ignoring her question, he declares, "You've been here all this time. You haven't slept."

"I'll rest after your Mom gets back," she promises with an unconvincing smile. "She's got several public appearances today."

Patting the empty space beside him on the monster mattress, he says, "Come here."

"Oh, no. Oliver, I don't think that's a very good idea," she demurs with a firm shake of her ponytail.

"Felicity, you're dead on your feet," he reasons. "You can at least rest while we talk."

Although she has reservations about lying with Oliver in his mother's house, she compromises by deciding, "Okay, but just for a few minutes." Stepping out of her heels, she pads across the rich Persian rug, her cramped toes indulging in a few seconds of burrowing into the plush silk fibers before collapsing on the bed.

His mattress is ridiculously large and comfortable and as she sinks into the expensive linens, she's suddenly aware of her weariness. In deference to his injuries, Felicity leaves a gap between them, lying along the bed's far edge.

Eyeing her critically, Oliver says, "Sit up."

"Why? I'm fine over here," she protests.

"Sit up," he doggedly repeats, a frown furrowing his brow.

Rolling her eyes, she relents and raises her shoulders while mumbling, "I gotta say, you're kind of bossy in bed."

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips as his arm sweeps her hip next to his, leaving his bicep beneath her neck. As of its own accord, her body curls into his solid warmth, settling on her side. Privately, he thinks Felicity's soft sigh of contentment is irresistible.
"Okay, so... my mom," he murmurs, now that they've circled back to his original question. "She knows."

"Boy, does she know," Felicity remarks, her eyes widening in unguarded amazement. "Oliver, she walked right in on us in the— What are we calling our new hideout? It's not a cave. Bunker sounds too much like Saddam Hussein lives down there. Lair? Do you like 'lair'?"

"Felicity."

"Yeah, okay. Sorry," Felicity apologizes, adding, "Yep! Moira knows. Big time. It's all out there now. But Oliver, the weird thing is... She didn't act one bit surprised."

"That we were there? Or that her son is The Arrow?" he asks, skimming her arm with his fingers, a habit that soothes him.

"Neither! Or both? She was totally unfazed by the whole vigilante situation," Felicity answers, hesitating before concluding, "It was like she already knew. Is that possible, Oliver?"

He pauses to think before replying, "Maybe."

"Really?? Your mom knew this huge thing about her only son, but didn't utter a peep? My mom couldn't keep a secret if her Jimmy Choos depended on it. But honestly, Oliver, your family and all their secrets. It's just twisted."

"You're not wrong," he agrees with a wry grin. "I must have been out of my mind. Thinking I could take care of business right under her roof."

"It's actually a great setup down there," she remarks sleepily. "And it's more secluded than Verdant. If only we weren't underneath the queen bee. Oh, no... I shouldn't call your mom that. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. She's been called worse, sometimes by me," he confesses quietly. "But it's also kind of a relief... if my mom's already figured things out. I had decided I should tell her anyway. Especially after seeing how Thea's been hurt by years of lying."

"But at least you've been protecting your family with your white lies," Felicity argues mildly in his defense, a yawn escaping her.

His expression shows that he's dubious about her fudging portrayal of his deception, prompting her to edit herself, saying, "Okay, maybe your lies were more a shade of beige. But your reasons come from the right place."

Felicity touches Oliver's naked chest, just over his heart. His larger hand covers hers, smoothing her fingers so that her palm lies flat beneath his, skin to skin. Their relaxed faces are tilted toward each other, sharing a pillow.

This is how Moira Queen finds them, the IT girl cuddled in bed with her son, both fast asleep. It's been six years since she's seen his beautiful face in a state of such contented peace.

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Isabel rudely shoves Laurel Lance over the threshold where the blindfolded captive stumbles before regaining her footing.

"Hey!" Laurel indignantly complains.
Slade nods to Isabel, signaling that he wants the blindfold removed. Isabel complies, glad to be nearly rid of this nuisance assignment.

Slade gestures to a nearby chair, saying, "Miss Lance, forgive my associate's intrusion on your... vacation time. Please, have a seat. Can I offer you a drink?"

"No," Laurel retorts harshly, "You can offer me a ride home."

"All in good time," he sneers, "But first, I have information that should be of particular interest."

"I doubt that," Laurel disputes, fire spitting from her hazel eyes. "But I'd have preferred a text or email."

Slade chuckles before responding, "Oh Miss Lance, this is the kind of news best shared face to face."

"I'm spellbound. Truly," Laurel says, dripping sarcastic venom.

"Why don't you just let me kill her now?" Isabel demands to know. "I could save all of us a lot of trouble."

Slade nails Isabel with a quelling glance, effectively silencing her.

"Miss Lance, you're my guest for now. It's not my intention to harm you," Slade promises.
"Actually, your fate rests in the hands of your beloved Oliver."

"My who?" Laurel stammers in surprise. "But he's not... I'm not..."

"I can understand your confusion," Slade remarks.

"I doubt that," Isabel mutters under her breath. But Slade is so absorbed in his cat-and-mouse game that he disregards her snarky attitude.

"For all this time, it seems that your Oliver has kept a terrible secret from you," Slade reveals, savoring this moment with oily glee.

Her curiosity seized, Laurel asks, "What secret?"

To Isabel's chagrin, Slade pauses in a demonstration of dramatic overkill. Finally, he announces, "Oliver Queen — your Ollie — is The Arrow."

Dressed in black from head to foot, the slight figure makes her way through Chinatown, weaving between the throngs of vendors and tourists in the open food market. The air is thick with the potent odors of fish, Asian spices and exotic meats. At the end of the food district, the hooded woman slips down a damp, dark alleyway leading to the St. Thomas Bridge. When she reaches the old, red brick bridge, she veers to the side and scampers down the adjacent wet, grassy slope. Once she's directly beneath the bridge, her gloved hand searches the brick wall until she feels the ancient oak panel. It takes four pushes of her shoulder before the secret door gives way, allowing her to creep through it.

Closing the panel behind her, she pulls the flashlight from her hoodie pocket and switches it on. The narrow beam of light cuts through pitch darkness, revealing a brick tunnel that angles down until leveling off. It's been nine years since she’s crept along this passageway to meet her lover but nothing has changed about its dank, earthen smell and confining walls.
She follows the tunnel for almost a mile until the surface transitions to gray stone, a clear indication she is closing in on her destination. A set of narrow stairs leads up to finished corridors and more stairs until she arrives at an aged wooden door secured with a simple, but heavy, bolt lock. Quietly sliding the bolt from its plate, she pulls the rustic handle to open the door, revealing the back of a thinner panel.

Stilling herself with a deep, cleansing breath, she pushes the final barrier open. She waits silently, not moving, barely breathing, to see if her intrusion has been noticed. The only sound is the ticking of the mantle clock to her right and the soft hum of the central heating. When she's satisfied that the bedroom is unoccupied, she clambers out of the tunnel and closes the polished oak cabinet behind her. Looking back at the wall of expensive paneling, there's nothing to hint at a hidden passage that provided entry to the Queen mansion. The opulent castle is so vast that the tunnel leading to this remote corner has allowed for generations of romantic rendezvous without raising the suspicion of trusting spouses.

For a moment, Isabel's assailed with memories triggered by the familiar room and its rich furnishings. How many times had she sneaked inside to arrive in this very spot for her illicit trysts with Robert, the handsome, charming tycoon who seduced her with his whispers of love, marriage and a future together? She'd truly loved him, believed his fervent promises to leave his wife and family for a life shared with her, before she'd figured out that she would always be the wrong girl from the wrong side of the tracks.

Her bitterness is palpable, a living thing that feeds her crystallized hate for this place, this family and everything connected to the Queen name. If it was up to Isabel Rochev, she'd burn this bitch to the ground tonight, but she's still under the thumb of Slade Wilson, bound by his agenda. However her days as his sycophant are damn near done.

Hitching her backpack higher on her shoulders, she glides out of the bedroom and makes her way into the quiet heart of the sleeping mansion, with the mission uppermost in her mind. For now.

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Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Moira meddles with Team Arrow before having a heart-to-heart talk with her son. Isabel's efforts provide Slade a new window on the Queens' world. Sara gets called to Central City after learning her sister has disappeared from rehab. A powerful spike on the power grid leads Oliver and Diggle to the Church of Blood, where one of their own is imperiled by Slade.

Chapter Notes

Now that we're all on an Olicity high, everyone's inspired to write and/or read! So, I've slammed this out before the weekend's completely gone. The "feels" in Chapter 13 are mainly between Oliver and his mother because I wanted to examine Moira's arc from a fairly diabolical schemer to her redemption as a devoted mother. Hopefully, that comes across as intended.

Your comments and kudos keep me writing, if you're want more of this, so please share!

"Sara Catherine Lance! What would your mother say if she saw you in that get-up?"

"Whuh... Um, Mrs. Queen," Sara stammers, at a complete loss for words, as she looks down at her customary Black Canary leathers. "Well... I usually wear a mask?"

"Mom!" Oliver protests from the exercise mat where he's seated with his braced leg stretched out in front of him while lifting weights.

Moira Queen purses her lips, a clear look of disapproval following Sara, who grabs the rest of her gear and practically runs out of The Annex, which is what Felicity has dubbed their hideout beneath the mansion.

"I don't know why it's necessary for The Black Sparrow to show that much cleavage," Moira continues.

"It's Canary, Mom. The Black Can-ar-y," Oliver explains through gritted teeth, with a mighty attempt to marshal his patience.

Beneath her breath, Felicity whispers to Diggle, "I think we're safe as long as she doesn't know our middle names." Then, on second thought, she gasps, "She doesn't, does she?"

With a mischievous smirk, Digg mutters, "What's your secret worth to you, Felicity Megan?"

"You wouldn't dare," she challenges, her voice rising, drawing Oliver's curious glance.

"Oliver," Moira begins, casting a critical eye at their array of weaponry. "Wouldn't it be better if your arsenal was arranged along the north wall? It would be closer to the exit."
Oliver rolls his eyes, silently counting to ten before responding. "Mom, shouldn't you be out kissing babies? Pressing the flesh? Bribing election judges?"

"Oh, Oliver! I'm happy to help, now that we're all—shall we say—on the same page," Moira offers, her face wreathed with the warm smile she only shares with her children.

"Yeah, about that—" Oliver starts, saying, "Mom, we should talk."

Digg and Felicity exchange a look of mutual understanding, prompting her to announce, "Oh! We've got errands to run. And awkward moments to avoid."

"That's okay, we'll go upstairs," Oliver responds, lifting himself to the nearby bench where a set of crutches are propped. "Besides, I need drugs. My knee's killing me."

As soon as the Queens are out of earshot, Diggle begins to gather up the row of arrows and bows. Felicity watches him with curiosity, but is bubbling with other questions. So many questions.

"Digg, having Oliver's mom around... How's that gonna work?" she asks excitedly.

"Oh, you mean having Moira giving us wardrobe pointers over our coms while we're in a shoot-out?" he guesses while moving more equipment.

"Yeah, will she like, put one of us in a time-out for using bad language? Because we sometimes do that," she wonders, twirling her shoe while she talks.

"We'll be lucky if it's only a timeout," Digg quips, adding, "Remember she shot Oliver with a thirty-eight."

Felicity giggles happily before noticing that her partner has effectively emptied the wall rack. "John, what are you doing?"

"His mom's right," Digg replies with a wink. "These belong on the other wall."

"How long have you known?"

After a necessary dose of lidocaine, Oliver is half-lying on the chaise lounge in the study while his mother sips her coffee, thoughtfully regarding him over the porcelain rim of her cup. She's had months to prepare for this conversation with Oliver, but it still feels too soon.

"It was around the time of the Undertaking," she answers quietly. "One night, I was watching the news and saw a clip of The Arrow jumping from a window ledge. It was only a few seconds really. But I recognized you. It was like I flashed back to the time you leapt out of the huge pine tree at Cape Cod on a dare from Thea. Do you remember?"

"Yeah," he admits, a boyish grin on his face. "I sprained my ankle too."

"It was suddenly so clear. The way you held yourself, the lines of your shoulders, the power in your legs," Moira remembers, her softening eyes meeting his. "There wasn't a doubt in my mind it was you under that hood. After all, you were always so fearless, so strong. Looking back, I can't believe I didn't see it before. But in that moment, I saw you, Oliver. My boy. My son. The Arrow."

"Mom..."

"That was the night I stopped sleeping," she confesses with a weary sigh. For the first time, Oliver
recognizes in his mother's face the heavy toll his risks have cost her. She's still a beautiful woman, as she has always been, blessed with fine bone structure, perceptive dove gray eyes and porcelain skin. But there's a veil of unspoken fear and remorse about her now.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he murmurs, reaching for her hand. She shocks him by sliding from her armchair to kneel at his side, gathering his hand in both of hers.

"Oliver, I just wish... There were so many times I made the wrong choices," Moira admits, pausing to take a deep breath. "And my bad judgment has caused so much suffering for you and your sister. If I'd only known what — and who — I stood to lose. When I see your scars—"

"No Mom, don't," he protests, rejecting her guilt with a shake of his head, hating the sight of his proud mother in this posture of abject shame.

"What I'm trying to say, Oliver, and not doing a very good job of it," she admits with a self-deprecating smile. "Is that I am so very proud of you."

She lifts her beloved son's calloused hand to her cheek, kissing his palm as her unabashed tears break the dam, freeing a river of regret from the thawing heart of Moira Queen.

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"Awww... How lovely. The Kid's having a moment with Mommie Dearest," Slade sarcastically comments, his solitary eye glued to the set of video monitors. He spends untold hours like this, his attention locked on the images and sounds secretly captured within the Queen mansion. The surveillance feed from seven locations throughout the manor's main floor lends an extra advantage in tracking his nemesis. He'd celebrated at the first visuals of Oliver in a knee brace and on crutches.

Isabel breezes in with bags of take-out for supper. Noting her partner's pre-occupation with Ollie-Vision, she inquires, "So what's happening on your little reality tv show?"

"Not enough," Slade grouses, giving her a sour look over his shoulder. "We need more cameras. On more floors. I want you to go back in."

"Nuh-uh," Isabel argues, as she pops another crouton in her mouth. "Are you crazy? It was risky enough planting the tech that's there. We'll be lucky to stay off of Computer Barbie’s radar. She's a geek freak, if you ask me. But she's smart."

"I want to see more!" Slade shouts with way more volume than necessary.

"Fine," she fires back. "Send in Gold. Or one of his henchman."

"Not Gold. He's holding church tonight," Slade reveals, with wicked anticipation. "It's time to sacrifice the lamb so my Army can rise."

Suddenly animated, Isabel demands, "I want to be there."

"No," Slade decrees, brooking no argument. "You will stay with our guest."

 Barely masking her fury, Isabel complains, "Your guest is a spoiled, whiny bitch. I'm sick to death of listening to her. I don't know why we can't just kill her already."

Slade lunges, jerking Isabel toward him with a brutal grip on her arm. "No," he whispers against her exposed throat. "Oliver must choose. Who to kill. Who to leave alive. But tomorrow, you will pick up more bugs for another midnight visit to the Queens."
He could shatter her arm with little effort, Isabel knows. Like the madman seizing her, Isabel's patience and control are deteriorating, clearing the way for the inevitable collision of wills between them. Unless she lets The Arrow kill him for her.


Oliver limps to her side, resting a protective palm on her shoulder, as he looks to her screens, asking, "Problem?"

"System seems slow," she explains. "I'll run a diagnostic later tonight."

It's early evening and they're alone, monitoring the city for any suspicious activity or blatant crime. Sara and Diggle are expected to check in at any time, now that Oliver's been benched by his bad knee.

"Any sign of Roy?" he asks for the tenth time in two days.

Felicity affectionately pats his fingers on her arm before rising and pulling a chair over for him. "Oliver, you need to rest your leg. Look, I know you're worried about Roy. I'm running facial recognition but haven't had any hits. That hood gimmick is a cheap life hack for anyone wanting to stay off the grid. But I guess you kind of already trademarked that concept."

Oliver sinks into the chair and grumbles in protest when Felicity drags up a storage box for his use as an ottoman. Ignoring his objections, she helps lift his injured leg, satisfied that she's done all he will allow in that department. She softly kisses his furrowed brow, murmuring, "If Roy's on the street tonight, there's a chance Sara and Digg will find him. We'll get him back, Oliver."

Both of their phones chime simultaneously, prompting Felicity to give him a hopeful smile, saying, "Maybe it's good news."

"It's from Sara," he reports, scrolling through the text. "She's headed to Central City to check on Laurel."

"She okay?" Felicity asks as she returns to her screens.

"They think Laurel bailed. She's disappeared from rehab," Oliver relates, tapping in a short request that Sara keep them posted.

"Another target for facial rec," Felicity remarks while rapidly uploading Laurel's picture. "Whoa, boy!" she gasps, her eyes flying to a different monitor lit in alarming red.

"That can't be good," Diggle observes as he enters, instantly jerked into vigilante mode.

"We've got a huge power drawdown at Collins and Main," Felicity explains, checking her other monitors for validation.

Back on his feet and hovering at her back, Oliver guesses, "The centrifuge?"

"It almost has to be. It's got a specific cycle, meaning there's only a forty-minute window before it shuts down," Felicity answers.

He's moving before she can stop him, yanking on his leather jacket and hood.

"Oliver, no! It's too soon," she pleads, reaching for his arm.
Oliver pauses, using Felicity’s hand to pull her close, his intense blue eyes connecting with hers. "Felicity, we can’t just sit this one out. There’s too much riding on it. And like you said, we have a narrow window."

"But you can’t do your Arrow acrobatics on that knee," Felicity counters, gripping the sleeve of his jacket as if she had a prayer of holding him here.

Softening his voice, Oliver bows his head so that their foreheads touch, murmuring "Felicity, I’m the emerald archer. The city, she needs me right now. And, in her defense, my arrows will fly tonight."

His promise, a steely vow sheathed in velvet, gives her chills, confirming that this is a fight she won’t win. Felicity bury’s her face in the tender skin of his neck, whispering, "I need you back in one piece.” He leaves her with a searing kiss that takes her breath, sending a streak of heat straight to her core.

As her two formidable partners head toward the door, Felicity cries out, "Digg?"

John easily keeps up with his limping friend while answering over his shoulder, "I’ve got his back, Felicity. I’ll bring him home to you."

The macabre scene Oliver and Digg witness from the crumbling balcony in the old church building will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Beneath them, twenty unconscious men on gurneys are being transfused, connected by intravenous lines, flowing with the Mirakuru-laced blood of Roy Harper, who lies at the center of the spectacle. With his needle-pierced arms strapped at right angles to his body, Roy’s position parodies a crucifixion. Deathly pale and thin, his appearance jolts the vigilantes crouched above him.

“Oliver, is he even alive?” Diggle questions, voicing the same fear Oliver is processing.

“I don’t know,” Oliver snarls. “But either way, we’re not leaving him here for these jackals.”

There’s little danger of their voices being heard in the one-time sanctuary because of the throbbing vibration of the massive generators powering the centrifuge. Orchestrating this freak show are Slade Wilson and his minion Cyrus Gold, who seem mesmerized by the nightmare they’ve brought to life.

“What’s our play, man?” Digg asks, palming his loaded Glock.

“I’ll work from here,” Oliver says after analyzing the angles, range and targets. “Wait to drop until I’ve neutralized the floor.”

Diggle nods in understanding, moving behind a pillar close to the aging staircase where he has a clear view of Oliver’s target zone. Dropping his hood, the archer nocks, aims and fires an explosive arrow, flying directly into the black heart of Cyrus Gold, detonating on impact. Stone dead, The Acolyte plummets to the cracked terrazzo.

Raising his eye to the archer’s perch, Slade grins at his adversary, taunting, “So the Kid’s come to church! Perhaps you’d like to confess your sins? While there’s still time.”

“You’re the one who’s out of time,” Oliver vows, nocking an arrow.

“I don’t fear your arrows. Haven’t you learned? You can’t kill me,” Slade sneers with a cruel grin.
“I may not be able to kill you,” Oliver answers, taking careful aim at his enemy’s one good eye. “But I can blind you.”

“If you do that, Kid, then you won’t know what happens to her,” Slade hisses in warning.

“To who?” Oliver demands to know, his attention now divided between rescuing Roy and understanding Slade’s cryptic threat.

“Hadn’t you heard?” Slade goads with mock concern. “I’ve got your girl. The love of your life.”

Oliver shoots a penetrating glance toward Digg, who taps his com to check on Felicity. Immediately after hearing her voice, he gives Oliver a reassuring thumb up.

Still perplexed, Oliver doesn’t know if Slade’s actually holding a hostage or if this is just another symptom of the madness caused by Mirakuru virus. Deciding not to take the bait, he switches focus to the main generator and releases another explosive arrowhead which detonates next to Slade, heaving him across the old auditorium, obscuring him in clouds of dust and debris.

“Digg!” Oliver shouts to his partner, who seizes the moment to sprint down the stairs to free Roy from the vile apparatus. But before he hefts Roy over his shoulder, Diggle checks his surroundings. He’s unsettled by the nearby ring of twenty sedated soldiers who may soon rise as a fierce Mirakuru army, but the crumbling building is groaning with ominous sounds. And he doesn’t have eyes on Slade, who could be overpowering him at any minute. But instinct keeps him there, searching in the dim light.

“Digg!” Oliver yells from above. “We gotta’ go!”

Pivoting in a slow circle, John’s attention is gripped by a small rack containing vials of bright, effervescent green — pure Mirakuru! Without hesitation, he grabs four vials, stuffing them in his cargo pockets.

“Digg!! Now!” Oliver roars, as a section of the ceiling collapses near him.

Gathering Roy in a fireman’s hold, Diggle runs for the exit, yelling up to Oliver, “Go! Go! Go!”

Firing a cable through a section of the now-open roof, The Arrow disappears against the night sky.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The team endeavors to hide and care for a seriously-damaged Roy. Felicity's insomnia has serious consequences, leading to a rift with Sara.

Chapter Notes

This chapter came to me during a road trip so there may be some peculiar formatting issues. But I really enjoyed the pace and flow of #14 so please let me know your reactions.

Thanks to my loyal and thoughtful readers who regularly share their comments! Bless you all!

"Felicity! We need plenty of blood and viper venom on hand for Roy," Oliver relates over his com while tending to Roy, who lies unconscious in the back of the cargo van. "We're coming in hot. Check our records to see what blood type he needs."

Without missing a beat, Felicity volunteers, "On it. And he's Type B Positive."

"How's he doing, Oliver?" Digg asks from the driver's seat as he rips through the streets on the shortest route back to their base.

With his fingers pressed to Roy's carotid artery, Oliver reports, "Heart's still beating. Mirakuru may be the only thing keeping him alive."

Minutes later, Diggle whips the van into the garage on the backside of the mansion. Meanwhile, Oliver struggles to get his damaged knee back in the brace before he gets caught without it by Felicity or worse, his mother. Well, maybe worse.

"Oh, no..." Felicity gasps at her first sight of Roy, a limp and bloodless ragdoll in Diggle's arms.

She's already hung bags of blood on IV poles and loaded a tray of medical equipment for Dig to begin the lifesaving transfusion. But when it comes time for him to find a vein, Felicity steps away because keeling over in a dead faint will not be helpful at this point.

"How long do we wait before it's safe to give him the venom?" Oliver worries aloud.

"Right now, we just need to get more blood in him than that green shit," Digg says tersely, pulling the small vials from his pocket. "Which reminds me...Felicity, I brought you a present."

John transfers the full glass tubes to her hands as she exchanges a puzzled look with Oliver, who grabs one in astonishment.

"Mirakuru!" Oliver exclaims, once again reminded of how damned lucky they are to have John
Felicity extends the quartet of vials as far from herself as possible, as if a dead rat or plutonium has been delivered into her hands. She's hyper conscious of the dangers posed by the lethal-looking virus and somewhat freaked that the only thing between her skin and the hazardous green liquid is a fragile glass barrier.

"I'll get these to Cisco and Caitlyn to see if they can R and D a cure," Felicity plans as she secures the samples in a sturdy container behind locked cabinet doors.

"Have we heard anything more from Sara?" Oliver asks. He pauses, distracted by the new location of their weapon racks. "What the..."

"Just roll with it, man," Diggle advises, ever the pragmatist.

"We liked your mom's idea," Felicity adds brightly.

Frowning, Oliver mutters something about "only encouraging her" as he stows his bow and quiver. Turning back to his partners, he limps to a nearby bench, grimacing as he sits, stretching his aching leg. "So... Sara?"

"I haven't heard anything new. Why?" Felicity asks, digging through Oliver's stash of painkillers because it's obviously past time for his scheduled dose.

"Slade said something crazy," Oliver answers, gratefully taking the pills from Felicity's hand and downing them with a swallow of bottled water. Closing his eyes, he rests his head and shoulders against the wall at his back.

"You're going to have to be more specific. Slade and crazy are redundant," Felicity quips, joining him on the bench. Oliver pulls her hand into his, their fingers naturally twining.

"He was intimating he might have a hostage," Digg explains. "Oliver's true love."

"Whoa. That could be a long impressive list," Felicity remarks, prompting Oliver to open his eyes and pin her with a penetrating, blue gaze.

"You're still here, aren't you?" he points out, his voice low and sexy.

Felicity ducks her head to hide the blush spreading north of her neck. This is all so new, and the timing couldn't be worse, but Oliver's admission sends a thrill through her.

On the far side of the room, Digg chuckles to himself, shaking his head as he stands over Roy. Dropping his broad palm to his unconscious patient's chest, he says, "Roy, you gotta wake up, dude. You owe me money."

"What's that about?" Oliver asks with a cranky tone of suspicion.

"Just a friendly wager, Oliver."

The wide, opulent hallways of the manor are hushed and dark as Felicity makes her way through the monstrous house, bound for the basement. She's mastered the layout of the main parts of the home but could easily get lost if she wanders off into the remote areas. As she passes through the kitchen, Felicity raids the fridge for a wedge of cheese and a healthy splash of red wine, balancing both in
one hand as she slips through the oak door leading to the basement stairs.

Felicity had made a game effort to sleep when the others gave it up and retired for the night. But her brain still buzzed with fear for Roy and the niggling worry that something odd was up with the wi-fi network. Plus, Oliver's growing expressions of affection have left her keyed up with excitement and longing for more. She lectures herself that this is a critical time to prioritize the team's focus, which shouldn't be distracted by such folly as Felicity's love life. However that doesn't mean she can't privately revel in the first blush of new romance.

The past year has taught Felicity that putting her personal life on hold, waiting for a crisis-free window, is a fool's game. As long as she throws in with Oliver, it's best to assume they're centered in the eye of the storm every freaking day-- and night.

Roy's catatonic presence lends an eerie aspect to the large, dimly-lit room, but at least his color has improved from his earlier ash-gray pallor. There's no longer a risk of the young man being mistaken for a cadaver although his breathing remains unnaturally shallow. Felicity feels compelled to acknowledge Roy because it just seems callous and rude to ignore the poor guy.

Lightly touching his shoulder, Felicity says, "Hey, Roy, it's only me. I can't sleep. And you can't be awake. We're like The Lady and the Hawk. Remember that one? We should watch it again. When you're not all homicidal and insane... anyway, you keep napping and I'll just be over there."

Felicity drifts to her work station while indulging in some sips of wine with nibbles of the rich, smoky cheese, "Okay," she sighs, attacking her keyboard. "Let's see what little vampires are sucking on my nodes." Looking up in embarrassment, she gives her face a light slap, muttering, "So relieved no one heard that one. Roy, be glad you're in a coma."

Absorbed in the data she draws from the powerful network, Felicity rapidly ferrets out the seven backdoor signals that were apparently activated five days ago. With quick strokes, she hacks into one of the feeds and her screen fills with live video of the shadowed kitchen where she stood only moments ago.

"Oh, frack," she whispers, switching through the other surveillance cameras, all hidden within various rooms on the floor above her. The final scene unsettles her -- Oliver lying unaware and vulnerable in his bedroom, soundly asleep.

The shattering of her wine glass is Felicity's only warning. Like a spectre from the darkness, Roy appears at her side, quivering in silent rage.

Rising to her feet, Felicity has little space to maneuver, blocked in the corner by the vacant-eyed, menacing figure who wears the familiar face of her friend. But there's no glimmer of humanity in the visage of the madman who has her trapped.

"Roy," Felicity calls softly, keeping her voice calm, non-threatening. "It's only me. I won't hurt you. Remember, I'm your friend, Felicity. You know me, Roy. You call me Barbie?"

She thinks there's the tiniest spark of memory in his eyes, followed by a heartbreaking expression of suffering in his whimper. Felicity's eyes fill with tears of empathy mixed with terror.

From the doorway, she hears a worrisome, subtle sound-- the snick of a gun's safety being released.

"Felicity, don't move," Sara instructs quietly. In a trained shooter's stance, she grips a handgun, aimed directly at Roy's head. At this close range, the League assassin won't miss. Her shot will be lethal. Permanent.
When the pistol fires, Felicity and Roy collide, going down hard in the crimson pool of wine and broken glass.

The scene before Oliver is chaotic and heart-stopping. Sara has her gunsight trained on Roy and Felicity who seem tangled in a bizarre struggle. Roy is wild-eyed and disoriented, but Oliver is more concerned by Felicity's behavior. Rather than trying to escape, she's clinging to Roy, her hands twisting the fabric of his shirt in a death grip. Oliver can't discern if either or both of them have been injured.

He doesn't hesitate to act.

Stepping in front of Sara's weapon, Oliver firmly grips her wrist and twists the pistol from her hand.

"Oliver!" Sara protests in fury, astonished that her friend would take her weapon.

"Stand down," he growls through a clenched jaw as he tucks the handgun in his waistband. "No one dies tonight."

Oliver pivots to the med bay, fisting a pair of syringes loaded with venom. In two powerful strides, he's at Roy's back, wrapping a muscular forearm around Roy's neck while slamming the twin shot needles into the younger man's shoulder. Straining with every muscle against Roy's enhanced strength, Oliver stubbornly hangs on, waiting for the venom to take hold. When Roy finally slumps against him, Oliver drags him to the side so that he can check on Felicity.

Addressing Sara, he jerks his chin toward Roy, commanding, "Watch him."

Trembling like a leaf, Felicity's kneeling in shards of shattered glass and spilled wine. When Oliver reaches her, she falls into his open arms, her breathing fast and shallow.

"Felicity," he gasps, gathering her to his chest, "Are you hurt?"

When she doesn't answer him, Oliver pulls back, his eyes frantically raking over her for signs of serious injury. Awakened by the firing of a pistol, he's all too aware that she or Roy may be wounded. From experience, he knows that gunshot victims don't always realize they've been hit. But he sees no evidence of harm except for the possible cuts from broken glass beneath her. But Felicity still hasn't spoken. She's shocky, staring at Roy's still figure.

Cradling her face with both hands, Oliver gently guides her attention to him, asking her to focus on only him.

"Felicity."

From the beginning, they've always had this special connection --his cobalt eyes meeting her turquoise ones-- whether sparkling with humor, a sharing of understanding or flashing in anger. That is how he reaches for her now, his eyes speaking to hers, calling her back to him, reassuring her that he's there. Waiting for her to fasten to his steady gaze.

"Felicity."

"Oliver?" she whispers, searching his face and sounding so damned lost it guts him.

"What, baby?" he murmurs, pulling her back into his embrace.
"Oliver, is Roy dead?"

"No. No, he's not dead," Oliver comforts her, finally realizing why she's so traumatized.

"But Sara... she shot him," Felicity says in confusion.

"And I would have hit him too," Sara declares, defensive and sour. "If you hadn't knocked him down."

Now the scene makes sense, Oliver realizes in horror. Felicity had thrown herself in front of an assassin's bullet for Roy's sake. That's why she was still clinging to Roy when Oliver burst into the basement. She'd been protecting their virus-deranged friend.

Unbridled fury explodes in Oliver's chest when he considers what could have happened in that brief flash of violence. What was Sara thinking? What had caused her to revert to her former ways, the role of an assassin? Oliver feels as if his extended team is crumbling and there's serious need for damage control.

But at this instant, three of them remain in the floor, which is doing a mean number on Oliver's bad knee. So his Waterloo with Sara will have to wait. Besides, his temper and Sara's are equally combustible so this is definitely a conversation that needs to be postponed, until his emotions are not so compromised. Until he's got Felicity safely out of range.

"Felicity, can you stand?" Oliver asks, offering her his hand.

Nodding, Felicity rises from the cold concrete floor, her legs stained with wine and traces of blood.

"Now, can I?" Oliver asks himself wryly, leaning heavily on a nearby pillar as he levers himself to his feet.

Limping back to Roy, Oliver speaks tonelessly to Sara, asking, "Can you help me with him?"

Sullen and silent, Sara approaches, lifting Roy with Oliver. They move his unconscious body to a metal gurney, securely strapping his wrists and ankles down with leather ties. Then, while Sara mops up the wine and sweeps up glass, Oliver tends to the cuts on Felicity's lower legs. Now that the shock has worn off and Roy's proven unharmed, she seems to be coping better. Oliver keeps her centered and calm with his steady hands and low voice.

"Felicity, what brought you down here?" he gently asks while applying antibiotic cream to her lacerations. "It's really late."

"I know. I just couldn't sleep so I decided to check the network. To find out why it's been running so slow," she explains, glancing toward her work station. "Oh, frack! Why does everyone keep shooting my babies?"

Following her alarmed gaze, Oliver immediately recognizes the issue. Her monitors have gone on the fritz and the mainframe has clearly been damaged by the bullet intended for Roy.

"Well, that's great," Oliver sighs in resignation.

"Better than shooting Roy, I guess," Felicity observes although she's obviously distressed by the destruction of her prized cyber world.

Pressing the last bandage into place, Oliver strokes her arm in sympathy. "We'll get it repaired," he promises.
"I'll repair it," Felicity asserts, her confidence returning. "You can pay for parts."

"Deal," he agrees, grateful that she's sounding more like her resilient, perky self.

After a quick glance around them, Felicity notices that Sara has left without a word. "Why would she do such a thing, Oliver? Kill a friend like that?"

"Sara... She's like I was. When I first came home from Lian Yu," he remembers, veiled sadness in his eyes. "Sara's still in survival mode. It's what kept us alive when we were... lost."

"And she's still lost?" Felicity wonders, studying his face for understanding.

"She is."

There's a bone-deep sorrow in the shadows of his eyes, remnants of memories so deeply etched they will never be fully erased. Felicity aches for him, for Sara, for the innocence and the years cruelly taken from them. Although she cannot imagine the level of violence they endured, that caused such vicious scars, Felicity regularly witnesses the aftermath. Just the brief trauma she's experienced tonight reminds her how strong Oliver must be to have survived five years of this.

"But there's hope for Sara. Oliver, you recovered your humanity," Felicity reminds him, caressing his forearm. "You found your way back."

"I had someone who believed in me. Restored my soul," Oliver says quietly, touching his forehead to hers. "I had you, Felicity."

He pours his gratitude into his kiss, telling her without words how remarkable she is, how much she means to him and why he's chosen her above all others.

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Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In the eye of the storm, Oliver and Felicity share their reactions to worrisome developments. Isabel taunts Laurel with not-so-innocent girl talk. Sara and Oliver clash over Roy's fate. Oliver confesses a mysterious connection to his girl -- his girl girl.

Chapter Notes

This chapter focuses heavily on Felicity and Oliver as they take time to process the recent discoveries and incidents swirling about them. The team is beset by arch-nemesis Slade, Mirakuru soldiers, Laurel's kidnapping, Roy's identity crisis, combustible Sara, secret surveillance and vengeful Isabel, who's running her own private agenda. It must be May.

Also, Oliver will finally have an important conversation with Felicity that ties back to a special bond they shared in Chapters 2-3.

I'm so grateful for the encouraging response that readers have given this story which started out as a one-chapter, stand-alone drabble. Your comments are invaluable to the creative process and keep my muse on the job.

Now, I hope you enjoy!

Exhausted by the night's traumatic chain of events, Felicity still can't surrender to sleep despite the lateness of the hour. Twisting in the expensive linens, she's having no luck getting comfortable in the Olympic-sized bed. Her mind erratically jumps between the recent crazy developments, each of which is daunting in its own right. In her bone marrow, she's convinced that Slade will keep coming for Oliver now that the madman is backed up by an invincible squad of Mirakuru soldiers. Their friend Roy has only one hope of survival: the development of a cure for an obscure 70-year-old virus. But right now, injecting all that cobra venom into his veins can't be good for a person. Sara's attempt to kill Roy is a painful betrayal of Oliver and the Arrow team as a whole. The new rift with Sara grieves Felicity, who recognized the fiery fury in Oliver's reaction. She dreads the inevitable collision of wills between the two warriors whose history is a long, rough road.

The shooting in the basement was so shocking that Felicity hasn't even had a chance to tell anyone about the hidden surveillance cameras that are presently spying on them inside the Queen residence. Her discovery relates to more troubling questions. How the hell was the mansion breached without alerting security? And, how can Felicity exploit the cameras to confuse the infiltrator who’s viewing the video feed? Who's been watching them? For what purpose? Could this be connected to Moira's election campaign? Or, more likely, is their voyeur the obvious culprit—Slade Wilson?

As to Slade, Oliver mentioned that the Aussie may be holding a hostage. With her next breath, Felicity suddenly knows who Slade is keeping captive. She pops up in bed, exclaiming, "Laurel!"
Frankly, being Slade's prisoner is not much different from drying out in rehab. Except there are no therapy sessions, unless Laurel counts the occasional rants by her appointed keeper, Isabel Rochev. For the most part, Isabel is sullen and bored, but on this night she's chirpy and chatty.

"So you and Queen, you were like high school sweethearts?" Isabel inquires, adopting an air of innocent curiosity.

Keeping her guard up, Laurel answers, "Something like that."

"So how'd your sister end up on the Gambit when it went down? Shouldn't it have been you, sailing off into the sunset with your guy?" Isabel asks, a mean spark glinting in her eyes.

"I guess you'd have to ask Ollie," Laurel bites out, each word razor-edged.

"Ollie! Oh, I love that. Does he have a pet name for you too?" Isabel asks, in mock sweetness.

Laurel fights the urge to lash out at her captor, but losing her temper will only play into Isabel's trap.

"Let's not pretend we're friends having a slumber party," Laurel coolly requests.

"Hey, I'm just trying to pass the time with girl talk," Isabel remarks. "I'm interested in how your romance with Oliver has lasted through all the ups and downs of the last seven years."

"It hasn't!" Laurel reveals in a flash of anger. "We've both moved on."

"Oh?" Isabel responds, "He's with someone new?"

"Like I said," Laurel begins, fuming, "You'll need to ask him."

"Sure, I'll do that," Isabel promises, a triumphant smile ghosting across her face. "Soon."

"Laurel!" Oliver realizes with a start, sitting bolt upright in bed. "She's his hostage."

If it weren't for the fucked-up incident with Sara, this realization would have hit him sooner. Hell, it was probably why Sara had shown up here in the middle of the night; she must have discovered her sister's abduction after investigating Laurel's disappearance from the rehab facility.

Reaching for his phone, he pulls up Felicity's contact screen and taps in a text message, saying, "Can we talk? My room?"

Seconds later, he receives her reply, "We need more privacy. Meet me on back patio. Use west door."

"What's more private than my bedroom?" Oliver wonders aloud, somewhat insulted. "What does she think is happening in here?"

Since he's still wearing the clothes he hastily pulled on upon hearing Sara's gunshot, he's quickly on the move. Oliver can't imagine why he needs to take the longer, circuitous route to reach the patio, but he's learned that Felicity always has her reasons. And she has his trust—not something she had to earn—but she inherently owned from their first encounter.

Slowed down by his limping gait, Oliver arrives to find Felicity already there, pacing the stone
paving as she types commands into her tablet. Sunrise is still a couple of hours away and there's a crisp chill in the air. Oliver presses the button igniting the fire pit that casts a warm glow on the surrounding furniture.

"Hey," he greets her quietly and Felicity paces a straight path into his arms for an affectionate embrace. "Are you all right?"

She nods, her loose hair silky against his cheek, and murmurs, "There's so much on my mind. So much you need to know."

Pressing a kiss to the tender skin of her neck, he responds, "Let's start with why you think my bedroom isn't a safe place to talk."

"First, you need to sit," she insists, leading him by the hand to the patio settee, where they snuggle for warmth, side by side. His arm comes around her shoulders. "Okay," she begins, taking a fortifying breath, "We're being watched. The mansion is bugged."

It's rare to shock Oliver Queen. He's usually miles ahead of the curve, but this news catches him off-guard. "Are you certain, Felicity? Since when? How did they get past security? Are you saying we've been hacked? Or had an actual intruder?"

Felicity allows his mind to wrap around this revelation. Oliver is intensely protective of his private life and she's aware that this invasion is disconcerting. Placing a soothing hand on his chest, she explains, "It's actual. A real live creeper was inside this place. I discovered the surveillance feeds last night, right before Sara... The devices were planted and activated five—no, now six—days ago. I've found seven video signals from rooms on the main floor, but there could be other equipment in addition to those."

"And you think there may be a camera in my bedroom?" he assumes, his voice rough with anger.

"There is, Oliver," Felicity regretfully tells him, hating that this knowledge will add to his stockpile of treachery. "I saw it. Um... no! Not it. I did not see it. I saw you. Asleep you. That's all I saw."

She rolls her eyes in embarrassment, but he seems unfazed by her unfortunate babbling.

His jaw set in a hard line, Oliver impulsively decides, "We have to relocate."

"Not necessarily, Oliver."

"I can't stay here, knowing Slade is spying on our every move. Watching us while we sleep!" he angrily vows.

"I know. It's sinister and disturbing on so many levels, regardless of who it is," she readily agrees with a spontaneous shudder. "But we may be able to use this to our advantage. Turn the tables and set a trap?"

"Not in the bedrooms!" he resolutely declares.

"Okay then, Moira gets a wild notion to repaint the bedrooms that are bugged. Problem solved," Felicity assures him. "There's no shortage of bedrooms here. I mean, this place is like a freaking Sheraton Hotel. Or the mountain lodge in The Shining. But not haunted. That we know of. Anyway, I can rig up focused frequency jamming in the rooms where we sleep."

Rubbing a weary hand over his forehead, Oliver admits, "This isn't even the reason I came down here."
"I'm sorry," Felicity murmurs, concern written across her face.

"Not your fault," he promises, dropping a kiss on the crown of her hair and claiming her hand with his.

"Felicity, I know who Slade's holding hostage," he reveals, worry creasing his forehead.

"Laurel," Felicity confidently supplies the name on the tip of his tongue.

"How did you know?" he asks, astonished by her answer.

"Oh, probably the same way you did," she guesses. "I had a few quiet minutes to connect the dots."

"It's remarkable, don't you think, how we connect like that?" Oliver asks, his eyes seeking hers in the pre-dawn light. "How we share thoughts without words? Like it's almost supernatural."

"I wouldn't go that far," Felicity giggles softly. "After all, I am a science major. I don't believe in anything I can't replicate in a controlled setting."

"Oliver, what?" she asks, intrigued by his enigmatic smile.

"Do you remember when you asked me how I found you by the river? When you were missing?" he asks, skimming her knuckles with his thumb.

Felicity nods, still perplexed, but curious.

"I was not in a good place. Hopeless really. Because I thought I'd lost you," he admits, resurrecting the memory and the pain that will forever be linked to those agonizing days and nights.

Felicity touches his cheek, cradling his jaw with concern.

"I had a dream and you came to me. It was your voice, your personality, your presence there with me, in me," he divulges, his eyes earnest and steady. "Felicity, it was you. And you told me you were waiting for me, in the woods by the river... It's okay if you think I'm crazy. And I'm sorry if this freaks you out. But the truth is: You came to me that desperate night to help me find you. And I did."

"Oliver. Wow."

"You don't remember a time you were dreaming about me while you were kidnapped?" Oliver asks, nervous that sharing his confession is a mistake.

With a self-conscious grin, she pauses before answering, "It might be easier to remember the nights I don't dream about you."

"Oh."

"Oliver, has this continued since you got me back? This Wi-Fi bond with me?" she asks, studying his reaction.

"Will it bother you if I say 'yes'? It feels like we're in weird territory here," he observes with a slight grimace. "I don't want to come across like some perverted sleep stalker."

Felicity's burst of laughter echoes across the flagstone, prompting Oliver to cup his palm over her mouth, while shushing her.

"My mom's bedroom is right above us," he whispers, although it's hard to take him seriously while
he's grinning.

"You mean the woman who slept through gunfire?" Felicity teases him amidst giggles.

"Thank God," Oliver thinks aloud. "That's all we needed down there with Sara trying to shoot Roy—Moira Queen showing up in all her midnight glory."

Felicity impulsively kisses him, repeatedly, before admitting, "Oliver, I love the special connection we have. Whether we're awake or asleep or comatose. So, look into my soul with your insanely-blue eyes and tell me: What am I thinking about?"

Rising to her challenge, he locks her gaze with a single arched eyebrow. "You're thinking... about... eating pancakes."

After rewarding him with two thumbs up, she reaches for his hands to pull him to his feet, saying, "Which means you're thinking about..."

"Making pancakes," he good-naturedly offers, lightly kissing the tip of her nose before drawing her to his side as they re-enter the house.

"You locked me out, Ollie?" Sara blusters into her phone.

"Are you on the back driveway?" Oliver calmly asks, watching the security monitor which shows her pacing furiously on the back drive.

A colorful stream of cuss words confirms she knows he's got a visual on her. Sara's always had an impressive ability to blaspheme. She can strip paint with her creative, profane vocabulary.

"I'll meet you outside," Oliver proposes, taking the long route around the house, to give her time to cool down and so she can't enter the Annex.

Sara is one hundred pounds of spitting rage when he reaches her. "So, you kick me out without a word, Oliver? After all we've been through together?"

"Sara," Oliver sighs, taking a conciliatory step in her direction. "I can't let you near Roy while he's defenseless. He's just a kid."

Backing away, Sara argues hotly, "That's not Roy. The Roy we knew is gone. That guy in there, he's a rabid animal and the only option is to put him down before he murders one of us. It's a miracle he didn't kill Felicity last night."

"It's a miracle you didn't," Oliver accuses, his expression suddenly leaden and dangerous.

"I didn't think she'd try to protect him, Ollie," Sara petulantly persists. "I told her not to move."

"We're not giving up on Roy," Oliver declares. "Not while there's a possibility he can be cured. If I'd given Slade that chance, none of this would be happening now."

His regret—and their shared nightmares—take some of the heat out of Sara's tantrum. "You don't know that, Oliver. And you don't have any guarantee that Roy can be saved."

"The difference between us, Sara, is that I have hope that he will be cured," Oliver quietly persists.

"No, Ollie, the difference between us is that you've forgotten who we fuckin' are," she bristles. "You
and I, we're stone-cold killers because that what it takes to survive. We do what has to be done, what others don't have the balls for."

Haunted by the loss of the girl she once was, Oliver reasons, "You're still stuck on that forsaken island, Sara. It's time to come home."

Bitter tears flooding her eyes, Sara raggedly confesses, "I'm not ready."

"Sara, I know Slade has Laurel," he reveals, his hand reaching out to her. "I promise, we'll get her back."

"She's not your problem anymore, Oliver. Go back to your shiny, new hope and your precious Felicity," Sara retorts with a crumpled smile before turning her back on him. On his mission. On his city.

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"I just don't understand," Laurel Lance complains, her whiny tone grating on Isabel's last nerve. "Why hasn't he come for me by now?"

"Well, like you said," Isabel says, "He's moved on."

"No!" Laurel protests. "Ollie's not like that. And now that I know his secret, that he's The Arrow, I realize how carefully he's been watching over me. All this time. He will always come for me. When I need him. Especially if he thinks I'm in danger."

"Apparently, the only one of us in danger right now is me," Isabel snarls under her breath, flinging her magazine across the room. "I may die of boredom before Slade pulls the trigger on his all-consuming master plan."

"Does Oliver know? Did you make sure he understands that I'm being held prisoner?" Laurel pleads, expecting sympathy and immediate action from her keeper.

"This is not my game, sister," Isabel declares, pinning Laurel with a cold, dark stare. "But yes, Slade crowed to your hero about having captured you, the love of his life."

"He called me that?" Laurel asks, a glimmer of hope sparkling in her eyes. "What was Oliver's reaction?"

"I don't know, your highness," Isabel huffs in exasperation. "I wasn't invited to that little party. Because I was stuck here. Babysitting your pathetic ass."

Ignoring Isabel's foul humor, Laurel savors the idea that her abduction could be a catalyst for Oliver, to remind him how much he still wants and loves her. Hasn't it always been true, throughout their long history, that they're meant to be together? And now that Oliver has outgrown his cheating frat-
boy behavior, this could be their moment to let go of past mistakes, to embrace their destiny. Even strangers like this Slade Wilson can see how important she is to Ollie, that he'll go to any lengths to protect her, to cherish her, now and forever.

Watching Laurel spin off into la-la-land, Isabel wants nothing more than to stick her finger down her own throat and vomit. God, this chick is insufferable. How did Oliver Queen ever find anything appealing about this woman once she opened her perfectly-glossed mouth? Even before Laurel's confirmation, Isabel had witnessed an incident proving that Oliver's eye had indeed moved on. Earlier, Isabel had assumed he might be hooking up with the sister, Sara Lance. Until Isabel sneaked into the dude's bedroom that night.

On her furtive sojourn to the Queen mansion to plant cameras, she'd visited Oliver's suite, where he was sleeping solo. After a closer look, she realized he was injured and apparently sedated with a pair of crutches propped at his bedside. Isabel had lingered, feeling relatively safe with him appearing to be dead to the world.

He truly was beautiful, a younger, virile version of his father when he was in his prime, when Isabel had warmed Robert Queen's sheets in this very house. Isabel had been lost in memories when she'd heard the light patter of approaching steps in the hallway. Diving behind the panel of heavy drapery, Isabel didn't recognize the young woman at first glance, until the visitor stepped into the weak beam of light from the adjoining bathroom. The reflection on the blonde's eyeglasses revealed Felicity Smoak slipping into Oliver's bedroom.

Shedding the oversized hoodie—obviously his—that she wore as a robe, Felicity placed her folded glasses on the table amongst the array of pill bottles before sliding into his bed. Even in sleep, Oliver reached for her as she lightly kissed his lips before snuggling into his side. Was this how she and Robert had looked fifteen years ago? Cocooned in one another, so sheltered by trust, safe in one another's arms. Her times with Robert are tainted now, poisoned by his pretty promises that turned into lies. Her bitterness burned deep at the tableau before her, recognizing an untarnished love that wasn't made tawdry by secrecy, by betrayal. As the couple's breathing deepened and slowed in unguarded sleep, Isabel fled from her hiding place, desperate to escape the pain resurrected by this cursed house and its entitled owners.

Later, when Isabel's emotions had cooled, she was able to take a cerebral look at her maddening discovery inside the Queen mansion. Felicity Smoak, the woman she'd very nearly killed, who they'd held prisoner, was the true target Slade had feverishly sought in his determined quest to bring Oliver to complete despair. They'd tossed away the wrong girl, their trump card. Yet there was no way Isabel was sharing this revelation with Slade since he always found a way to blame her ass for every little thing that went awry.

Only this didn't feel like a little thing. And Isabel was confident that this priceless nugget of information could help her bring down the House of Queen.

"What do you mean someone's been in our home?" Moira gasps in horror.

She and Oliver walk the spacious, walled grounds behind the mansion. The meticulously-landscaped gardens are shaded by towering, old oaks and lush evergreens. He leads his mother to a marble bench facing a tiered, Italian stone fountain.

"Felicity has discovered spy cameras inside the house, on the main floor," Oliver explains dropping
his cane onto the verdant carpet of mown grass.

"But Oliver, that's impossible," she protests. "Surely our security team would have been alerted if we'd had an intruder?"

"Look Mom, if Felicity says we've been bugged, then it's a fact," he states flatly, leveling his mother with a steel-blue gaze.

Clearing her throat, Moira carefully begins, "Oliver, I know you're fond of her, but... Is it possible that Felicity could have—"

A thunder cloud descends on Oliver's expression as he erupts. "What are you suggesting, Mom? That Felicity would have warned us about surveillance that she planted?"

"Well, she is a very clever girl. And she's the only stranger who's recently been in the house," she delicately comments with a defensive sniff.

"Stranger, Mom?" Oliver repeats in disbelief. "How can you say such a thing about the woman who holds my life in her hands during every mission, who keeps my deepest secrets? Who literally kept me alive the night you shot me?"

"That's not fair, Oliver!" Moira accuses. "I didn't know it was you back then. I didn't realize."

Grabbing up his cane and rising to stand over her, he views her smallness with pity, sadly observing, "There's so much you don't realize, Mother. And you never will."

"Oliver! Don't go," she pleads, as her son stalks away, leaving her alone, without a backward glance.

When Oliver enters the Annex, his furious countenance causes Felicity and Diggle to exchange curious glances as they continue to unpack the newly-purchased computer components.

Snatching his bow and quiver from the wall rack, Oliver limps to the makeshift target area and, with blazing speed, fires six arrows, nailing an equal number of bullseyes.

Communicating with animated eyebrows, Oliver's partners silently debate how to approach their obviously-agitated friend.

"Something annoying you, Oliver?" Diggle gamely asks.

Oliver's piercing glare pivots from the target to Digg.

"I think the bullseye started it," Felicity quips, hoping to take the edge off of Oliver's anger. Abandoning the stack of computer parts, she crosses to him, lightly touching his forearm to draw his attention. "Hey," she murmurs quietly, "What's wrong?"

Oliver expels a breath to loosen the tightness in his chest and shoulders. "Sara's gone. Roy's down. Thea is God-knows-where. And my mother simply can't be trusted."

Tracing his bicep with her gentle hand, she connects with his troubled blue eyes, softly reminding him, "We're here."

At her touch, Oliver's tension eases, the storm in his expression gradually calming.

"Oliver," Diggle asserts, "This began with us, man. Just us."
Looking gratefully between his two friends, Oliver realizes the wisdom of his partners, thankful for their loyalty and unconditional support.

"You're right," he confirms, adding, "It began with us. And it's time to get back to that."

"It's time," she repeats, although Slade's lost count of how many times Shado has reminded him. "Avenge me if you love me."

"I do," Slade vows with fervor, determined that she understand the depth of his feelings for her, despite the rusty chain of passing years. "I love you more than he ever did. More than he ever will."

"Prove your love," she implores, reaching for him across the void, as her beautiful face withers to gray ashes that scatter and fade to oblivion, reminding Slade once more—she's lost to him.

"It's time," Slade growls, pulling a dagger and shouting, "Isabel, bring our guest."

"Mr. Wilson, that's most flattering to hear."

Oliver's head jerks upward, instantly drawn towards the study where his mother's voice mingles with a deeper, masculine one. Recalling her mention of a meeting with a major campaign donor, Oliver's curiosity morphs into suspicion, then outrage. Slade Wilson, decked out in an expensive Italian suit, lounges in a wingback chair, casually conversing with a clueless Moira Queen.

Six years after their brutal struggles on Lian Yu, Oliver locks eyes with the man now hellbent to destroy him.

"Mr. Wilson, this is my son, Oliver," Moira says, making polite introductions. "Oliver, please welcome Mr. Slade Wilson, who has made a generous contribution to my mayoral campaign."

On their feet now, both men stride toward one another, ending in a contest of wills disguised as a steel-gripped handshake. On the surface, the dangerous adversaries maintain the social standards of the lady of the house while masking an undercurrent of searing contempt. Oliver is disgusted by Slade's tactic—using his mother's innocent presence as a shield. If she was absent, the combatants would already be at each other's throat. As it is, Slade twists an invisible knife in Oliver's gut, daring him to endanger his genteel, naive parent.

Like an actor in a low-brow stage play, Slade sneers, "Mr. Queen, it's an honor."

Although it nearly breaks his jaw, Oliver forces a grim smile in return, responding, "Mr. Wilson."

"Call me Slade. Please," the trespasser invites, his tone oily with sarcasm.

"Mr. Wilson is quite the art collector, Oliver," Moira cordially volunteers. "I invited him to see our galleries."

"Did you, Mother?" Oliver coolly asks, barely sparing her a glance.

Her son addressing her as "Mother" gets Moira's attention, her first inkling that something is not quite right about this encounter. She studies the demeanor of each man. As a new acquaintance, Mr. Wilson comes across as any successful tycoon might, displaying an aggressive, larger-than-life ego. Although, upon closer scrutiny of Oliver, her son is definitely agitated. His eyes have a hard, icy
edge and the iron set of his jaw has to be making his back teeth ache.

Openly concerned, she lightly touches Oliver's arm, inquiring, "Are you okay, darling?"

"I'm just not sure this is the best time for a tour," Oliver observes, keeping his cold stare drilled on Slade. "Since the painters and decorators are here. Perhaps your guest would like to come back when we're truly ready for him."

Slade catches Oliver's thinly-veiled warning and answers with a smirk. He's assured that the kid won't throw down while his precious mother is in striking distance.

"But of course," Slade agrees with a slight bow to Moira. "I have pressing business keeping me in town. I'll be around for as long as it takes."

The consummate hostess, Moira takes Slade's arm as they stroll into the main corridor, apologetically saying, "Thank you for understanding. You know how trying remodeling can be."

Oliver falls into step on their heels, silently cursing Slade for his exploitation, hiding behind a woman to defile their home with his evil presence.

"Holy crap on a cracker!" Felicity exclaims when she glances at the monitor displaying the surveillance feed from the study. Raising the audio volume, she hears "Call me Slade. Please" in the dreaded Australian dialect, the familiar voice from her nightmares.

Jumping up from her desk chair, she wildly scans the Annex while choosing a course of action.

"Roy, we've got a situation," she informs her sleeping friend, who remains suspended in a twilight state between the warring influences of Mirakuru and Tibetan cobra venom. Felicity's impromptu conversations with a comatose Roy have developed into something of a habit when she's downstairs. It just seems an affirming expression of faith that a small fragment of the real Roy survives, hears her and will one day respond as only he can.

Racing around the Arrow's lair, Felicity babbles as she quickly assesses the risks of—and possible responses to—the unfolding threat.

"Okay, it seems that Oliver's arch nemesis—why must he always have one of those—is upstairs as we speak. Or as I speak. And you listen. And Slade’s with Moira. So... I could alert mansion security but I'm thinking those guys are in no way prepared to face a Mirakuru-spiked nutjob. So, no on that? What's the best option for helping Oliver, you're wondering. Venom-tipped arrows! Great idea."

Felicity snags Oliver's bow, the cobra arrows and quiver, which is heavier than she expects as she slings it onto her shoulder. When she exits, she grabs a .38 pistol, muttering, "Just in case." Before Felicity hits the stairs, she abandons her pumps and calls out, "This should be you, Roy!"

Oliver recognizes the familiar weight and curve of his bow, pressed into his hand, before he sees it. Distracted by the monster in front of him, Oliver realizes barefoot Felicity is in his shadow, lifting a full quiver to his shoulder as he stalks forward, now a lethally-armed hunter.

Unfortunately, Moira is still linked to Slade, who won't hesitate to snap her neck if he anticipates an attack. With his back still to Oliver, Slade's taken the added precaution of tucking Moira's hand snugly under his arm as they affably amble side-by-side.
Felicity melts into the far wall of the corridor, giving Oliver space and removing herself as a liability. She securely grips the handgun with both hands, releasing the safety and pointing the barrel at the floor.

Mercifully, Moira stops as they reach the wide threshold, thanking Mr. Wilson again for his generous support. When he stoops to kiss her cheek, Oliver's revulsion rises in his throat.

The moment Moira steps away from her guest, Oliver releases a nocked arrow, caught in flight by the uncanny target. Studying the venom-tipped arrowhead held in his grip, Slade remarks, "How very crafty of you, Oliver. And what might be the purpose of a special arrow like this one?" He sniffs the venom point with curiosity, muttering, "You trying to poison me, Kid?"

"With any luck," Oliver answers grimly, firing a second time and infuriated when Slade casually knocks the projectile out of the air with his forearm.

"You'll have to do better than that, Kid," Slade taunts.

Felicity slips along the hallway's edge, pulling even with Oliver. She motions for Moira to retreat into the study while keeping her pistol securely held.

Shifting his bow to his fist as a melee weapon, Oliver prepares to switch over to close-quarters combat, a tactic Felicity knows cannot end well for him. Acting on instinct, she raises the handgun, widens her stance, and shoots in Slade's direction, destroying a costly vase and a chunk of the entryway molding.

Surprised by the gunfire, Oliver and Slade pivot in her direction. Moira has safely withdrawn from danger, watching the exchange with alarm from the adjoining room.

"You again!" Slade shouts at Felicity. "Who the hell are you, bitch?"

"I'm the bitch who's about to blow your head off," Felicity calmly answers. It's a total bluff, but she sells herself as a badass by snapping off a second shot, this one—by sheer luck—striking only inches from her target, who has the good sense to flinch.

"The next one's going between your— Um, between your eye and your pirate patch," she threatens, causing Oliver's eyebrow to twitch. "So this is your last chance to make like a tree and leave."

Weighing his options, Slade suddenly spins and is gone, racing towards his Mercedes-Benz. Oliver gives chase, his speed and ability hampered by his damned knee. He launches several more arrows that fall harmlessly to the pavement as his prey burns rubber in his escape down the graveled driveway. Appearing at Oliver’s side, Felicity hands him the .38, which he fires, shattering the retreating car's back windshield. Private security guards come at a dead run toward the house.

Gripping Oliver's sleeve, Felicity says, "I'm so sorry, Oliver. I tried to stop him."

Despite his anger over Slade's escape, Oliver consoles her, explaining, "It's not your fault, Felicity. You did all you could."

"Still, it wasn't enough," she sighs, greatly regretting the disappointing result of her actions. She's fully aware that this was a lost opportunity to end Slade's escalating war of nerves.

"Hey," Oliver murmurs, pulling her to his chest and resting his chin on the crown of her silky hair. "You gave us a chance. You put a weapon in my hand. You ran a killer out of our home. But... make like a tree??"
Felicity giggles softly into his shirt, groaning, "I know. That was terrible. I've got to practice talking smack to the bad guys."

"You have a delivery, Mister Oliver," Raisa says, following him down the hallway as he carries more of his belongings into his new bedroom. He and his mother have abandoned their suites to a team of painters in order to escape the cameras without revealing their awareness of the planted surveillance, which Felicity insists they keep in place for now.

Setting his things on the bed, Oliver takes the small delivery box from the faithful Russian woman, murmuring, "Thank you, Raisa."

Bearing no addresses but his own, Oliver slices open the package, which contains a letter and a small satin pouch. Felicity has trained him to treat mysterious items such as this as evidence so he heads downstairs to their lair, where she continues to search online for Slade's footprints in Starling City.

After pulling on a thin pair of Latex gloves, Oliver spills the box contents onto a small metal tray, attracting Felicity's attention.

"What you got there?" she asks, rising on her tip toes to lean over his shoulder. "Early Christmas gift?"

"Anonymous package that was just delivered," he replies.

"And those are never good," she remarks dramatically, watching as he carefully loosens the drawstring on the pouch, but before he can view the contents, Felicity blurts, "Wait! Could there be a toe in there? Or a pinky finger? Because I need to prepare myself if that's a possibility. So, can you peek first and warn me if something freaky, like an appendage, is about to fall out?"

She's pacing in a tight circle now, her nerves evident in the fluttery motion of her fingers.

"Felicity."

The calmness of Oliver's tone, combined with his steady gaze, halts her mid-fret. He traces the square, rigid shape in the pouch with his adroit fingers before reassuring her by saying, "I will look and then tell you, okay?"

She agrees with a quick nod of her ponytail, her lips pursed in concentration.

Oliver tilts the small bag to reveal a set of glass slides containing some sort of specimen.

Felicity's curiosity has gotten the better of her fear, as she sneaks a closer look at what appears to be a small slice of skin? "Is that a—"

"Tattoo," Oliver volunteers, his mouth setting in a grim line. "Laurel's heart tattoo."

"He cut off her tattoo?" Felicity gasps in horror. "Oh, Oliver..."

With fury lighting his eyes, Oliver unfolds and reads the accompanying note, written in Slade's unique scrawl.

Your beloved sends you this token of her heart. Come and get the rest of her, Kid. If you can.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Having exhausted her high-tech means of finding Laurel, Felicity harbors secret plans to defeat Slade. S.T.A.R. Labs delivers a possible cure for Mirakuru and the team struggles with the decision of whether to administer it to Roy. Slade unleashes his soldiers on the beleaguered Glades.

Chapter Notes

I just want to share a bit of my rationale for this chapter and Felicity's perspective. I've always been troubled by Oliver's enigmatic decision to deliver Felicity into Slade’s hands simply because she was the threat he wouldn't see coming. Considering how over-protective he and Diggle are of her, it struck me as completely out of character and more of a ratings gimmick. So, Felicity will take the reins in this new chapter, making decisions that would not be approved by her Arrow partners.

I'd love to hear your responses if you will take a minute to share!

It's not fair, Felicity knows as she stares at the high ceiling of her bedroom suite, unable to sleep. The guys were still on the streets searching for Laurel when Felicity went to bed alone in the wing opposite from Oliver's. Their relationship is still tender, new and treasured. She hates using their burgeoning romance as a trap for Slade. If Oliver suspected what she was planning, he would be throwing every possible obstacle in her way. That's why Felicity has no intention of giving him any clues. But the guilt she feels is crushing.

After the grotesque delivery from Slade, the team doubled down on finding Laurel and bringing her safely home. They've tried unsuccessfully to reconnect with Sara, who's apparently running her own independent mission. But it's only a matter of time before Detective Lance discovers his older daughter is imperiled; for now he simply believes Laurel is a rehab runaway. But their immediate mission is outwitting and neutralizing Laurel's kidnapper. And, although they're not close friends, Felicity's haunted by the thought of Laurel being swept up and tormented by the Slade freak show.

Slade's operating off the grid, thwarting Felicity at every turn and she's run out of her usual high-tech wizardry for tracking bad guys. So unless Slade mails them an engraved invitation to visit him at a specific address, she's surrendered to the reality that they've exhausted their options. It's a bitter realization that she has failed the team who depends on her to find information, to follow victims and criminals, to protect them from danger. Felicity may not have found Laurel, but she can lead them to her.

She's left with her Final Solution, but wow, she needs to come up with a better name for it. Operation Buttercup? Because Felicity is pretending to be a blond damsel in distress? The Rat Trap with her served up as the cheese? Operation Blind Leap? Maybe The Scorpion Mission because it sounds cool and deadly, both of which she so needs to feel right now in order to
muster the courage to go through with this idea, that is seeming more insane with each passing minute. Getting kidnapped is scary, but anticipating it as a sure thing kicks her anxiety up another notch.

If Felicity dwells on the prospect of being back in Slade's clutches, heart-clenching terror will prevent her from offering herself as bait. She's chilled by the same icy fear she sometimes recognizes in Oliver's deep-set eyes that follow her as if she's a phantom in danger of disappearing. But she trusts her two brave partners with her life; there's no doubt Oliver and Digg will move heaven and earth to bring Felicity back.

Exhaustion finally drags her into an uneasy sleep, haunted by disturbing dreams of one-eyed pirates and mystery boxes. Tomorrow, she only needs to lure Oliver into the conversation that will tempt Slade with the bargaining chip he thinks he already has -- Oliver's one love.

The next morning, pure dread floods Felicity's heart when Diggle announces the arrival of a special delivery. Terror must be evident in her face because Oliver's hand has encircled her waist and Diggle’s tone is instantly reassuring, saying, "It's okay. This one's from S.T.A.R. Labs."

"That would have been good to hear first," Oliver observes dryly, giving Felicity a soothing stroke of her arm before taking the bio-package from Diggle.

"Think this might be the cure?" Digg asks.

"Caitlyn said they were making progress," Felicity offers hopefully, leaning in to watch as Oliver cuts the seals on the carefully-packed container.

Oliver gingerly lifts the foam insulation to reveal two dozen glass vials filled with serum.

"Looks like it," Oliver observes, his voice neutral despite the possible game-changer this development may be, if it works.

Felicity pulls one of the vials, holding it up to the light and marveling at the potential promise held between her fingers. She'd actually considered going into medical research when she was choosing a career path, but the ick factor had posed too much of a hurdle. Still, she's in awe of doctors like Caitlyn, whose work and dedication literally change lives.

"How do we know it works?" Digg questions.

Felicity and Oliver gaze regretfully at the still figure lying across the way. Her fingers tighten around the tube of serum, suddenly realizing it could kill as easily as heal. Or have some crippling side effect. Or do absolutely nothing. Felicity looks to Oliver, who seems troubled by the same doubts she's experiencing.

"This is reckless, even for us. Do we have the right to do this? To use Roy as a guinea pig?" Oliver asks uncertainly, his eyes searching hers for absolution.

"I don't know, Oliver," Felicity admits. "But we're keeping him down with lethal doses of cobra venom. Who knows what harm that's doing to him? The cumulative effect could be more damaging than this experimental stuff!"

"She's right, Oliver," Digg volunteers from Roy's bedside, where he now stands. "We're giving the kid poison around the clock. We can't be dosing him with this forever."
Oliver sighs, scrubbing his neck with calloused fingers as he struggles with the weight of a decision that could effectively murder Roy before he's had the chance to really live.

"Oliver, I know we're gambling with Roy's life and I hate that," Felicity declares. "But Slade's infected an army of convicts with Mirakuru. How can we protect the people of this city from that kind of force?"

"We have to know if we actually have a cure," Digg concludes, with a slight nod to the vials in question. "So we can prepare for Slade's soldiers."

An alert sounds at Felicity's work station, drawing her attention to the news feed flashing on one of the monitors. She moves to the keyboard, tapping in the URL for video coverage from a local TV news site. When she sees the raw footage of masked men wreaking chaos in the Glades, Felicity calls out, "Oliver!"

Joined by Diggle, Oliver leans over Felicity's shoulder, frowning at the violent scene unfolding in broad daylight. They immediately recognize the superhuman strength of a Mirakuru soldier as ten perpetrators body-check moving vehicles and rip doors from their hinges. The police tactical units fight back with lethal weapons, having little impact on the perpetrators.

The visceral display of helpless, panicked people being senselessly attacked launches Oliver into action. Striding across the lair, he commands, "Suit up, Digg!" Without pausing, Oliver grips one of the S.T.A.R. Labs tubes, snapping it into a syringe and going directly to Roy's side. Grasping the young man's shoulder, he quietly says, "I'm sorry" before plunging the serum needle into Roy's bicep.

Roy gasps for a deep gulp of air, startling the trio of friends keeping close watch on his reaction. But nothing more happens and his eyes never open.

Felicity fears the worst, crying, "Digg?"

He presses his stethoscope to Roy's chest and gives a thumbs up sign as he counts the pulse beats. "His heart rate is elevated, but he's doing okay."

"It didn't work," Oliver decides darkly.

"Too soon, man," Digg explains. "He's still got venom in his system. We have to give it time."

Oliver huffs in frustration as he factors in hours they can't spare. "Felicity, I want you out of here while Digg and I deal with The Glades. It's too dangerous to be near Roy until we know how he's going to respond to the injection."

Felicity's uncommonly compliant with Oliver's edicts, a red flag that he fails to notice with his attention so divided. While he and Digg prepare to go tactical, she pockets a syringe and two S.T.A.R. Lab vials. Secretly glad for time to work independently on her own agenda, she worries nevertheless when her guys are headed into danger, as they most certainly are. Before leaving their headquarters, Felicity presses a sweet goodbye kiss to Roy's forehead to cope with her worries for his survival.

Once The Arrow and Spartan depart, Felicity pulls the trigger on her scheme by moving one of Slade's surveillance cameras to a similar room that Oliver believes to be free of spyware. She has her choice of alternate spaces in this big-ass house; there's really not much difference between the interiors of the study, the parlor and the formal sitting room. During the move, Felicity temporarily jams the video signal so the transition won't be noticeable to whichever creep happens to be
watching on the other end. In a bit of play-acting, Felicity stages a fake phone call for the benefit of surveillance viewers, mentioning her plans to make a run to the drugstore for mascara the next morning. The most important, fail-safe tactic is embedding trackers in her eyeglass frames and one of her earrings before time runs out for Laurel—and herself.

After all technical preparations are complete, Felicity indulges in a long, steamy bath to pamper her skin and hair for the evening she has planned for Oliver. Since they began to pursue a romantic relationship, they've been taking turns recovering from injuries, giving one another the time and space to let their feelings grow, to savor the slow magic of falling in love. Now finally, they're both more or less healed and she wants to cross the final boundary. Because she's always loved him and, in atonement for her impending betrayal, Felicity wants to give herself—and him—tonight. In case they have no more tomorrows.

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When Oliver and Digg return to the mansion, they find no change in Roy, still dormant in his twilight existence. The two vigilantes are scraped and bruised from their battle in The Glades, but all things considered, in fairly good shape. Lyla had turned the tide of the skirmish when she showed up in an Argus helicopter loaded with RPGs that took out a dozen Mirakuru fighters.

After cleaning up and changing, Oliver locks Roy in the annex before heading upstairs. Raisa has kindly left his supper plate in the warming oven. He wolfs down the meal before going in search of Felicity, finding her in a small sitting room, curled up on a loveseat with a glass of red wine while watching an old episode of *Buffy*. She's wearing a soft yellow sundress embroidered with tiny blue flowers.

He settles beside her on the cozy sofa. Felicity pours him a goblet of wine and nuzzles his neck in greeting. Her face is incredibly soft and she smells of honeysuckle and soap.

"Hi," she murmurs, her fingers lightly touching a graze on his cheek. "Are you okay?"

He nods slightly, always reticent to share the wear and tear his missions cost him.

"Any change? Downstairs?" she asks.

"No. Digg thinks we should know something for sure by morning," he says, conscious of her touches as she leans over him to mute the TV remote, her warm thigh pressed to his. Felicity turns into him, welcoming his kiss. Her lips taste of wine and Felicity, both equally intoxicating to him.

Oliver wraps her in his arms and her knees curl into his lap, bringing her breasts into full contact with his chest. He drops his hand to her ankle and strokes her silken bare leg, feeling the deep scar on her calf from Isabel's gunshot. It's fully healed now, but still dark rose in color.

Self-conscious about the old wound, Felicity murmurs, "Sorry. Maybe I should see a plastic surgeon about that?"

Locking his gaze to hers, Oliver shakes his head and kisses the small scar at her temple, "No. Not for me. It's just proof we belong together."

She melts against his heat, but remembers there may be others watching and listening. For now, she needs to stay on script before moving this encounter away from prying eyes.

"Oliver?"

"Hmmm?" he answers, distracting her by sucking on the pulsepoint of her neck.
"Oh god, what was I asking?" Felicity wonders aloud, drunk on his affection. "Oliver, why did Slade take Laurel?"

Her question interrupts his kisses, causing him to return his eyes to hers. "Um... what?"

With renewed resolve and clarity, Felicity repeats, "Laurel. Why was she taken?"

"Oh, I thought you understood," he explains, sitting a bit straighter and moving his caresses to her arm. "Slade took the wrong woman. He doesn't know about you. What you mean to me. And you're my everything, Felicity."

Boom, there it is, Felicity inwardly celebrates. That's all she needs him to say for whichever scoundrel is monitoring this conversation. She turns off the television with the remote while engaging the jamming device, ending the video feed. Now, she can concentrate completely on the meaning behind Oliver's words and their growing desire.

Felicity shifts into Oliver's lap, her knees straddling his abs, and falls into his searing kiss as his hands claim her hips, pulling her intimately close.

"Oliver, take me to bed," she pants. "Make me yours."

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Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Isabel breaks free of Slade's control. Roy wakes up in the middle of a crisis. As Felicity's plan unfolds, her team deals with the emotional, high-risk fallout. Unexpected players show up at a critical point.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 18 simply would not be denied and demanded to be written this week, whether I had the time or not, so here we go. The previous update set a lot of wheels in motion and they're spinning madly in this update. I'd love to hear your reactions, if you wish to share.

"It was her all along. We had her—his precious Felicity. His everything. Not only did you fail to kill her, you let her get away!" Slade Wilson seethes with anger, the Mirakuru pulsing hot in his veins.

His fury is reflected in Isabel's dark eyes, snapping with brittle hatred. She no longer cowers in a corner, but rises to her full height although she barely reaches his shoulder. For a brief moment, Slade pauses, surprised by the full-on rebellion he sees in her posture, her outraged expression, the katana sword she's pulled in open defiance.

"Typical man," she spits, circling him warily, looking for an opening, a moment's weakness. "When you fuck things up, it's always a woman's fault. Well, I'm done taking the blame for your screw-ups. I'm sick of your obsession with your imaginary girlfriend. Your Shado."

"Don't say her name!" Slade screams, his self-control slipping. "You don't get to say her name!"

Isabel smirks with mean-spirited amusement at seeing him knocked off-kilter. She can't resist twisting the dagger by taunting, "But she wasn't your girl, was she? Because Shado never loved you. She loved Oliver."

Slade roars like the wounded, rabid animal he's become as he charges toward her. But Isabel's size actually gives her the advantage; she's small, smart, quick and on her game. Her strategy is to stay out of his reach and keep him off balance. He'd be too hard, if not impossible, to kill, but she's no longer playing the role of his minion.

Slade maneuvers to force Isabel into a corner or trap her against a wall. Employing her sword as a mere distraction, Isabel pulls her favorite handgun, an automatic 9mm Ruger, and fires four slugs into Slade's knees. At this range, there's no chance of a miss for an experienced shooter like Isabel. Although he'll be healed by tomorrow morning, the gunshots put Slade on the floor, giving her the opening she's been waiting for, to walk away from his mission, freeing her to launch her own.

For Isabel Rochev, it's independence day.
I'm sorry. Follow the tracker app to find Slade. — Love, F

Even before he reads it, Oliver recognizes the small, precise handwriting on the pink sticky note attached to the burner phone, tendrils of dread tightening in his chest. For a moment, he feels numb, paralyzed by the implications of her message. *She can't have done this. Can't have put her life in play.*

"Oliver! I gotta crazy note from—"

Silently raising an identical phone for Digg to see, Oliver hears the sigh of recognition, of grim understanding, from his partner who’s just entering the lair.

"Crazy note from who?"

The unexpected male voice causes both men to pivot towards the gurney that's now empty. Roy stands a few feet away, chewing on a Red Vine from Felicity's not-so-secret stash.

"Roy?" Oliver gasps in disbelief, exchanging a WTF glance with Diggle.

"You guys got anything to eat?" Roy asks as he scarfs down two more vines. "These are kinda old."

"How you doing, Roy?" Digg asks slowly, taking guarded steps in his direction, ready for anything at this point.

"Starving. But can't remember shit," Roy admits, his face crumpled in confusion.

"What's the last thing you can recall?" Oliver quizzes him, stunned at how normal Roy sounds.

"I was at The Foundry, I think. Not here, wherever here is," he says, taking in his strange surroundings. "Deathstroke was here. Or there. I think..."

As Diggle checks Roy's vital signs, Oliver's attention is back on the burner phone left by Felicity. After powering it up, he loads the tracker app, seeing two bright-red dots in motion on the map screen, moving south toward the warehouse district near the coast. Meanwhile his conflicting emotions compete for dominance.

As he mentally sorts through the events of the past twenty-four hours, Oliver realizes that Felicity was one very busy girl yesterday, that she obviously had a secret plan in place she failed to share with him. It's especially painful considering the intimate night they'd spent together while she was hiding this insane scheme. Her lack of trust—this blatant betrayal by omission—makes him furious. Which is agonizing because he'd give anything to have her back, safe in his arms.

In absolute frustration, he single-handedly destroys the nearest thing, which turns out to be a wall rack for storing vintage tools.

"Oliver, whatever you're feeling, push it down, man," Digg advises, dropping his hand heavily onto Oliver's shoulder. "Or use it as fuel for the fire but we gotta move."

"Yeah, I'm good," Oliver lies, huffing with leftover rage. "What do we do with..." He loosely gestures in Roy's direction.

"The kid?" Digg guesses, looking over his shoulder at Roy, who's devouring some beef jerky that he's dug up. "It's your call."
"Is he... sane?" Oliver questions with a frown.

"Compared to who?" Digg pointedly asks. "He'll be okay. As long as we keep feeding him."

"We'll take him," Oliver arbitrarily decides, suddenly on the move, searching through a cabinet. "Digg, we need all the injection arrows loaded with serum."

Diggle begins gathering serum vials and custom-fitted arrows.

Grabbing a box from the shelf, Oliver approaches Roy, handing the small container to him.

Mystified, Roy opens the box which contains a red leather domino mask. Even in his muddled state, he recognizes that this gift symbolizes something important. That he's been accepted as a full-fledged member of the Arrow team. "Oliver... thank you."

"Put it on," Oliver sternly demands. "You're about to earn it."

Don't panic. You knew they'd come for you. Everything is going according to plan. But, oh frack, why did they have to cover my head with this stifling black hood?

Felicity tries to slow her breathing and tamp down a deep-seated fear of suffocation. She's been unceremoniously hog-tied and thrown in the back of a cargo van after being snatched on the drugstore parking lot. Even before she got a chance to buy the damned mascara, which she actually needed.

They've been driving for about fifteen minutes although that's strictly a guess. Time definitely does not fly when you're bagged and tagged. Her guys have probably found the burner phones by now, she muses. If she listens closely, she may be able hear the big kaboom when Oliver's temper explodes.

It was horrible leaving him this morning, ranking as one of the worst moments of her life, perhaps because it came crashing on top of the best—waking in Oliver's arms. Felicity had skated so close to confessing her plan. Or just abandoning it outright. Her night with Oliver had lived up to the ecstasy Felicity had dreamed of—longed for— the past two years. And now she may have destroyed any chance of another.

For most of her life, Felicity has had no one to rely upon but herself. Although she never doubted her mother's devotion, there was a wide gap between Donna Smoak's good intentions and her follow-through as a committed, single parent. The daughter of a Vegas cocktail waitress, growing up without a father meant Felicity was forced to assume responsibility and think independently at an early age. Her remarkable intelligence and self-sufficiency has served her well in her career, but may have just imploded the relationship she's craved with Oliver.

Last night, Felicity withheld critical information from the love of her life. Regardless how noble or self-sacrificing her reasons, she betrayed Oliver's trust—while she was naked in his bed. Who freaking does that?? Mata Hari and every female Bond villain, that's who. Felicity can't believe she's turned into a femme fatale, but there's no candy-coating how badly she's screwed up this relationship. Even if Oliver forgives her, she's not certain she can ever forgive herself.

The van slows and clatters over eight sets of railroad tracks, bouncing their captive with rude disregard before accelerating again. They're near the railyards and warehouse district on the coast, Felicity surmises as she maps the road in her head. She assumes Slade has set up shop within the vast maze of warehouses. But the vehicle keeps moving on, farther than Felicity believes it will, farther
from safety, farther from him.

"Just to be clear," Digg begins talking as they race down Market Street with him at the wheel, "Those two dots are..."

Riding shotgun, Oliver's blazing blue gaze meets Digg's sideways glance in answer.

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of," Digg sighs, his brow creased with worry. "What was she thinking?"

"What two dots? Which she?" Roy asks from the backseat.

Oliver reminds himself to be patient with Roy, who's struggling to get his bearings. But he's simply too anguished to deal with incessant stupid questions right now. Thankfully, Diggle seems to possess unlimited coping skills.

"Roy, we're following two tracers on Felicity, who set herself up to be kidnapped by Slade," Digg explains, making eye contact with Roy in the rearview mirror.

"Well, shit," Roy curses in disbelief. "Why'd you guys let that happen?"

Oliver pivots to face Roy, his expression and every line of his frame strained with fury. "Why did we —?!?" he erupts.

"HEY!" Digg yells, "We don't have time for this crap. Save it for Slade."

Roy settles into a surly pout to hide his hurt feelings. He's still got a headful of questions because nothing's made sense since he woke up a few hours ago. He wants to ask why Sara's missing in action, but hesitates to make Oliver go nuclear. Again.

Oliver is in pain. The excruciating sense of loss that he endured during Felicity's last disappearance has returned, dragging him down into familiar darkness like a lead weight on his soul. He's lost his girl, his Felicity, to a heartless madman who now knows the value of his new hostage. Oliver's suffering is made worse with the knowledge that, this time, her plight is the direct result of her intentional choice. Felicity secretly plotted and carried out her ruse, shutting him out while he believed they were steadily growing closer. His male pride is wounded that she not only orchestrated her own kidnapping, but as The Arrow, he failed to recognize the subterfuge playing out right beside him.

The three men drive in silence, speaking tersely only as needed to stay on Felicity's track. The tracers continue moving on a southern route through the city on a straight line toward the warehouse sector, which covers a huge tract of land. Once they cross the railroad tracks and enter the maze of warehouses, their adrenaline mounts as they anticipate reaching Felicity and fighting to get her back. But to their frustration, the dots don't stop but continue on toward the docks.

"Oliver? You don't think—" Digg wonders aloud.

"They're taking her on a boat," Oliver grits out. "They're about fifteen miles ahead of us."

As the words leave his lips, both tracking dots wink and disappear.
When the vehicle finally parks and Felicity smells the ocean air, she's fairly sure they've reached the docks although the damned hood still prevents her from seeing. Two pairs of hands drag her from the back of the van. She feels the zip ties around her ankles being cut loose and she's pulled to her feet, being propelled forward with a captor on each side, firmly gripping her arms. She stumbles as the walking surface changes to slanted boards but the men holding her keep her from pitching forward onto her face.

Felicity's suddenly lifted again before being plunked back onto another surface. The rocking motion confirms her growing fear that she's on the water. When the hood's jerked from her head, painfully taking some stands of her hair with it, the bright sunlight temporarily blinds her. Once her eyes adjust, she sees him—Slade Wilson—standing right in front of her with a triumphant sneer splitting his face.

"Felicity Smoak!" he says, spreading his arms like a cordial host. "Welcome to the last chapter of your life."

"So, the plot thickens."

Nyssa al Ghul passes the binoculars to Ta-er al-Sahfer, born Sara Lance, who focuses on the distant cargo ship, where she recognizes a familiar blonde ponytail. "Dammit... I hate to see her pulled into this," Sara sighs.

"What is one more added to the mix?" Nyssa coolly speculates.

"It's complicated," Sara observes, chewing on her lower lip.

"Is she the Felicity, the one you spoke of?" Nyssa asks, studying her lover's reaction.

"Yeah, she's the Felicity. The one and only," Sara comments with a slight laugh. "But her presence makes Oliver all the more unpredictable."

"If he truly loves her, where is he?" Nyssa wonders aloud, raising the binoculars to her eyes again to scan their perimeter for other vessels. "How has he allowed her to be taken?"

"I doubt that Ollie does a lot of allowing where Felicity's concerned. She's more like us. Badass in her own way," Sara explains.

"At present, her bad ass appears to be in a sling," Nyssa remarks as she watches Felicity dragged down into the ship's hold.

"Yeah, hers and Laurel's. We're going to have to do something about that."
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Felicity is reunited with Laurel, now sharing her cell in the bottom of an ocean-bound freighter. Slade's sanity slips further away. Felicity has time to reflect on her abandonment issues while plotting ways to stay alive. Oliver grieves for the girl he may have lost.

Chapter Notes

It's Wednesday, so let's do that Arrow thing!!

My newest chapter dwells mainly on emotional developments and hopefully adds more understanding to characters' actions, especially in regard to Felicity.

I owe very special thanks to Scu11y22 for promoting this story on Olicity FicBridge and including TWG in the Scu11y22 Fave Fanfics collection!

Please be kind and take a moment to share your thoughts by commenting on this latest update. Your feedback is deeply appreciated!

The solid clang of the iron door slamming closed behind Felicity as she's shoved into the dank cell echoes her state of mind. There's a finality to the sound that depressingly confirms her perilous situation. At this point, Felicity struggles to recall why she ever imagined this scheme would succeed. Because hello? Here she is, imprisoned in a gloomy, cold cell in the bottom of an ocean-bound ship.

"I'm underwater. Behind iron walls," Felicity thinks aloud, realizing that the transmitter from her tracers cannot penetrate her surroundings. Oliver won't know where she's being taken. Her signal's lost. She's lost.

"Felicity?"

Now that her eyes have adjusted to the dim light, Felicity discovers she's got a cellmate—Laurel, who's definitely showing the strain of captivity. She's pale, appears thinner and in desperate need of fresh clothing.

Dropping to her knees, Felicity kneels before Laurel, who's perched on an ancient cot. "Laurel, thank God you're alive. How are you?"

With a ragged sigh, Laurel runs a trembling hand through her bedraggled hair, answering, "Been better." Describing her plight releases a fresh wave of tears down her wan cheeks.

Pulling Laurel into a comforting hug, Felicity feels true compassion for the young woman, who's done nothing to deserve this mistreatment. Fully aware that Laurel's been under Slade's control for several days, Felicity fervently hopes that she hasn't been held in the bowels of this oppressive
freighter the entire time.

Grasping her friend's cold hands, Felicity soothes Laurel, promising, "We're going to be alright. Shhh... The Arrow will come for us."

Laurel's head pops up, her face a strange mix off misery and excitement, as she exclaims, "He's Oliver! The Arrow, I mean. Oliver is The Arrow."

"Ohhh...." Felicity replies, her mind spinning at the implication of Laurel's newfound discovery. "Are you sure, Laurel? Our Oliver? That's pretty hard to believe."

"No, Slade told me, but it makes sense," Laurel argues earnestly. "When you think about it, it adds up. This Arrow guy shows up at the same time that Oliver comes home? They're about the same height and build?"

"Oh, I don't know, Laurel," Felicity says, not wanting to lie, but hopefully sowing seeds of doubt. "I know Oliver's got a bad boy reputation, but he's not all grrrrr like The Arrow? I mean, really? Oliver? You think?"

"I do," Laurel says, nodding fervently as she wipes the tears from her face and straightens up. "It gives me hope that he'll rescue me... Um, I mean, rescue us."

"I'm sure he will, whoever's under that hood," Felicity adds, giving an encouraging smile. "But in the meantime, what can you tell me about the ship's routine? How many crew members have you seen?"

"We just boarded this morning. Before that, we were in a nicer place. Like a big house," Laurel explains.

"Yeah, been there. Done that," Felicity remarks, remembering the first place Isabel took her after being shot in her apartment.

"I don't know how many are on the boat though," Laurel tiredly volunteers. "They kept me hooded until they locked me down here. Where do you think they're taking us?"

"No idea," Felicity replies, looking around the cramped space for escape possibilities. "With Slade, it could be anywhere. He's quite the wingding. Which reminds me, where's Mrs. Berserker? Isabel?"

"I overheard them arguing. They did that a lot. But I think she's gone," Laurel reveals.

"Gone?" Felicity repeats, mulling over how to assess that bit of news, as she studies the electrical outlets and light fixture overhead.

"Is your necklace sterling? Is it plated or solid?" Felicity asks as she eyes the gleaming strand of jewelry on Laurel's neck.

"Um, Daddy gave it to me. I think it's sterling," Laurel answers hesitantly. "Why?"

"Can I see it?" Felicity requests, her mind racing as she McGuyver's their situation.

"You want me to take it off?" Laurel asks, fingering her necklace possessively.

Felicity's attention returns to her cellmate briefly, replying, "Yep, that's what I'm asking."

"Well... Okay," Laurel half-heartedly agrees, unfastening the chain's clasp and dropping the necklace in Felicity's outstretched hand. "But I don't think these guys can be bribed with jewelry."
"Oh, no, I'm sure they can't," Felicity answers while removing a tiny tool kit sewn into the hem of her jacket. "But they can be electrocuted. Oh, and I need your bra."

Slade Wilson knows that Oliver Queen hates the sea. It was the ocean that took his father's life, that imprisoned him in the purgatory of Lian Yu and separated Oliver from his family and the life he'd always known. Slade congratulates himself on the brilliance of his decision to drag his high-value hostages onto the water. There's a twisted symmetry in his ploy that effectively brings him full circle to face his sworn enemy. Oliver's arrow destroyed Slade's eye in their previous showdown on the freighter off the shores of Lian Yu. So it's only fitting that Slade seizes his revenge by luring The Kid back to the sea to witness the slaying of his woman, his Felicity.

Slade's determined to prove he's back on his game. He blames Isabel for the mistakes that have been made. In his opinion, the Mirakuru obviously affected her judgment, turning her into a cranky, willful diva. He's better off without her pushback, he decides. He's discovered that converting a slew of convicts into an army of super soldiers has its pitfalls, particularly in maintaining control of his deranged troops. It was almost a relief when half of his squad was wiped out by Argus. He's down to twelve men whose rebellious behavior is increasingly difficult to predict and rein in.

Shado keeps Slade anchored, sharing her thirst for vengeance in urgent, breathless whispers only he can hear. He tells her of Oliver's new love, how the callow playboy cheats on her, forgetting what they had on Lian Yu. It was Shado who guided Slade to the harbor, insisting that he find a freighter to take Oliver's whores where Queen would dread to follow. Shado understands Slade's compulsion to maximize The Kid's suffering. She may have loved Oliver Queen in the final months of her short life, but in death, Shado's completely devoted to Slade and his unholy mission.

The ship rocks in darkness, but Felicity can't sleep. The chilly, damp air triggers aches in her leg and shoulder blade, where bullets carved cruel paths through her flesh months ago. Felicity misses Oliver in her bed. Even before last night, when they'd found passion in each other's arms, she had grown familiar with the security and contentment of sometimes sharing a bed, curled against his warm chest. Closing her eyes, Felicity comforts herself by recalling his words and sighs that fell softly by moonlight against the tender skin of her neck.

Earlier, she'd given her meager share of stew to Laurel, who obviously needed the extra calories and nourishment. It wasn't really a sacrifice for Felicity, whose queasy stomach rebelled against the sight and smell of the roadkill soup. Now her empty tummy growls in complaint.

Laurel's asleep, coiled on her side on the sad excuse for a bed. Felicity wishes she was tired enough to rest, but random worries and regrets skitter through her overactive brain. She never intended things to turn out this way, to turn her strategy into a reckless, solo mission. Felicity had planned to lead the team to Slade. She'd depended on her technology to guide Oliver and Diggle to Laurel for rescue. But this time, her gadgets had let her down and her misplaced faith in them had caused Felicity to desert her team.

From the first time she'd held a pair of wire strippers, Felicity had found security in her natural ability to build, tear apart and program computers. They became a source of stability during her lonely teen years when there were few people on whom she could rely. Throughout Felicity's life, hardware and motherboards had proven more trustworthy than people. Technology provided her salvation and a golden ticket to MIT.

Even when Felicity was involved with Cooper at grad school, she'd withheld parts of herself,
cloaked by the heavy goth persona she'd adopted. And as it turned out, her instincts had been right. Cooper had lied to her, hiding his selfish motives for their joint creation of destructive malware that could have sent her to federal prison. Then, in a final act of cruelty, he'd killed himself, another self-centered man to leave Felicity without a goodbye.

So she focused on her promising career, shedding the dark goth image and again reinventing herself. Felicity discovered that she felt more comfortable—at home—in her new skin. Her perky blonde reflection suggested Felicity's natural can-do attitude of hope and optimism. She stopped looking in her rearview mirror, casting her blue eyes on the sunny road ahead that pointed to a job with the illustrious Queen Inc.

When Oliver and Diggle crossed Felicity's path, they broke the stereotype of men who had forsaken her. By making her their partner, she experienced the loyalty, respect and protection of good men. Time and again, these two battle-hardened warriors have been there for her, proving their faithful devotion and concern. Heroes had finally shown up in the life of Felicity Smoak.

In a rush of certainty, Felicity realizes that there has been a sea change for her. She no longer has to hide behind her intellect and circuitry as a means of protecting herself from the hurt and fears of her past. At last, Felicity has someone willing—and deserving—to be her trusted partner and defender. Someone she can lean into without risk of abandonment. She has Oliver.

His haunting words come back to her, from the night Oliver confessed his psychic connection to her when she was missing, separated from him.

"You came to me that desperate night to help me find you."

"Oliver," Felicity whispers in darkness. "I can't tell you where I am tonight. Because I'm as lost as I've ever been. But while you search for me, and I know you'll never stop, I only need you to sense my heart seeking yours."

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Watching the harbor by starlight, a desolate Oliver stands at the water's edge, his attention torn between the lonely seascape and the empty map screen on his phone, praying for Felicity's tracers to reappear, to give him some hope of finding her on this vast, dark horizon. Eventually, his cell phone goes black too when the battery dies. There's an eerie similarity to his first desperate nights on the beaches of Lian Yu.

Felicity is lost to him in spite of all his obsessive efforts to protect her. After keeping her at his side, taking her into his bed, baring his heart, he had still failed to shield her from his enemies and his dangerous way of life. Oliver wants the earth to stop turning, the waves to cease their ebb, the clock hands to fall still. Because that is how it felt when he found her and took Felicity in his arms. It was when his pain ended.

He hadn't meant to fall so hard, so deep. In truth, Oliver hadn't intended to ever fall in love again, as if the island, Amanda Waller and the Bratva had buried his humanity along with the other bodies that dropped. After years of deprivation and violence, Oliver believed his heart had hardened to the point that love and tenderness could never live in him again. Even after coming home, reconnecting with his family had felt forced, as if he was acting the role in another man's life. Five years had twisted him into a heartless killer with a stone in his chest, a stranger pretending to be Oliver Queen by day. In darkness, he only lived for The List and his self-appointed crusade as The Arrow, driven to execute the individuals his father had named for him as a vengeful legacy.

After a lifetime spent bedding the wrong girls, Oliver had been redeemed by the one he hadn't seen
coming. The enchanting woman who had disarmed him so easily, with her sweet dimpled smile, her funny run-on thoughts, her brilliant mind and a red pen. Felicity slipped behind his walls, warming him with her pure light, as if his true self had been frozen deep within his chest, waiting for her touch. And tonight, he just needs her spirit to fall on him again, to revisit his dreams, to tell him how to bring her home.

The chance of failing her now chills his blood, returning his heart to sharp, black granite, making every breath painful. He will die before he loses her. And the devil better prepare a special corner in hell for every sonuvabitch keeping her from him.

"I know you're super smart, Felicity, but are you sure this is a good idea," Laurel frets, nervously watching her cellmate crouching by the opposite wall. "Is this even safe?"

"Wires are wires, Laurel," Felicity confidently answers as she pulls her trusty little screwdriver. "Trust me, I spliced my first electrical wires when I was in elementary school."

"But even if this works, Felicity, and we get out of this cell, then what?" Laurel asks, her question riddled with doubts.

"We need to be able to protect ourselves, if necessary. In case The Arrow is delayed in finding us," Felicity says, removing the cover plate from the electrical outlet.

Laurel blanches at that possibility, expelling a dejected, "Oh..."

"For now, this is a precaution," Felicity explains, intentionally using her calm voice for Laurel's sake. "The current won't be live unless I connect this last wire. But we can't just sit here waiting to be rescued. Are you done stripping the wire from our bras?"

"Almost, although I don't know why you couldn't have brought wire along with your tools," Laurel laments as she grudgingly destroys her expensive lingerie.

"It's hard to plan for every situation when you're devising your own kidnapping," Felicity mumbles around the screwdriver held in her mouth. "And I ran out of room to smuggle supplies, you know?" Especially when squirrel ling in syringes of anti-Mirakuru serum, not that she needs to share that nugget of information.

Laurel rolls her eyes, but submits to her cellmate's crazy brainstorm because it's better than doing nothing. And she so desperately wants to go home.

The alert of Oliver's phone interrupts his gruff intimidation of the harbor master. Diggle steps in to get the manifest records they need and will be getting—one way or another. Oliver pivots away to deal with the phone call, not recognizing the number appearing on his screen.

"Ollie?"

"Sara?" he responds, instantly identifying her voice.

"Yeah, it's me," she confirms. "I'm on a Sat phone so I'll make this quick."

"Sara, where are you?" Oliver demands to know, his boots echoing on the boards of the wharf.
"I'm on a League schooner, Ollie. I've got eyes on your girl."

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Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Felicity attracts unwanted attention aboard Slade's freighter. Oliver senses her terror as he marshals forces with the League. Felicity receives a vivid reminder of her captor's madness.

Chapter Notes

I really don't know how to introduce this chapter because I expected it to be dominated by action, but my muse took me down an angsty road of loneliness, worry, fear and insanity instead. Sometimes, the muse can be a real bummer.

I hate that my updates are so infrequent these days, but I want to do justice by this story and these characters by investing the time needed to uphold my standards. If this story continues to interest you, please be kind and share your comments.

She smells him before she sees him. The cloying blend of garlic, fish and sweat roils Felicity's stomach as she peers through the darkness, making out the dim shape of the jacked convict who's leering at her through the bars of her prison. She's certain he's the one who got handsy with her when she was dragged onto the ship. The rough groping, however brief, was enough of a warning though. And led to her decision to hotwire the cell, providing a small measure of protection, not only for herself, but for a defenseless Laurel too.

In order to release the electrical current to the cell bars, all she needs to do is to pull away a small insulator tab. It's not a tactic she wants to employ. Not yet. Frying one of Slade's crew might push him over the brink and his mental state seems dangerously rocky as it is. But if the freakazoid drooling over her doesn't back off, she's ready and willing to burn him down.

He's leaning heavily against the iron bars, close enough that she can hear his labored breathing, feel his hungry eyes raking over her. Although Felicity's lying fully dressed in jeans and a sweater, she feels naked under his scrutiny. Instinct tells her to lie still, feigning sleep and avoiding any direct contact with her stalker. But his leering presence makes her skin crawl.

*If Oliver was here...*

She halts her thoughts right there. Her throat constricts painfully with unshed tears. If she thinks about Oliver, about how desperately she misses him—needs him—Felicity knows she'll crater, an indulgence she cannot afford now. Especially while this Neanderthal is slobbering and probably doing other gross stuff right next to her. She has to stay strong, protect Laurel and keep her wits about her for as long as she can, as long as she must.

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Felicity’s fear spikes down Oliver's spine like a cruel dagger of ice stabbed into his back.
He jerks awake, angry with himself for dozing off and deeply disturbed by the terror he just sensed from her. His nerve endings tingle with remnants of her fright, like static electricity lightly humming beneath his skin. Should he try to sleep again, in hopes of reaching out to Felicity with his subconscious? Not that he can calm down enough to nap, but even if he could, what good would that do? Unless she's having a nightmare, Felicity's must be awake if she's feeling so threatened. It's agonizing to not know—and yet imagine—the cause of her anxiety. Oliver's only solace is his certainty that Felicity will know he's coming for her, that she's his only priority in this dark hour of separation.

A glance at his watch tells him it's after three in the morning. They're ripping across the moonlit waves in a stolen trawler with Roy at the helm. Roy's wide awake and hyper as if making up for the lost time he'd spent in a coma. Having no such problem, Diggle is grabbing forty winks before they meet up with Sara on the League schooner which is following a safe distance behind Slade's freighter. It will be hours before they catch up to the League.

The dark waves surrounding their boat hold stark memories for Oliver. There was a time before The Gambit's sinking that he loved the sea and spent untold carefree hours sailing on catamarans or partying on the family yacht. But those sun-drenched days were forever swept away by the icy, bitter waters of the North China Sea.

On this lonely night, Oliver remembers standing in seawater on a dying ship in the Lian Yu bay after a brutal fight with Slade. Oliver had stood over his fallen enemy, who was pinned by a fallen beam. He had struggled with a fateful decision, gripping the Mirakuru antidote in one hand and an arrow in the other. Surrendering that night to anger and fear, he'd chosen to bury an arrowhead in Slade's eye. That impulsive act might prove to be the greatest regret of his life now that Felicity's life is forfeit in Slade's deadly quest for vengeance.

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Felicity's stalker jumps back when the heavy hatch at the top of the hold creaks open. Moonlight frames the head and shoulders of one of the other crewmen, who peers into the dim confines of the makeshift prison.

"Roberts! Get your fat ass back up here before the Cap'n discovers you down there," the man barks.

To Felicity's everlasting relief, the perv on the other side of her cell grunts in reply, but before he leaves, he reaches through the bars. Realizing he's trying to touch her hair, she jerks away, jumping off the cot to stand trembling at the center of the cell. After he's gone, she sinks to the cold, damp floor, giving herself permission to fall apart, in the few desolate hours before dawn.

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"No kill shots," Oliver says gruffly, taking command of the lethal crew of assassins as they arm themselves with their specific weapons of choice. Because they face a half-mile swim to the freighter, each fighter is forced to pack light. Except for Nyssa al Ghul, who bristles with steel Katana swords, knives, bow and arrows. Oliver quietly envisions her sinking straight to the ocean floor, but he has no interest in wasting time or energy arguing with the dark amazon.

"Ollie, we're the League of assassins," Sara points out. "Kill shots are kind of our specialty." Several of the other other League members grumble in support of The Black Canary's stance.

_of course, Sara's going to challenge his strategy, Oliver sighs to himself. She has a history of bristling at the concept of teamwork. And simply because she's Sara._
"Slade's crew wasn't given a choice of whether they wanted to become Mirakuru soldiers," Oliver explains. "They may be convicts, but our mission is to neutralize them so they can be returned to prison."

Oliver ignores Nyssa's quiet observation about "a true waste of talent."

"Dead is pretty neutralized," Roy mutters to Digg, who subtly shakes his head in reply.

"Just sayin'," Roy adds defensively.

"Who do you think kept you alive while you were under the influence?" Digg remarks, his voice low but deliberate.

A stunned look of realization crosses Roy's young face at the same instant that Oliver throws a quelling glance their way.

"Use the antidote loads we brought," Oliver orders. "The cure may not be immediate, but they should be weakened by the serum."

"If we can't kill them, are we allowed to give 'em noogies? Or maybe wedgies?" Sara teases.

But Oliver's in no laughing mood. His only thought is to get on that distant ship, now floating as a small dark shape on their horizon, capture Slade and get Felicity back safe in his arms. It was early afternoon when Oliver, Digg and Roy had caught up to and boarded the League schooner. The wait for sunset has nearly driven him mad. But with the gathering darkness, The Arrow rises in him, crowding out the life of Oliver Queen, and filling the void with danger. With razor-toothed intent. With the cold stillness of the graves he's barely escaped. In full readiness to take down Slade Wilson.

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"Shall I call him for you?" Slade sneers, baiting Felicity with the prospect of summoning Oliver.

Her captor has had her brought to his private quarters on the ship. Compared to the miserable space she's been occupying in the hold, the captain's room is as plush as the Bellagio.

"Do what you like," Felicity calmly answers, meeting his one dark eye. "But we both know you want Oliver here. In a front row seat for your grand finale."

His assessing gaze sharpens as he recognizes her fiery spirit. "You're not like the other one. The first girl," he growls, "But I definitely see the attraction."

Felicity steels her nerves. She's unsettled by Slade's confessed admiration, but she hopes to gain some insight into his thought processes. In order to ferret out his weakness, it's necessary to engage with Oliver's mortal enemy. In no way is this encounter her opportunity to inoculate Slade with the antidote. That **coup de grace** has to wait. He has taken the precaution of having her hands bound behind her back. For now, she must proceed with care, but instinct suggests that she keep him talking.

"Tell me about her. About Shado Gulong," Felicity invites with no small degree of genuine curiosity.

For several tense minutes, Slade says nothing, just drilling Felicity with his singular stare. The longer he goes without speaking, the more she begins to anxiously second guess herself. Was this strategy a mistake?

"So lovely she was, my Shado," he finally murmurs, letting his focus soften and drift away from
Felicity, to the woman who haunts his every hour. "Her hair fell like black silk around her beautiful face. Shado was the island's saving grace, an angel caught in purgatory, like an orchid among thorns. She was intelligent and strong, but there was a kindness about her."

*She's playing you, my love. Prodding your mind with her pretty words. Tell his whore nothing!*

Shado's voice hisses in Slade's ear, violently jerking him from his reverie. His expression suddenly venomous, he turns on Felicity, yelling, "She's right! You!! You want to trick me! To protect him!"

With one back-handed swat, he knocks Felicity to the floor. She lands hard on her flank, her cheekbone striking painfully against the edge of a dresser.

Well, that answers the state of mind question, Felicity decides as she slowly sits up. He's as unstable as a drunk walking in stilettos. Now, how to keep Slade from careening into a complete meltdown so she can survive long enough to eventually inject him with the cure? She makes the conscious choice to disarm him with the truth.

"I want nothing more than to prevent you from hurting Oliver," Felicity confesses, allowing authentic emotions to rise to the surface. Tears pool in her eyes as she adds, "Because I love him."

Her bare-faced honesty temporarily stuns and shames Slade, dissolving most of the heat from his temper.

"But what threat can I possibly pose?" Felicity asks. "I'm your prisoner in the middle of the ocean. No one even knows where to find me. What happens now, it's all up to you. Only you can say if there's any mercy left in your heart, as the man you once were."

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It had embarrassed him, the sight of the beautiful, frail girl at his feet, a deep bruise already purpling on the side of her face — damage he'd left there when he lost control. Slade hadn't meant to hit her, to mark her. He'd just wanted a measure of the woman who held Queen's affections, which he'd gotten while giving up more about himself.

Slade had discovered Felicity Smoak was not just another pretty blonde, a playboy's winsome trophy. She was real and rare — a three-dimensional woman possessing the trifecta of intellect, heart and strength of character. Her presence, as she'd spoken so earnestly, holding his attention with her lovely wide-eyed gaze, reminded him of Shado and how he'd felt when first he'd known her. Slade still chased that feeling, the splendor of falling in love with the Asian beauty who would only be his in death. These many years gone, Shado was reduced to a divining voice in his head, a pale specter in the shadows, an imagined scent of jasmine in the wind.

In an uncommon gesture of remorse, Slade had ordered his cook to prepare Miss Smoak a nutritious, hot meal and to provide an ice pack for her swollen face. It was still his intention to take her life in the presence of her doomed lover. But Slade had no desire to cause undue suffering in a fine woman such as her. When he killed her, it would be swift, sure and merciful. The lingering pain, writhing forever in the heart of Oliver Queen, would simply be a promise kept.

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Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In the midst of stormy seas, Team Arrow and The League board the freighter for a rescue mission. Felicity crosses a line in self-defense. Slade sets the stage for vengeance against Oliver.

Chapter Notes

Most of my chapters run about 2,000 words, but I just didn't have the heart to leave my devoted readers with another cliffhanger, so I just kept writing. I hope you're pleased with the result. If so, I'd love to hear from you!

Ten, hardened warriors slice silently through the dark, bitter waters of the Pacific, keen for a fight. It's nearly midnight and they swim in a dead-heat race against the heavy thunderstorm building ahead. Fortunately, the wind and choppy waves should help to mask any noise they may make as they overpower Slade's army of convicts.

Their plan is to swarm over the ship with the League neutralizing the crew with doses of the cure while Team Arrow rescues Laurel and Felicity. Based on Sara's earlier surveillance, they believe the young women remain imprisoned in the forward hold.

After being tied in knots all day, Oliver attacks the ocean waves with fierce pent-up energy, surging ahead of the others. He doesn't worry about pacing himself. As long as Felicity is endangered, a tiger's heart thunders in his chest, flooding adrenaline into his veins.

Oliver reaches the ship's hull, searching for the best access to the deck fifteen feet above his head. Flashes of lightning reveal a low railing along the ship's edge. Diggle appears beside him in the water, on his shoulder a coil of steel cable attached to a three-pronged hook. With a powerful swing, Digg snags the overhead rail on the first try, pulling the line taut to make certain it's secure to hold their weight.

Oliver nimbly ascends and disappears over the side, followed by Digg and Roy. Seconds later, with Oliver in the lead, a watchman intercepts them. Without breaking stride, Oliver deftly steps beyond the crewman's reach and keeps sprinting toward the hold, trusting his posse to bring the lone guard down.

Cracks of thunder now boom in concert with streaks of lightning. Light rain begins to pelt the ship, rocked by powerful waves and gusts of wind.

When Oliver reaches the hatch, a meaty fist appears from the shadows, grasping his shoulder and flinging him to the deck, where he rolls into a crouch. Raising his bow, he nocks an antidote arrow and fires the needle into his attacker's thigh, where it sticks, delivering a dose of cure. But the big guy keeps coming, now armed with an impressive knife that he wields with expertise, slicing through Oliver's leather sleeve. Ignoring the flash of pain, Oliver unloads a flying kick into the guy's wrist in
hopes of breaking his grip on the blade, but the brute hangs on.

A second cure-laden arrow zings out of the darkness, piercing the back of the target's neck. A puzzled look crosses the Mirakuru soldier's face as he weakly bats at the syringe before his eyes roll back in his head and he goes down like a felled tree. Roy stoops and retrieves the dropped knife, which he slips through the loop of his pants.

Oliver's already returned to the hatch and about to open it, when Digg assumes a shooter's stance behind him to back up his partner. After slinging his bow over his shoulder, Oliver raises the heavy hatch with both hands. The rain has begun falling in heavy sheets, obscuring the visibility on deck. Oliver enters the narrow stairwell, peering into the darkened hold.

A sharp stench hits him, causing his gut to clench in reaction. It's an ominous odor he knows well. Death. Somewhere beneath him, someone has died. Recently.

Oliver shuts down his imagination, determined not to let his thoughts—his fears—get ahead of him. It's not her. It can't be her.

Digg's heavy tread follows him down the metal stairs and he drops his hand reassuringly on Oliver's shoulder. Roy brings up the rear, an arrow nocked in readiness.

"Something's burning," Diggle murmurs as they descend, letting their eyes adjust to the darkness, pierced by Digg's mag light. As they reach the bottom of the hold, they come around a corner.

"What's that humming sound?" Roy asks.

Oliver throws his arm out to prevent his team from advancing any further. "Don't touch anything! Stay back!" 

Digg's flashlight searches the space, revealing a barred cell containing two empty cots. Felicity's glasses, lying broken on the rough floor, cause Oliver's heart to stutter. As Digg tracks the beam across the floor, it falls across the twitching body of a crewman, sprawled inside the jail's entrance. Eerie wisps of smoke drift upwards from the corpse's hair.

Oliver pulls a coin from his pocket and tosses it against the bars, which crackle and spray sparks on contact.

"Geez!" Roy exclaims in surprise.

"She's wired the bars to a live current," Oliver notes with a conflicting mix of relief, worry and pride.

"She?" Roy repeats while pitching another penny at the electrified bars to trigger more fireworks.

"Felicity," Oliver and Diggle answer confidently, in unison.

"So, where'd she go?" Roy wonders aloud, echoing the uppermost question on his partners' minds.

>----->|<-----<

*I'm a murderer.*

Felicity replays the statement over and over again in her head, as if that bizarre phrase will somehow make sense in any world. She has taken a human life. Two years ago, she'd accidentally backed her car over her neighbor's cat and cried every day for weeks.

Felicity had long ago come to uneasy terms with the reality that she aided and abetted Oliver in his
nightly pursuit of vigilante justice, sometimes resulting in death for his targets. And there had been incidents when he had killed for her, in defense of her life. She will never forget the traumatic night when Oliver buried three arrows in The Count's chest, mere inches from her face.

But tonight's kill was hers alone. By a tactic she alone planned and deployed. Felicity had intentionally put herself in Slade's hands, in harm's way without realizing she might have to use lethal means to defend herself. It was brutal to grasp the fact that her intellect was even capable of devising lethal means. Tracking and hacking for Team Arrow had seemed a justifiable use of her skills. But tonight, she's crossed a line, acting with premeditated malice to take a life.

Logic tells Felicity that her actions were necessary, to protect not only herself, but Laurel as well. Even burdened with guilt, Felicity has no doubt her stalker had come to their cell with rape—and perhaps worse intentions—on his mind. Her ripped sweater and the bloody scratches on her neck prove the threat was undoubtedly real. And yet...

Understanding the pure science of electrocution was a far cry from causing and witnessing it.

_The ominous hum and snap of unleashed current claiming its host. The keening scream. The rattling of bars clenched by tensing muscles. The sickening smell of burning skin and hair and spilled urine. The staccato tap of his twitching boots in a final dance with Death._

But there's little time to wrestle with the status of her soul once her crime is discovered. Felicity wrestles with symptoms of shock as she and Laurel are dragged before Slade who presides over a larger storage space below deck that's similar to a warehouse. The women's hands are untied, the opportunity Felicity has anticipated, yet now she fears she may be too rattled to take advantage of this chance.

"They've killed Roberts," reports the crewman at Laurel's back.

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Laurel protests shrilly, earning her a withering look from Slade as he paces in front of them.

"It was me," Felicity states, heroically lifting her head, determined to keep her voice steady. "I'm responsible."

Slade halts in front of Felicity, pausing to study her face. "Fascinating," he finally mutters. "Ms. Smoak, you're an astonishing woman. As much as I admire your resourcefulness, I can't have you killing my men. I had hoped to stage your execution on Lian Yu, but perhaps it will suffice for your cold and lifeless body to be found at sea on an abandoned freighter."

Slade signals to his henchman, who pushes Felicity forward. Drawing his sword, Slade spins and pulls her back roughly against his chest.

Suddenly, Laurel lets loose a stream of ear-splitting screams that are amplified by the surrounding metal walls. In a fit of aggravation, Slade releases Felicity, letting her slide to her knees, so he can deal with Laurel's hysterics.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Laurel," Felicity thinks. She needs this moment to withdraw the loaded syringe from her pocket. Snapping off the cap, she grips the antidote as if it's a dagger, steeling herself for her next move, stabbing Slade Wilson with the cure for his madness.

Slade has rudely cuffed Laurel with the back of his hand, but he must have held himself in check because she's still conscious and cowering on the floor. Felicity throws her a sympathetic look before refocusing on Slade, who's coming her way.
The mission to take down the crew eats more time than Oliver can stand. Fighting has broken out throughout the mid-sized freighter, which is a warren of cargo and closed-off spaces that could take hours to search. The stormy weather adds a surreal, chaotic aspect to the endless night.

Always moving forward, Oliver methodically cuts around and through the combatants, avoiding the skirmishes that the League seems to control and intervening in the duels needing his forceful backup. But he keeps his engagements brief, fierce and focused because Felicity is hidden somewhere in this nightmare. He feels her presence pulling him through the inky darkness, the blinding rain, Mirakuru soldiers, battering winds and Slade's cruel agenda.

No power on this earth can keep him from her.

Sara is barely holding her own in a clash with two of the crew when Oliver joins the fray, making quick work of his opponent before helping her inoculate the second fighter. Breathing hard, she looks around them, in hopes of seeing her sister and Felicity.

"No luck?" Sara asks, her forehead creased with worry. "They weren't there?"

She falls into step with Oliver as he presses on.

"There were signs they'd been there," he says, his expression tight and dangerous.

"And the boys?" Sara wonders as they fruitlessly search a cargo bay.

"We split up," Oliver explains. "They're starboard."

"What if Laurel and Felicity are no longer on the ship, Ollie?" Sara suggests, her voice uneasy.

"They're here," he vows. "I would know if she was gone."

Laurel's frantic screams rise above the raging winds.

Laurel's shrieks were abruptly cut off but not before leading them here.

When he reaches the cargo hold, Oliver relies on his acute hearing to locate Felicity beyond the wall of crates. Sara is at his six, moving in unison with him in a silent approach toward a familiar growling voice with an Australian accent.

Sara slinks into the shadows as Oliver purposefully walks a straight line ahead with eyes only for Felicity. With one laser-like scan, Oliver notes the bruise on her cheek, her torn sweater, the exhaustion in her face, the six pounds she's lost, the fiery determination in her eyes—and the weapon in her fist.

Felicity is held tightly by Slade, who towers over her, exposing her neck to the sword he wields. Oliver steps into the light, his bow held away from his body in a subtle sign of submission. At the archer's arrival, Slade's four soldiers instantly react, but their leader waves them back.

"Well, Kid, I must say your timing is perfect," Slade drawls, his eye glinting in triumph. "Welcome aboard."
"Ollie!" Laurel cries out from her forgotten corner. "I knew you'd come!

Still hidden, Sara indulges in a roll of her eyes at her sister's expense.

"Let her go, Slade," Oliver requests, sharing a brief, reassuring glance with Felicity. "Your army's broken. Give it up."

“I can’t.” Slade bellows, his self-control slipping. “I’m going to teach you how I suffered when Shado lay dead at your feet. Do you remember, Kid? When you chose Shado to die? When you sacrificed her life?"

“I know how it feels. I know how to hate, how to want revenge. I've lost people I loved, as much as you loved Shado,” Oliver responds, struggling to reason with a madman.

"Lose the bow," Slade demands, jerking Felicity closer in an unspoken threat.

Oliver stoops to lay his recurve on the floor as he advances. "Okay, it's down. Take your hate out on me. Just let her go."

"You may have forgotten, Kid. But I haven't. Years ago, I made you a promise. To destroy everything and everyone you love," Slade says, savoring this hour of vengeance. "And I keep my promises."

Felicity recoils as Slade presses his lips to hers, tormenting Oliver whose features twist in cold fury. “She's a remarkable woman, isn't she?” Slade goads them. “So irreplaceable and exquisite.”

Upping his treachery, Slade declares, "My blade is kissing the throat of the woman you love—" as he bears down with the razor tip of his sword. A small spurt of blood trickles down the column of Felicity's neck.

"No!" Oliver pleads, raising his palms in supplication. "Please! Don't hurt her..."

"I truly regret that I cannot spare her life," Slade offers. "But she's doomed, another woman cursed by the love of Oliver Queen. Just as Shado was."

"Do you remember her laugh?" Oliver murmurs, changing course, his voice low and composed. "Like wind chimes in a soft breeze. And the beautiful color of her eyes?"

"The richest brown... There were golden flecks," Slade recalls, intent on hearing Oliver’s compelling words that stir his sweetest memories from Lian Yu. His grip on Felicity eases slightly.

"You see her, don't you?" Oliver asks quietly. "She still talks to you."

Nodding faintly, Slade's focus has softened, his gaze settling on a spectral figure only he can see. His sword has lowered further from Felicity's neck.

Oliver continues talking in an even, hypnotic tone, his eyes locked with Felicity's. "I remember Shado being gentle and kind. She was your caring friend, someone who would never want the innocent to be harmed in her name."

With the lowering of her captor's defenses, Felicity seizes the opportunity. She raises her hand, plunging the loaded syringe into Slade's neck and forcing the cure into his bloodstream. Rather than struggling to break free, she goes limp, slipping from his grasp and falling hard to her knees.

As soon as Felicity strikes, all hell breaks loose in the confined space as arrows, fists and bullets fly,
but she's only aware of two men—Slade roaring behind her and Oliver charging forward to catch her. Enraged, Slade swings his blade in a powerful arc, aiming to slice through Oliver and Felicity with a single stroke. Oliver pivots, curving his body over hers, braced for a blow that never reaches them.

Storming out of the shadows, John Diggle plows into Slade with the commitment of a pro linebacker, knocking the air from his target's lungs. Right on his heels is Roy who shoots an arrow bearing a double-dose of cure into Slade’s chest.

Sara, Nyssa and their League sisters fall upon the Mirakuru soldiers, displaying remarkable discipline in keeping their feral opponents alive despite the intensity of the fighting. But the green vials of antidote eventually turn the tide as each soldier succumbs to its curative effects. Even Slade, whose madness has fed years of hatred, blacks out once the serum overpowers his system.

Now that Slade's army have fallen comatose and been secured with zip ties, the cargo hold is eerily silent. Until Laurel, deciding the coast is clear, leaps up and runs toward Oliver, crying, "Oh, Ollie! Thank God you came!"

Sara intercedes, snagging her sister in mid-flight and speaking to her in hushed explanations that she’s not the girl Oliver came for. Laurel wants to argue, determined to throw herself into Oliver's arms which happen to be quite full of Felicity. With help from Nyssa, Sara manages to steer her sister away from the reunited couple who are oblivious to their latest fit of Lance melodrama.

Realizing that reinforcements have arrived and have the situation well in hand, Oliver can concentrate on his primary mission.

“Fe-li-ci-ty.”

They cling to each other, nestled in a heap against a wall, behind a sturdy stack of crates where Oliver carried her out of the line of fire. He rains soft kisses across her hair, her eyes, her face, her lips, adoring the perfect fit of her body pressed to his.

“Are you okay?” he asks, pulling back to anxiously search her eyes.

“They broke my glasses.”

And just like that, Felicity bursts the agonizing bubble of terror that has been trapped in his chest since the first hour she went missing. Oliver’s grin conquers the tears in his eyes and he shakes his head with wonder, understanding that this is how his life is now, and will always be, with her at its center. Laughter through tears. Crises sprinkled with whimsy. Fear threaded through happiness. Danger laced with desire.

“It isn’t funny,” she grousrs, although a dimple teasing the corner of her mouth contradicts her tone. “I can’t even tell the villains from the good guys.”

“I’m a good guy,” he jokes, moving closer so she can see him clearly.

“I know. And I never doubted you would come for me,” she solemnly replies, her voice turning earnest as she gently frames his face with her hands before kissing him.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

This chapter is exclusively focused on Oliver and Felicity's reunion. Still confined to the freighter, Oliver hovers over Felicity in the immediate aftermath of her captivity as she copes with her traumatic experiences as Slade's prisoner.

Chapter Notes

I finally found the time and inspiration to return to this story! This update is 2,300 words of pure Olicity now that they're reunited and Slade has been neutralized. They have yet to deal with the fallout from her deception and those issues will be loudly addressed, but I felt their immediate need was emotional reassurance and physical healing. And, I'm a sucker for attentive Oliver caring for his woman. Isabel is still waiting in the wings to cause her special, vindictive brand of mayhem, probably showing up in Chapter 23.

Thanks for your patient following, kudos and comments. They mean everything and keep pulling me back to work on this labor of love.

I hope you enjoy!

"Felicity, don't try to stand," Oliver implores as she squirms in his lap.

"I'm okay," she argues. "I'm not hurt."

"Baby... Be still. Please," he begs, straining to get a look at her bleeding neck in the murky light.

But Felicity is determined to prove she's no damsel in distress, rolling to her knees and getting to her feet. Oliver rises with her, but hovering nonetheless.

"See, I'm just fine. Right as rain," she announces with a forced smile that falters as her face blanches and she wobbles, her knees suddenly unsteady on the rolling seas. "Whoa!"

Oliver's powerful arms are instantly there. He loops an arm behind Felicity's knees and the other at her back, easily hefting her to his chest and carrying her out of the cargo hold, away from the now-secured Slade and his hateful mission. Even if she hadn't actually needed him to hold her, Oliver feels infinitely better with Felicity back in his protective embrace. He craves the reassurance that she's no longer lost, at the mercy of his enemy.

"I can walk," Felicity sputters as an icy sheet of wind-driven rain hits them upon returning to the ship's deck. Now that the adrenaline rush has abated, Oliver's limping from the abuse to his bad knee. "Where are you going, Oliver?"

"Somewhere warm and dry, wherever that is," Oliver replies tersely with no clue which direction to turn.
"Go that way," Felicity orders, pointing him toward a flight of stairs. She answers his questioning look by adding, "The Captain's quarters. They're at the top of that stairway."

By the time they reach Slade's warm cabin, they're both soaked and chilled to the bone. After throwing the deadbolt, Oliver scans the room that's outfitted with a kitchenette, Murphy bed, fold-down table, bench, built-in desk and small upholstered couch. He finds a small, private bath behind a narrow sliding door.

Oliver gently lowers Felicity to the sofa and kneels before her, lifting the wet strands of her hair away from her face and neck, which is streaked with watery trickles of blood. Her blue-tinged lips tremble with cold. When his fingers graze the remnants of her torn sweater, Felicity reflexively jerks away from his touch.

Pulling his hand back, Oliver notices the rough scratches marring her chest, aligned with the ripped edges of her clothing. A flash of fury sheets over him as he gets the visual, imagining the rough hands that groped her, that tried to—

"Oliver?" she whispers, pulling his focus back to her face, to her beautiful eyes, brimming with new, unshed tears.

"Felicity?" he asks, the words catching in his throat, "Did they— Were you..."

With a fierce shake of her head, Felicity sobs, "No, Oliver... I... I killed him."

Her head falls against him, into her safe place, in the hollow curve between his shoulder and neck.

"I'm glad," he seethes next to her ear, his voice ragged with barely-controlled rage.

With a moan of grief, Felicity lifts her tear-streaked face to his, confessing, "Oliver, I killed someone."

Closing his eyes to her raw pain, Oliver struggles to separate his wrath from Felicity's guilt, her sense of soul-wrenching loss. After centering his emotions, he frames her face with his hands, connecting his steadfast gaze to hers.

"Felicity, I'm sorry you were forced to take a man's life. And I'm sorry I couldn't be here to protect you from that. What you did, it will always haunt you, but it was the right choice. It was your only choice," he stresses, catching an errant tear with his thumb. "But make no mistake, when he chose to put his hands on you, to hurt you, he was a dead man. You just got there before I could."

"What about Isabel?"

"She's in the wind, Oliver," Diggle reports, leaning his large frame against the closed door of Slade's quarters. "According to Laurel, she bailed a day before Slade moved his crew to the freighter."

Troubled by the idea of Slade's missing partner, Oliver asks, "Did she break away from Slade?"

"That's Laurel's impression," Digg replies. He tilts his head toward the closed door of the bathroom, where the shower water can be heard running. "How is she?"

With a sigh, Oliver explains, "She's exhausted. And hurting. She going to need time."

"Whatever Felicity needs, we'll make sure she has it," Digg vows.
"ARGUS here yet?" Oliver wonders aloud.

"They're waitin' for the storm to blow itself out," Digg says. "Don't worry, we've got Slade and his crew on ice until it's safe to move them. They're all out of commission after getting the antidote. But we'll keep close watch, just to make sure."

"You need me?" Oliver offers, feeling obligated to take a turn with his teammates.

"No, man. You stay with her," Digg assures his partner with a big hand clapped on his shoulder. "I'll let you know if anything changes."

A light spray of lukewarm water rinses the days of grime from Felicity's skin as she struggles to stay centered in the tiny shower while the ship dips and sways on the stormy waves. She had hoped for a steamy hot bath, but at least there's some foreign-smelling soap and shampoo to restore a semblance of cleanliness. As she washes her exhausted self, the harsh evidence of recent months becomes apparent, even in the dimly-lit bathroom. She barely recognizes herself — bruised, cut, scratched and scarred. Felicity ponders how she ended up here, in a gritty world she hadn't known existed, routinely caught up in the violent clash between heroes and villains. During her Goth phase at MIT, she’d pretended to be tough and street-wise. *What a silly poser I was,* she realizes.

The floor pitches suddenly, tossing Felicity into the shower's tile wall. She manages to keep her footing, but yelps in surprise.

"Felicity?" Oliver asks from the other side of the door. "Are you okay?"

Gripping the wall's edge, Felicity mutters, "What's one more bruise?" as she glances down at her latest welt, this one on her hip.

"Felicity!" he calls, his voice raised in concern as he slides the door open a crack.

"I'm fine, Oliver," she assures him, shutting off the water and deciding to abandon this shower/carnival ride.

"Do you need anything?" Oliver asks, sounding calmer and closer, but leaving the door ajar anyway.

Wrapping herself in a towel, Felicity considers the pitiful heap of clothing she shed and never wants to touch again.

"Um, something to wear?" she responds.

"Okay, give me a minute," he answers before disappearing.

Felicity squeezes as much water from her hair as she can, then rakes her fingers through the worst tangles. She's still finger-combing the wet strands when Oliver returns, knocking lightly and waiting for her invitation to enter.

His gallantry amuses her, considering their newly-consummated relationship, but she's also grateful that he's treading carefully considering her recent imprisonment and manhandling. *Has she ever felt so vulnerable?*

"It's okay, Oliver," Felicity assures him. "You can come in."

Sliding the pocket door open, Oliver reappears carrying a bundle of man's clothing in his arms.
"These will swallow you," he guesses, "But you might find something usable to keep you warm."

Felicity anxiously lifts a large shirt from the assortment and gives it a careful sniff, instantly repulsed. "These are his? Slade's?"

Oliver nods as she pitches the rejected garment back into his hands. "I think they're clean?"

"No, it's not that. I just don't want anything of his touching me," she explains. "I'm sorry, I know it's stupid. It's just clothing, but—"

"Hey," he murmurs, tossing the garments aside and cradling her bruised cheek with his hand. "It's not stupid. I understand."

Oliver strips off his white t-shirt and offers, "Here, it's not clean, but—"

Felicity jerks the tee from his hand and buries her face in the soft cotton fabric that is infused with Oliver's scent. It's illogical, she knows, to feel comfort—or distress—from the smell of a man's clothing. Nevertheless, the distinct connection is there and she'd choose Oliver's sweat over Slade's cologne without a second thought on any day.

"Do you want... Can I look for... Maybe I should go find Sara?" Oliver suggests, clearly bothered that he can't immediately resolve her needs.

"Hey," she murmurs, placing her hand over his Bratva tattoo, "This is fine. Just give me a few more minutes and I'll be done in here."

He presses a lingering kiss to her forehead before backing out of the cramped bathroom.

Oliver checks the simmering pan of canned soup on the hotplate and find two mismatched mugs. He's already laid out gauze, tape and antibiotic cream for her injuries on the drop-down table. Felicity reappears at his side while he's pouring up the soup.

"I'm not hungry," she says quietly, standing in the galley area wearing nothing but Oliver's white t-shirt, which falls to her mid-thigh.

"How long has it been since you ate, Felicity?" Oliver asks in a neutral voice.

Felicity considers the question. She's looked at several unappealing meals in the past few days, but can't remember eating anything substantial since she was taken. The ship's endless motion on the sea, added to the perilous situation, have effectively killed her appetite. Even the smell of the soup is off-putting.

Recognizing the green tinge of her complexion, he doesn't push it. "Would you like to warm your hands on the mug?"

She sits at the small table and wraps her palms around the steaming cup. Oliver tucks a worn quilt around her bare legs before opening a packet of soda crackers in hopes she will give them a try. He pushes a bottle of water next to the crackers. "These will help your tummy."

It touches Felicity that Oliver's trying so hard to take care of her when he could be scolding her for putting herself in this situation. "I'm sorry," she offers with a weary sigh.

"Sorry? For what?" he questions, his brow furrowing at her apology.

"For getting myself abducted. For thinking I could play the hero and lead you to Laurel," she
confesses, a sad smile crossing her lips. "It all went sideways so fast."

"Drink some water, Felicity. Then let's take care of your cuts and bruises," he says, kneeling to look up at her. "There will be time later, after you're feeling better, to have that conversation. Tonight, it's enough that you're here. That you're safe. With me... just be with me tonight, Felicity."

Oliver's compassionate words dissolve the tension coiled in Felicity's core. A part of her has dreaded being alone with him, fully aware that she owes him an explanation for her deception, but she simply cannot face that difficult encounter in this hour. Days without eating, sleepless nights, the constant state of fear and the final violent hours have taken their toll. Felicity is ragged with exhaustion.

He knows her well and Oliver's perceptive eyes miss nothing. The tentative way Felicity moves tells him she's hurting from rough treatment as Slade's captive. Her skittish glances reveal the shock and terror she has yet to let go. Felicity’s tiredness is evident in the translucent purple shadows around her eyes. He notices that the delicate lines of her collar bone, wrists and ankles are more pronounced due to weight loss and possible dehydration. The remarkable woman he loves is dead on her feet.

Oliver has already lowered the Murphy bed and made it up with a spare set of sheets he miraculously found. They're not luxury linens by any means, but seem clean and softened by age.

Felicity drinks most of the water and manages to swallow a couple of the crackers before giving up. She's propped her chin in her hand and her eyelids have fallen to half-mast.

Oliver returns to her and strokes her slender back, "Felicity, would you like to lie down while I tend to your cuts?"

"Okay," she yawns, attempting to unwrap the quilt that Oliver snuggled around her.

"Baby, let me," Oliver offers as he gracefully bundles Felicity and the quilt into his arms and crosses to the bed, where he gently lays her down.

Out of habit, Felicity reaches up to remove her glasses. Realizing her silly mistake, she huffs and rolls her eyes. Being without her lenses is deeply frustrating.

"The next time I go rogue, remind me to take my contacts," she says as Oliver sits on the side of the mattress, dropping the first aid supplies in his lap.

"I think there's a flaw in your logic," he comments, touching his fingers to her chin so she will lift it, exposing the laceration on her neck. He grimaces at the sight of the short, crimson gash against her fair skin. Although her wounds don't look nearly as serious now that they are clean and dry.

"I can't think clearly when the world is fuzzy," she muses, flinching slightly as he carefully applies the antibiotic salve.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "I'm about done touching you."

Even half-asleep, Felicity reacts with a double-take, drawling, "I'm certainly hoping that's not true."

Smoothing the edges of the gauze bandage, he grins back at her, vowing, "That won't ever be true." He leans over her and bestows a tender kiss on her lips. Pulling the blanket up over her shoulders, Oliver smiles down at her, adding, "I'm going to shower. You get some rest."

"Oliver?"

"Yeah?" he answers, trailing his fingers through her silky hair.
"I know it's over. And that I'm safe now," she says quietly, her eyes misty with emotion. "It just doesn’t feel that way."

"Felicity," Oliver responds, lying down beside her, wrapping his powerful frame around hers, his words a promise falling softly on her face. "I'm here however you need me. As your partner. Your lover. Your follower. Your defender. Your refuge."

The timbre of his voice soothing and familiar, Oliver talks on, telling how afraid for her he has been, how important her presence is in his life. Nestling into his warmth, his strength, his assurance, Felicity surrenders to sleep, at last finding rest and peace in his embrace.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Felicity confesses to Oliver and there's no way to sugarcoat the truth of her actions. Coaxed by the ghost of Robert Queen, Isabel arranges for a distraction for Team Arrow. Diggle deals with the fallout of a fractured Team Arrow. Felicity has a surprise benefactor and seeks a private partnership with Sara.

Chapter Notes

Okay, round up your pitchforks and torches because this chapter is just an awful thing to do to readers. But in my defense, there was simply no way to go around Felicity's and Oliver's trust issue but straight through the thorns. (If you've forgotten the origins of their conflict, Chapters 17-18 will refresh your memory of Felicity's rash actions.) This update was painful to write so I apologize in advance. All I can ask is for you to hang with me on this one.

And, as always, I am truly grateful to you lovely people who share your thoughts and encouragement of this story through your comments and kudos! Olicity shippers are so supportive and generous.

Now, grab the tissues and let's just deal with consequences...

"So... Do you want to explain what were you thinking?"

And here we go, Felicity realizes with dread. It's been five days since they were airlifted by ARGUS back to the mainland. Up until this awful moment, Oliver has not said a word about her clandestine plot to set a trap for Slade with herself as the bait. She'd almost convinced herself that he'd accepted her actions and forgiven her reckless choices. Maybe he's over it, she had optimistically hoped. But no, Oliver was simply giving her a period of grace while she recuperated from her ordeal in captivity. There's nothing for it now but to hoist up her big girl panties and face the consequences.

She curls into a corner of the sofa leaving him to pace in front of the fireplace. It's a chilly December evening and they're ensconced in the downstairs parlor of the Queen mansion.

"Yes, Oliver," Felicity answers with a dimpled smile. Hey, she's allowed to use whatever weapons she can muster. "But first, I'm going to need a drink."

He arches an eyebrow in surprise, pausing briefly before asking, "What can I get you?"

"Oh, whatever you're having," she replies with a genial wave of her hand.

"Felicity, I'm not drinking," he says, mildly surprised at her lack of observation.

"Yeah well, you might want to rethink that position," Felicity remarks glibly. "Um, I'll have a bourbon. Neat."
Again, there's the eyebrow. "I have a nice California red," he offers, tempting her fondness for good wine.

"Nope, this is a conversation for hard liquor," Felicity declares resolutely, wishing that Oliver would join her in a shot of booze to take the edge off of his determined expression. But he just calmly serves up the single glass of amber liquid, which she downs in one gulp.

The alcohol burns a path from her lips to the pit of her stomach and brings tears to her eyes, but she welcomes the liquid courage as ensuing heat floods her veins. She can feel the warm flush in her face as she gamely attempts to steady her nerves, searching for the explanation Oliver deserves.

He's returned to the mantel, studying her thoughtfully, his cobalt eyes missing nothing.

Felicity clears her throat, takes a deep cleansing breath and raises her gaze to meet his.

It's taken time, more time than she wants to allow, but her unfolding plot will ultimately feed the monster living in her chest. It craves revenge, payback, destruction with a feverish intensity that threatens to take her sanity. The logical, analytical remainder of Isabel's mind, struggles to keep the beast at bay, at least until the moment she needs it to unleash its full fury on the Queen family.

When the monster sleeps, Robert whispers to her like the lover he once was, coaxing Isabel in her malicious schemes, urging her to be patient so that, when the time is right, she can embody his consuming hatred of Moira. He needs Isabel even more in death, to act as his deft and lethal instrument of vengeance on his traitorous widow, the cold-blooded woman who welcomed Malcolm into her bed, who ended his life and so grievously damaged their son.

It's not as if Isabel needs Robert's list of grievances for motivation; her personal resentments are sufficient to fuel the retribution she has in mind. Isabel had possessed Robert's love and she was devoted to him despite the difference in their ages. In her fantasy, she was ready to be his bride and would have been a faithful wife and partner, if only Moira had gotten out of the fucking way. So now, having failed to steal the Queen empire, which by rights should have been hers, Isabel's obsessed with bringing it down, preferably on top of as many Queens as possible.

She kept tabs on Slade, tracking his movements from his headquarters until he disappeared at the wharf. Isabel hated losing his footprints for several reasons. Mainly, he still posed a threat to her, especially after she rebelled and left him on his own to carry out his own demented agenda. But secondly, Slade's vendetta got way more interesting when she saw him nab Oliver's whore, Felicity Smoak. After all of his grand obsession with Laurel Lance, what—or who—had finally convinced Slade that he had the wrong girl??

The crazier Slade became, the bolder Isabel's actions grew. Just as she'd devalued the Queen corporation's assets, she also plundered Slade's finances as her Plan B, which is proving most fortunate and necessary. She needs liquid wealth to buy the services of Chien Na Wei and the Chinese Triad as a distraction for Oliver and his annoying partners. Keeping Team Arrow busy fighting China White will give Isabel unencumbered access to her key target—Moira Queen.

"My plan was to set a trap for Slade."

"Offering yourself as the lure," Oliver adds, "Without telling me. Or anyone."
"Well yes, Oliver," Felicity answers, reminding herself to avoid the sarcastic "duh, Oliver" that's so tempting. "Because I knew you wouldn't go along."

"Of course I wouldn't!" he replies, heat rising in his voice. "What you did, Felicity. It was beyond dangerous! When I think about what could have happened... what very nearly did happen to you—"

He turns his back to her, seeking control of his temper in the cool marble of the mantel.

"But Oliver, I'd run out of options for finding Laurel," she argues. "And I had to let Slade know he was holding the wrong girl."

Oliver pivots to face her, his intelligent eyes questioning hers. "And how did you do that? How did Slade find out about us?"

Oh, frack. Oh, frack on a cracker. Oliver doesn't know about the camera and the live video feed of them, that night, in this very room. How could she have forgotten that part of her arrangement which seems even more horrible after the fact? Frackity, frack, frack!

"Felicity? How did Slade find out?" he prods her for an answer although it's obvious she's seriously rattled.

Avoiding his intense scrutiny, she nervously traces the rim of the crystal shot glass with her fingers. "I thought... it seemed like... Since Slade had planted cameras in the mansion," Felicity stammers. She inhales a gulp of air before confessing, "I used them against him."

For a torturous minute, the room is dead quiet as Oliver connects her fragmented admission with his memory of the secret surveillance feed.

"You staged a scene for Slade," he correctly guesses, his tone cold and hard-edged.

"I needed him to see us together," she pleads, rocked by his shattered look.

"To see us..." he repeats quietly. "You let him watch us when we—"

"No, Oliver!! Not like that! Not when we were together together," Felicity protests as she comes off the couch toward him.

Oliver steps back, away from her touch.

A tiny crack runs through Felicity's heart. She freezes in place, her hands falling to her side.

"Where?" he asks, barely moving his clenched jaw.

"This room," she dully replies, numbly pointing to a light sconce in the corner of the small parlor.

Stalking to the offending corner, Oliver immediately spots the tiny lens and violently rips the camera, sconce and wiring out of the wall, sending screws and dust flying in its wake.

With the fixture and camera clenched in one hand, Oliver crosses back to her, hurt and fury flashing in his eyes. "So Felicity? This was all for Slade's benefit? You and me... in here... Tell me, was any of it ever real?"

"Oliver," Felicity whispers, tears filling her eyes. "How can you ask me that?"

His face changes into one she's only seen in old scandal sheets as Oliver morphs into the cavalier billionaire's son, a calculated smile flirting on his perfect lips, "I know how you actresses are."
One of his well-aimed arrows could not wound her more deeply than his cruel words, the dismissive edge to his voice and the emptiness of his cool gaze.

"Oliver," Felicity gasps, her throat tight with pain and choked sobs. "It wasn't like that. God, I'm sorry. I screwed up, but I never would have—"

"Save it for your Oscar speech, beautiful," Oliver snarks before turning on his heel and leaving Felicity more alone than she has ever been, her life in broken pieces on the rich Persian rug at her feet.

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"So... Felicity coming in tonight?"

Oliver doesn't look up from his work bench, ignoring John Diggle's question as he continues to sharpen the edges of an arrowhead with a hasp.

Digg sighs in exasperation, so past the point of being fed up with his partner's silent treatment.

"I know you can hear a mouse fart in the next block, not that the mice in this neighborhood would be so crass, but I'd appreciate an answer, Oliver," Digg says firmly.

"I'm not Felicity's keeper," Oliver comments, remaining intent on his task.

"Since when?" Digg retorts, his volume rising. "I distinctly remember a promise that we—you and I—made. That we could keep her safe. And with Isabel in the wind, Felicity needs protection more than ever."

"I took care of that," Oliver declares hotly. "I've had a state-of-the-art security system installed at her apartment."

Diggle slams his broad palm down on Oliver's work bench, causing a small earthquake amongst his tools and arrowheads. "Dammit, Oliver! Felicity's still our partner!"

"Then call her up," Oliver commands, now glaring furiously at Digg. "Ask her where she is."

"I'm asking you," Digg says, his deep voice echoing in the large basement. "Look man, I know you're pissed. It was profoundly stupid of Felicity to go rogue, but she's not the first member of this team to ever make a boneheaded decision. It was just her turn."

Oliver stands so abruptly that his stool tilts and falls with a crash. Grabbing his jacket, he stalks to the outer door, declaring, "I've got places to be."

At the predictable slam of the heavy oak door, Diggle shakes his head, consumed with worry for a fractured and crippled Team Arrow.

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"Okay, let's try this again," Felicity crisply declares to the payroll clerk on her phone. "I am no longer employed by Queen Consolidated. My resignation became official two weeks ago. I need you to do whatever it takes to stop payment on these direct deposits into my bank account."

Felicity picks at her chipped nail polish as she listens to the cranky voice droning on about a "permanent stipend" attached to her file.
"Stipend?" Felicity blurts impatiently. "I don't qualify for a stipend. If this was authorized by Mister Queen—"

The clerk's voice interrupts, explaining, "Not Mister Queen. The signature on the form is Moira Queen."

Felicity is so stunned that she drops her phone. Before she can reach for it beneath the table, a nimble hand snatches it from the tile floor.

"Good news! The screen's not cracked."

Sara Lance grins down at Felicity, who's nursing a salt caramel mocha at her usual booth in the neighborhood Starbucks.

"Sara!" Felicity greets her, rising to share a warm hug. "I've been trying to reach you."

"I know," Sara admits as she slides into the bench facing Felicity. "Sorry to keep you hanging. I've been away on a job."

Felicity can't help the shudder that she feels, knowing what "a job" means in Sara's world. But she recovers quickly, asking if Sara would like something from the coffee bar.

After a quick shake of her blond curls, Sara asks, "So, what's up?"

Felicity takes a sip of her coffee, gathering her thoughts and marshalling her emotions. But she keeps her eyes fixed on the foam of her drink. "Um, I don't know if you're available right now, but Oliver and Digg could use some extra backup. But it's okay if you're jammed up..."

Sara studies her friend, who without her usual makeup and ponytail, appears uncharacteristically vulnerable and stressed. Reaching across the narrow table, Sara gathers Felicity's hand in hers, murmuring, "Hey, you okay?"

Felicity lifts her head and swipes away a sudden tear while giving Sara a tremulous smile. "Is it that obvious? How messed up I am?"

"It just looks like you're hurting, sweetie," Sara says with genuine concern.

Felicity pulls a paper napkin from her lap to blot the flow of tears, saying, "I'm sorry. I can't talk about me right now. I just need to know that someone has the guys' backs. Now that I'm... not there."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," Sara sympathizers, squeezing Felicity's fingers. "What did he do?"

"It's not something—" Felicity begins, but can't bring herself to say Oliver's name. "This is all on me."

Sara is dubious about Felicity carrying the full blame in whatever has led to her breakup with Oliver, but she doesn't press further.

"Sure, I can help out, but I'll never be able to provide the kind of intel support that you can," Sara earnestly concedes. "I'm way better in the field."

"I understand," Felicity replies, having already thought through the dilemma of maintaining the necessary level of tech support. "But if you're comfortable with it, I will continue tracking and hacking their missions from home—"
"Without Ollie and Digg knowing," Sara guesses, quickly catching on to the ruse.

"Yep!" Felicity agrees with a brief nod. "I'll feed you the intel on a private line while you man the coms. We'll lose a few seconds of reaction time, but I think we can still give them enough edge to make a difference."

"Felicity, they deserve to know it's still you watching their back," Sara protests.

Felicity falters, her eyes dropping to the design on her coffee cup, struggling with a fresh onset of tears. "I can't come back. Not ever."

"Felicity, I wish I could tell you he's not worth your tears," Sara implores, "But the truth is, what you have with Oliver, it's worth fighting for."

"Yeah, Sara," Felicity whispers sadly, "It was. Until I lost him. If you had seen the cold way he looked at me... Oliver doesn't love me anymore."

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Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Sara gives Oliver a piece of her mind, as only she can. Felicity pays a visit to Moira's campaign headquarters. Isabel hires a new recruit. The Chinese Triad gets busy while Laurel decides that if she can't have Oliver, then no one can. Diggle accepts a dinner invitation.

Chapter Notes

So, here it is: Chapter 24 all wrapped in shiny green paper and tied up with a bow, just in time for Christmas and Hanukkah! Just a note of explanation: when The Arrow is in the field, Sara is juggling communications from Felicity in one ear and Oliver in the other on separate lines. So, Oliver and Felicity can't hear each other's dialog with Sara. I hope that's not too confusing. If it is, let me know and I'll try to tinker with the wording because it will be a continuing theme in the next chapter too.

To all my readers and kind followers, I wish you joy and peace in this sacred season born in love for all.

"She did it for you, ya know?"

"How can you say that, Sara?" Oliver explodes, his eyes stormy with resentment. "Felicity played me."

"Felicity? Felicity Smoak played you," Sara repeats sarcastically. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard come out of your mouth, Ollie. And that's saying something."

"You don't know the whole story, Sara," he seethes, taking his anger out on the punching bag hanging in the mansion basement.

"Yeah, and I don't have to," Sara fires back. "Because I know Felicity. And she doesn't have a deceitful cell in her body. But I shouldn't have to tell you that because you've trusted her with every broken piece of your damned life for the past two years."

"That doesn't change the fact that Felicity betrayed me!"

"She did it for you," Sara diggs in. Because she’s right and because she knows it’s irritating him.

"Stop saying that!" Oliver petulantly demands, although he’s certain she won’t.

"Felicity felt she was failing you. Falling the team and failing my sister,” she insists. “Whatever she did, it may have been the wrong choice, but it was for the sake of everyone else. And deep down, beneath your male pride, you know I'm right. I know Laurel can be a neurotic nuisance, but we both love her and she’d probably be dead if it wasn’t for Felicity’s brave stupidity," Sara retorts, her
temper flaring and going for the jugular. "But if you're sure that this is what you want, if you're hellbent on walking away from the best thing to ever happen to you, just give Laurel a call. She'll come running back to you in a fucking heartbeat. So good luck with that, boy-o."

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"Mrs. Queen?"

Moira Queen studies the precinct map for a few more tense seconds before raising her eyes to meet Felicity's. The matriarch's brief expression of surprise is quickly replaced with her practiced mask of pleasant ambivalence. Moira rises from her desk and steps forward to offer Felicity a kiss that lands inches away from Felicity's cheek.

So close, Felicity thinks.

"Why, Felicity," Moira greets her, flashing the trademark Queen megawatt smile, "How lovely to see you again."

Felicity, miles out of her comfort zone, returns the smile with one of her own, hoping to project the confidence she seriously needs in this moment.

"Mrs. Queen, I just wanted to stop by and thank you for the... for continuing my..." Felicity stammers to a halt.

Smoothing the skirt of her designer suit, Moira sits back at her mahogany desk while gesturing for Felicity to take a seat. "Actually, you've been on my mind, Felicity."

"And on your payroll, Mrs. Queen, where I no longer belong," Felicity adds as she settles in the leather armchair.

"I don't think that's true at all," Moira calmly asserts. "Your continuing worth to our corporation, and our family, is considerable."

Felicity wonders when Mrs. Queen last spoke with her son, but quickly decides she doesn't want to go down that steep, rocky road.

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Queen—"

"Please, Felicity, after everything we've shared, it's Moira."

There's a warmth and earnestness in the older woman's gray eyes that catches Felicity off guard, confusing her mission. She's come to Mrs. Queen's campaign office with a specific purpose, to say thanks, but no thanks. This is supposed to be a clean break from all reminders of and connections to Oliver.

"Mrs... Moira, it isn't that I'm not grateful, but it's not necessary for you to continue your support considering that I'm no longer... associated with..." Felicity falters, her lips trembling with emotion she had prayed wouldn't rise to the surface. "I'm sorry, um... now that I'm not in your employ."

There's genuine maternal sympathy in Moira's expression as she regards Felicity, seeing more than the younger woman wants to reveal.

"Felicity, my son... I know that he can be closed-off. That he sometimes hides his true feelings beneath a cool, polished veneer. I'm afraid he may have learned that from me. Which is why I understand it's his way of protecting himself," Moira explains with a rueful smile, "But I've never
seen Oliver as content or at peace as he is when he's with you. I think you truly care for my son and that makes you valuable in my eyes. It would be most regrettable if you gave up on Oliver.”

“Maybe you should speak with your son, Moira,” Felicity replies, calmer than before. “Since he’s the one who gave up on me.”

“Perhaps I will do exactly that,” Moira vows, in a firm voice backed with steel. “And, as to your stipend, it will stand as long as I’m living. Because you saved our family’s business from that horrid woman.”

Isabel signs the check with a flourish before handing the five-figure check to the muscle-bound behemoth whose girth strains the soundness of her office furniture.

"Just to be clear, Mr. Troy," Isabel says, pinning her hireling with a shrewd gaze. "You will receive a second payment once you produce proof of your employment within the mansion. There will be a final payoff with substantial bonus once the job is finished."

"Yes, Ms. Roberts," he answers, greedily folding the check with his meaty fingers and stuffing it in his pocket.

Pulling a packet of documents from her desk, Isabel hands it to her new employee, instructing, "Your employment records, resume', references and identity papers are enclosed here. I've backstopped your history so you should have no problem passing their security screening. I've given you a sterling reputation as a trustworthy bodyguard, Mr. Troy. Make certain you do nothing to tarnish it."

"No, ma'am," he politely obeys, oddly afraid of the tiny woman with the wicked glint in her strange, dark eyes. "I mean, I won't give 'em reason to doubt me."

"That's fine then," Isabel concludes, ready to be done with this bit of business.

"If you don't mind, Miss—"

"It's Mrs.," Isabel insists starchily, flashing the diamond solitaire resting on her left hand. It was the last gift Robert gave her before his death.

"Um sorry, Mrs. Roberts. About the injection, when might that happen?" he asks, barely masking his anticipation.

"Not yet," she snaps. "I will choose the time of your immortality. And then, you will be eminently grateful."

"Oh, yes ma'am, yes ma'am," he agrees, immediately chastened by the glimpse of her anger. "Intimately grateful."

Isabel narrows her eyes at his stupidity, wondering again if this overgrown lout can be trusted as her inside man.

"Here," Isabel barks, slapping a cell phone in his enormous hand. "This is how we will stay in touch. My number has been keyed in. Do not ring me unless the reason is valid. If you fail to answer a single call from me, our deal is forfeit, as is your life. And, you are never to come here again. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he blusters, backing toward the door in his rush to escape her malevolent presence,
fairly certain he's just sold his miserable soul to the devil.

The blade of China White's Karambit knife bites into and lodges in the flesh of Oliver's calf as he fires a succession of arrows chasing the Asian assassin as she vaults into the cab of the stolen pharmaceutical truck.

The Arrow is torn whether to follow China, but Diggle's grunt of pain pulls Oliver in the opposite direction to backup his partner who's engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the Bronze Tiger, the latest addition to the Chinese Triad. With his deadly titanium claws, the Tiger snaps the flurry of airborne arrow shafts in half.

China whistles sharply, summoning her partner, who retreats from his challengers to join her in the cab of the hijacked truck. The heavy engine throbs to life and lurches forward with the Arrow leaping onto the cargo bumper.

The sound of police sirens splits the dark isolation of the alley.

"Frack!" Felicity curses on her com with Sara. "Who called in SCPD on this?"

"That would be Laurel," Sara sighs in frustration. "She's declared all-out war on The Arrow."

"What?!?" Felicity sputters in disbelief. "Well, we've got to get the guys out of there."

Sara clicks on her link to Oliver, saying, "Ollie—"

"Arrow!" Felicity and Oliver shout simultaneously in each of Sara's separate earbuds.

"Arrow," Sara repeats with exasperation, "You gotta fall back."

"But I'm right on top of them," Oliver shouts from his precarious perch atop the truckload, ready to pounce.

"Those sirens are coming for you, Ol— um, Arrow. It seems you're back on top of SCPD's most wanted list again."

Oliver unleashes a torrent of cuss words, but angrily returns to the back of the truck, no small feat considering China's wicked whipsaw of the speeding vehicle as she tries to throw him off the roof. He manages to drop to the bumper and fires a steel cable to an overhead roofline, swinging up and away from the flashing lights below.

"But Laurel knows The Arrow's identity. I don't understand how she can turn on him now after he saved her," Felicity puzzles aloud as she hacks into FEMA's schedule of upcoming medical shipments to Starling City. "Especially with their history of... of..."

"Screwing like bunnies?" Sara helpfully suggests from Felicity's cozy kitchen, where she's preparing chicken Alfredo.

Felicity gags at the visual Sara has inspired, regretting she's brought up a topic directly related to Oliver sexual past, but still... how the frack can Laurel be so petty and mean? Oliver may be a serial heartbreaker, but you can't send guys to Iron Heights Prison for that. Can you?
"Hell, yeah," Sara chimes in as she sets the table for three.

"Did I say that out loud?" Felicity wonders as Sara nods with a grin.

Gesturing with a serving spoon, Sara remarks, "Slade got Laurel's hopes up that Ollie still carried a torch for her. When she found out that wasn't the case, she kind of snapped. If Laurel can't have Ollie, then nobody can, even if that means putting him under arrest."

A knock at the apartment door interrupts their conversation, bouncing Felicity from her sofa, eager to greet their invited guest. She punches in the keypad's passcode, jerks the heavy door open and walks into John Diggle's open arms. He envelops her, tucking Felicity's blond head under his jaw and letting her linger in the refuge of his embrace. He says nothing of the damp spot she's leaving on his breast pocket, but pats her back reassuringly until she's regained her composure.

"Hey, Digg," Sara greets him with a friendly wave while pouring iced tea.

"Come in, John," Felicity urges as she reaches for his coat.

His sharp eyes take in the new high-tech security system, earning a low whistle. "Wow, this is top of the line hardware, girl. This place is wired like Fort Knox."

"Yeah, no boogey man... or woman... is gettin' in here. Unless I let them in. Which I've been known to do," Felicity confesses with a guilty giggle.

"Maybe you should buy frozen pizza from now on," Diggle jokes, following Felicity and the delicious aromas into the kitchen, where Sara's putting finishing touches on a spinach salad.

"Frozen? Forget that! I make a mean pizza dough too," Sara brags with a flirty wink. "I spent some time in Tuscany."

"Thank goodness!" Felicity says with a beaming smile, "I got so spoiled to having real home-cooked food when—"

She stops cold, slamming her eyes shut in horror as she's babbled her way into the one forbidden six foot two topic she's determined to avoid. "Sorry, so sorry," Felicity sighs in embarrassment, feeling the flush rise to her hairline.

Fanning her heated face, Felicity opens her eyes to the sympathetic expressions of her friends, who thankfully steer the conversation to non-Oliver subjects. Although it's tricky business, considering the central role he plays in all their lives, their shared mission and overlapping friendships.

Felicity may not be be ready to talk about her break with Oliver, but she realizes it's important to include Digg in her plan to continue providing online intel support with Sara's help.

"Are you sure, Felicity?" John asks, his warm brown eyes searching hers. "You know you'll be keeping another secret from him."

For a moment, Felicity doubts herself. Digg is right. This is the same rationale that led to the implosion of her love life. She betrayed Oliver by independently using her tech skills behind his back. She wrestles with the spectre John has raised, but simply cannot abandon the responsibility she feels to the team. To Oliver.

Lifting her tear-filled eyes to answer her concerned friends, Felicity whispers, "I have to keep him safe."
He's come to hate the midnight hours. Oliver pushes himself past exhaustion, keeping a killing pace now that China White and the Triad have resurfaced. But even mercenaries—and the vigilantes on their trail—eventually have to surrender to sleep.

When Oliver's body finally betrays him, and the basic need for rest can no longer be denied, his wretched soul seeks her out, drawn with unerring accuracy by the pain binding both their hearts. Felicity is suffering, shattered by his cruel words, his chilling disdain. Unlike their previous spiritual connections, there's a break between them, a divide he cannot fully cross. He sees her from afar as if separated by a gossamer veil, but her emotions bleed through, leaving Oliver tortured by her stress and the part he played in hurting his soul mate.

His bed is cold without her warmth pressing into his empty places, breathing his sighs, matching his raw strength with her own velvet will. Felicity's absence from all the claims she has staked on Oliver's life has left an aching, bleeding wound in him. He struggles to fill the hollow hours—to forget the lilt of her voice and her fragile beauty—to escape the pain of her desertion. The part he played in causing this shared grief is a twisting dagger in his broken heart.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Felicity buries her broken heart in cyber work while secretly backing up Team Arrow. More bodies fall to the unholy sisterhood of Isabel and China White. Oliver makes a discovery while unconscious. Felicity tracks Isabel on the Dark Web and makes a decision about her future with The Arrow.

Chapter Notes

This is the first time I've felt a need for a beta to tell me if this chapter makes sense, so I'm really relying on my faithful readers for feedback. Most of Chapter 25 belongs to Felicity as she struggles with her break with Oliver and her continuing dedication to his mission. But circumstances and new information help her come to a decision. I pinky-promise that Oliver and Felicity will have direct communication in the next update and I appreciate your patience during their time of separation.

Chapter 26 is partly written, so hopefully there will not be too long of a delay in completing it! Thank you for your continuing interest and encouragement of this story!

Felicity's hands go limp on her keyboard, triggering an annoying beep, her screen asking if she wants to reconfigure her data entry settings. She jerks awake, realizing she's literally fallen asleep at the computer while working on her latest cyber security job. Chronic work eats the empty hours, to keep her from dwelling on the Oliver-sized hole in her heart.

Felicity doesn't want to be that girl, the one who wallows in self-pity over a breakup. It isn't as if she can't live without a man in her life. Having grown up without a father figure, she's quite capable of and accustomed to making it on her own. But she can't seem to recover from this loss, this hurt, this emptiness.

Part of her yearns to leave Starling City, to burn every bridge, road and line that leads back to him. Even thinking his name is another little nick in her heart. Felicity's bleeding to death, hemorrhaging inside from a thousand tiny cuts. It's made worse by guilt for the direct role she played in their breakup. Felicity can't avoid the painful truth that she sabotaged their love story, betrayed the trust of the only man she's ever recognized as her soulmate. It is only his dependence on her skills that keeps Felicity here, holds her in place as his unseen protector.

Her nights are familiar in a haunting way, her fingers and mind racing to stay a step ahead of the threats constantly endangering her team. Felicity continually frets over the crucial seconds it takes to pass intel through Sara to the guys in the field. One night, Felicity isn't fast enough.

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"And you're certain the bodies won't be found?"
Chien Na Wei drills Isabel Rochev with a death stare, daring her to further question the platinum-haired assassin's thoroughness. They make a deadly pair with contrasting looks but at the core, they're chilling mercenaries, an unholy sisterhood of cold-blooded killers.

"If you wish to pay your respects, they are laid under the concrete foundation of the new Hyatt tower being built downtown," Chien says, her sarcasm thick as honey.

"May they rest in peace," Isabel adds, a wicked smile twisting her features.

"They rest in pieces," Chien corrects her. "Aren't you concerned that The Queen will be suspicious at the disappearance of four of her security guards?"

"But her guards haven't disappeared," Isabel replies in mock innocence. "As a matter of fact, these talented gentlemen were head hunted by Bruce Wayne whose generous offer of employment was simply too tempting to turn down. Their letters of resignation should be delivered by courier to the mayoral candidate's office today."

A gleam of admiration sparks in Chien's obsidian eyes. "We should work together again. Our partnership could be quite... profitable."

"For now, just keep The Arrow busy and out of my way," Isabel orders crisply.

"It will be my pleasure."

Felicity huffs in exasperation as she checks the status of the facial recognition app that has been running non-stop for days, searching for the Isabitch. Felicity's intuition tells her that Isabel hasn't given up just because Slade's been captured. If anything, Ms. Rochev probably poses a larger threat as a rogue operative now that she's wearing her Mirakuru cuckoo-pants. Remembering how psychotic Slade became from an up-close view, Felicity can only imagine how the virus will interact with Isabel's obsessive craving for revenge against the Queen family.

Although she doesn't need the extra paycheck due to Moira's largesse, Felicity overbooks her hours with freelance IT jobs, most of them without ever having to leave her apartment. Her latest contract is with Starling City's largest bank, First Financial, which has been under cyber attack for the past three days. It hasn't been much of a challenge for Felicity to keep the bank's data secure, but she's bothered by the relentless nature of the hackers, and the fact that the Queens are the majority shareholders in First Financial. Is it a coincidence? Or is this Isabel resurfacing, making another run at destabilizing the Queen fortune?

That possibility points Felicity back where this all began, when she was investigating Isabel's early illicit activities as Slade's spy and corporate raider. On a whim, she quickly retraces her research into Slade's finances, revisiting the funds owned by the Gulong corporation. What she discovers is eye-opening. It's as if someone has stuck a pin in Slade's investments, deflating them like a leaky balloon. Where did all the money go? And, more intriguingly, whose greedy little hands made off with the cash?

Maybe the way to find Isabel is Deep Throat 101: Follow the money.

"Okay, I've looped old GPS data to SCPD. That should slow the police down," Felicity informs Sara over her earphone before returning to her hunt for the Chinese Triad's gang. A FEMA truck loaded
with medicines, including highly-prized narcotics, is expected in Starling City tonight and poses an irresistible target for China White. Felicity has already funneled the truck's scheduled route through Sara to Oliver and Digg, who are tailing the lumbering cargo rig.

"How'd you get in so fast?" Sara asks in amazement through her headset.

Oliver, puzzled by Sara's question over his earbud, answers, "Still enroute, Canary."

"Wrong com," Felicity reminds Sara as her fingers fly over the keyboard.

Sara kills her connection to Oliver and Digg. "This is so much harder than it looks."

"Tell me about it," Felicity quips. "But in all fairness, I'm usually not carrying on with another person at the same time." She cringes as she hears her unfortunate double entendre.

Smirking, Sara remarks, "You'd think I'd be better at it then, considering my history."

Felicity hacks into the camera feed on the roof of a building in the warehouse district, giving her a view of the lightning-fast vigilante throwdown in the midst of a rainstorm. Oliver wields his bow as a melee weapon against the flying kicks and punches of three skilled martial arts fighters while Digg has his hands full on the street below, handling another gang of Triad members.

"I've got movement from the north roofline, moving hard and fast," Felicity warns Sara over a static-filled connection.

"Say again, Overwatch," Sara asks, spurring Felicity to talk faster.

"There's a bogey advancing at The Arrow's back. Watch his six!" Felicity insists. She hears Sara's voice, repeating the alert to their guys in harm's way. But the approaching figure on her screen descends on Oliver just before the frantic words reach him. Her warning has dropped all too late.

The Bronze Tiger's talons rip the Arrow's back, piercing leather and skin, while the Triad closes in. The vicious attack drags Felicity's heart into her throat. Oliver's on the defensive, being pushed ever closer to the roof's edge. All Felicity can do is have Sara message Digg, relaying Oliver's plight to his partner, who is wrapping up his own violent skirmish.

No one is where they're needed when Oliver falls twenty feet to the street below. Diggle and the Black Canary should be fighting at his side. And Felicity should be in his ear, protecting all of them from the bastards who've overwhelmed them. A dysfunctional Team Arrow has failed him.

Spartan's thundering arrival with guns blazing spooks Oliver's attackers, who scatter like rats, disappearing into the obscure alleyways. Oliver is face-down on the damp asphalt, his face hidden by his hood with one leather sleeve shredded by the Tiger's claws. The minutes drag by, eternal, as Felicity watches his prone form. He lies in the falling rain, still as death.

Oliver moves through muted darkness, barely aware of the fleeting landmarks and structures below him. He's in the place of shadows, a moorless traveler between life and death, wandering the hinterlands of his psyche. He's been here before, too many times in recent years.

His destination is inevitable—her. Felicity. But Oliver is unsure he can find her, afraid he will meander in twilight, lost forever to a place without time or meaning or love.
Finally, he senses her nearness before he sees her. She's chilled by fear, her heartbeat stuttering and fast. Tears trace Felicity's gaunt face, her voice anguished as she speaks on a headset. Oliver is stunned by the image holding her attention on the open laptop: The Arrow felled and unconscious in a dimly-lit alleyway with Digg leaning over his motionless body.

"Is he... Digg? Digg, please talk to me?" Felicity cries, trembling as she waits, powerless and feeling far removed from where she belongs.

*It's my fault. All my fault. His life was in my hands and I wasn't there for him.*

"Felicity."

Digg's voice in her ear interrupts Felicity's mantra of guilt.

"He's alive, Felicity," John reassures her. "He's got a pulse."

The figure on her screen moves slightly and she overhears his moan through Digg's earpiece.

Felicity's head drops into her hands and a deep sob of relief escapes her.

"He's coming around," Diggle reports as he carefully rolls Oliver onto his back, checking for wounds. "He's going to need stitches, but I don't think anything's broken."

A tremulous smile crosses Felicity's lips as she raises her eyes, captivated, as Oliver grips Diggle's wrist. In his unmistakable voice, he gasps, "Tell her. Tell Felicity... I'm okay."

Oliver awakens in his bed in the mansion. She's silhouetted in the window, the moonlight outlining her fair hair with a silver halo.

"Felicity?" he calls softly, trying to lift his head from the pillow, but it's held in place by a stiff cervical collar restricting movement of his neck.

The voice that answers is familiar, tinged with sadness. "No, darling. It's me."

Moira Queen moves gracefully to his bedside, her features touched by the light of a small Tiffany lamp. Even in the darkest hours of night, her face stripped of makeup, his mother is a beautiful woman.

"Mom, why are you here?" Oliver rasps, groggy and hurting.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she replies, "When my son suffers a concussion and needs fifty stitches, you can guarantee I'll be wherever you are."

Moira bends to kiss his forehead, calmed by the warmth of his skin against her lips. She'd been terrified hours earlier when Mr. Diggle had dragged him in, both of them covered in blood and bruises.

"I'm okay, Mom," he assures her, his fingers already searching for the Velcro straps securing the neck collar.

"Oliver," Moira fusses, trying to still his hand with her own, although he's having none of it. "You really shouldn't..." But the collar is off and flung to the foot of the bed before she can finish her
motherly reproach.

"Is Diggle all right?" Oliver asks, gingerly lifting his arm to inspect the lengths of gauze covering his wounds from shoulder to wrist.

"Well, he looked pretty banged up," Moira comments dryly, "But he stayed to stitch you up before he went home."

Oliver attempts to sit up, shoving the luxurious duvet aside.

"Oh no, Oliver Jonas Queen," Moira commands in her sternest voice, standing over him with arms crossed. "Mr. Diggle says you likely have a concussion. So you're going nowhere tonight."

"Mom," Oliver grumbles in protest, although necessity halts his movement because the bed is spinning and the likelihood of barfing is suddenly becoming a real possibility.

"Oliver, don't you dare throw up on my good linens," Moira lectures him, a distinct reminder from his adolescence. But in the end, his aching skull and nausea conquer his determination to shake this off and get back on his feet.

Happier after her slight victory, Moira smooths the covers over him, promising, "Whatever you need, Oliver, I will get for you."

"It's not what," he sighs, his eyes settling on hers. "It's who."

The notion of sleep is a wishful fantasy at this point. At 3:00 a.m., Felicity abandons her bed, accepting the reality that her brain activity is too manic to allow her weary body any rest. Digg had texted her after patching up Oliver, assuring her he was okay, but the sight of The Arrow lying unconscious on wet pavement is burned into her retina, rebuking her for the selfish idea that she could ever leave him, even if they can't be lovers.

The Arrow needs her regardless of whether Oliver does. In the morning, the morning that involves sunshine, Felicity's going to tell him exactly that.

After brewing a cup of tea, Felicity resumes her hunt for Slade's stolen assets, tracking them to an offshore account. From there, the trail descends to the Dark Web, which is murkier, but not invisible to a hacker of her caliber. Felicity hits paydirt when she unearths a number of illegal transactions for weapons, including guns, ammunition, grenades, flamethrowers, cordite, fuses and C-4 explosives.

"Holy frack," Felicity exclaims, her voice echoing in her kitchen. "Izzy's all grown up and going to war."

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Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Isabel lines up her targets but is haunted by the past. Moira smothers Oliver with attention and makes certain that Felicity returns to him. Oliver reminds Felicity of the first promise he made to her.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the beginning of Oliver's and Felicity's return to each other. Not all of their relationship issues are addressed in this update, but they will be before story's end.

Thank you for sharing your belief in this story and for trusting me to tell it in my way and in my time. I hope you enjoy the update!

"It's a red mini-Cooper. That's what I said mini-Cooper. Looks like a hearse for clowns," Isabel emphasized, pacing at an agitated clip while giving instructions on her phone. "She lives in a condo but it's jacked like a max shack so I need you to rig the car. That's the right address. Yeah, tomorrow. Make it happen."

Isabel ends the call. She should be euphoric at how well the pieces are falling into place. Her gear and weapons are in the hands of her skeleton squad. After watching Slade lose control of his Mirakuru soldiers, Isabel's decided to only rely on a few fighters plus the "security" staff she embedded inside the Queen mansion.

Her scheme is to strike after dark when the household will be asleep. China has informed her that Oliver is recovering from a violent battle with The Triad so she's not particularly worried about serious interference from The Arrow.

With the pain-in-her-ass Ms. Smoak's fate sealed, Isabel wants to savor the impending downfall of the imperious House of Queen. Isabel craves the sight of a desperate Moira begging for the life of her beautiful boy, to witness the matriarch's cracking facade of untouchable perfection.

But Isabel's oddly afraid, haunted by her past when she placed blind belief in Robert, swallowing his promises that he would leave his spoiled wife and kids for her. That he would make her a Queen, make her his queen. Her fairytale ending had disintegrated like a castle of ashes in the wind because he never loved her enough.

Is her dream of bloody revenge as doomed as the rest of her history with this accursed clan? Can she actually bring them down, turning their elegant mansion into their crumbling tomb?

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Felicity celebrates with a tiny happy dance when she receives Caitlyn's text message that S.T.A.R. Labs has successfully replicated the Mirakuru antidote. A fresh batch of the cure is on its way to
Starling City by special courier. Trying to prepare for all of Isabel's possible tricks, Felicity hopes to arm the team with a new supply of the serum in order to strip the super bitch of her freakish powers.

Gathering her bag and car keys, Felicity feels as ready for her conversation with Oliver as she will ever be. She recites for the umpteenth time, saying, "Oliver Queen can live without me, but The Arrow cannot."

Keying in the code on her security system, Felicity opens her front door and descends the stairs. Before she exits the building, her phone chirps, signaling a call from—shut the front door—Moira Queen.

After a brief hesitation, she accepts the call, mainly out of naked curiosity.

"Ms. Smoak?" Moira says politely. "Have I caught you at a convenient time?"

"Sure! Or is it surely? I'm never sure," Felicity babbles, rolling her eyes at herself. "Actually, I'm planning to drop by the mansion in awhile, if that's okay?"

"Actually, it's perfect," Moira exults. "Oliver's been asking for you."

"Oliver's been...." Felicity repeats, thrown off course by this news that makes her heart clench.

"Asking for you," Moira confirms. "I've sent a car."

Felicity scrambles to peek out the condo foyer window to see the Queen's Bentley parked at the curb, the chauffeur standing patiently by the passenger side.

Felicity tries to resist, saying, "But, I can just zip over in my—"

"Nonsense," Moira purrs, "We look forward to seeing you."

"But...." Felicity blurs before realizing Moira has disconnected and gone on to mastermind her next global coups.

"Okay, then great!" Felicity mutters as she schleps to the curb, gives a limp wave to her driver and crawls into the cavernous backseat.

"Oliver Queen can live without me, but The Arrow cannot."

Moira stays at Oliver's bedside, waking him through the night to make certain that he's sleeping and not slipping into a coma. He frightens her toward dawn, when she has trouble rousing him, but he finally mumbles, "I'm okay, Mom. Just sleepy."

By mid-morning, Oliver rejoins the land of the living, waking clear-eyed and ready to move. Moira brings him sweats and a short-sleeved tee shirt to fit over his bandaged arm. Raisa prepares a light breakfast on a tray for him, but he can't muster an appetite not even to appease his concerned caregivers.

"Oliver, I've sent a car for Felicity," Moira informs him while he drinks juice under Raisa's watchful eye.

"Mom, she's not a package at the bus station!" Oliver protests, astounded by her presumption.

"Don't be ridiculous. She was fine with it," she insists, adding, "As a matter of fact, she was already
planning to stop by."

At that revelation, Oliver sets the tray aside and stands, only a little wobbly.

"And where do you imagine you're going?" Moira challenges, blocking his path to the door. A frowning Raisa acts as her second lieutenant.

"I'm not meeting Felicity in my bedroom, Mom," Oliver declares resolutely.

"She'll understand, darling," Moira pleads, laying a hand on his good arm. "Felicity knows you're injured."

"No, Mom. This is not a... a neutral space for either of us. And she needs that now," he explains, struggling to be patient although he’s got no intentions of backing down.

Fortunately, John Diggle appears at that moment in the spacious hallway outside Oliver's room. "Thank God," Oliver mutters.

Raisa frets and Moira flutters as Digg changes Oliver's bandages before helping him manage the stairs and the long walk to the Arrow annex in the basement. By the time he reaches his work bench, Oliver's a light shade of green and grateful he has nothing much to lose in his stomach. Digg presses a cold rag into his hand, which Oliver drapes over the back of his neck.

"You okay, man?" Digg asks.

"Just a bitch of a headache," Oliver answers, closing his eyes as his thudding pulse pounds a spike behind them.

"Here," Digg drops two ibuprofen tablets into his hand along with a bottle of water. "Try to keep this down."

"Felicity's coming back," Oliver says, looking to his partner for a reaction.

"Yeah? I heard something about that," Digg admits with a tight smile. "Don't screw it up."

Oliver flinches at the very real possibility that he’s entirely capable of messing up this reunion. He watches as Digg slings on his suit jacket and asks, "You leaving?"

"Yeah, I'm pitch hitting as security for your mom. She has a lunch appearance scheduled at the botanical gardens downtown," Digg volunteers. "Mrs. Queen is having some staffing issues."

Oliver frowns as he processes this information, making a mental note to check on this situation.

“Take care of yourself, Oliver,” Digg says as he hits the stairs. “And tell Felicity hello for me!”

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The Bentley driver pulls around to the garage behind the mansion, the same entry point for Vigilante Central. Is Moira lurking in the Arrow annex or will this be a solo encounter with Himself?

Felicity's question is quickly answered when she reaches the Annex, where Oliver’s perched on a stool at his bench, although he looks like he just escaped from Starling General. Her resolve to be professional and detached is tested when Felicity sees him pale and weakened, his entire left arm sheathed in bandages. Too many wounds. Too many scars.

“Hey,” Felicity greets him, her voice as uncertain as her smile.
“Hey.”

They’re surrounded by the familiar equipment of vigilante life, however it’s impossible to feel normal, now that they’re estranged. So she forces herself to retreat to her customary space in the midst of her "babies" because technology is way less unpredictable than the quiet, not-to-be-underestimated man studying—and unnerving—her now.

“Are you okay?” she asks, resisting her natural inclination to go to him, to touch his cheek and reassure herself that he is.

“Yeah, there are too many women fussing over me,” he admits, but he immediately sees that his weak attempt at humor is misunderstood based on her hurt expression.

“Oh… that’s nice,” Felicity lamely comments, glancing away from him to examine her shoes.

“No, Felicity. I meant my mom and Raisa,” Oliver explains, adding, “They’re driving me crazy.”

“Oh, well either way, I’m glad you’re being cared for,” she says, keeping emotional distance, as if that’s a thing.

“Felicity…”

“I have something to say,” she announces, a little too loudly, but determined to stay on script. Felicity adjusts her volume before sharing the reason for her return, saying, “To explain why I came back.”

“Okay.”

She’d practiced this conversation in the mirror, on the drive here, imagining him as broody or cranky or straight-up hostile. But Felicity wasn't prepared for this Oliver. Because this guy with the eyes and the face and the freaking kindness, he's dangerous. And now he's giving her that adorable crinkled frown of concern. Frack...

“Oliver Queen can live without me, but The Arrow cannot,” she declares, feeling like a sixth grader repeating a memorized algorithm.

“Felicity… that makes no sense,” Oliver comments, although there’s no heat in his response. He’s just so damned grateful that this remarkable, beautiful woman has returned to where she belongs. “And you’re dead wrong about the first part.”

"Buh..." Felicity stammers, thrown by the calm affection in Oliver's countenance. "Um, as I was saying, I'm willing to continue my commitment to Team Arrow as the tech consultant and as overwatch when you're on a tactical mission," Felicity relates, just as she rehearsed, adding. "If you feel you still need me—"

"I'll always need you, Felicity," he assures her, his voice deep and slightly suggestive.

Oh, not fair.

"Whoa-o-o-kay," she responds, aware that a blush is rapidly flooding her cheeks. "Then we will just go back to the way it was when I was your Girl Friday or Wednesday or whatever day you want. And leave it at that."

Felicity whirls around, turning her back to Oliver and busying herself with her prodigious assortment of tech hardware.
"I don't think I can do that," he admits, quietly.

Felicity jerks her head up, ponytail bouncing, as she absorbs his reaction. He's rejecting my offer of help? He doesn't want me back with the team? Seriously??

She takes a moment to compose her expression, to paste a shallow smile on her face, before turning toward him yet keeping her eyes downcast as she reaches for her purse. Felicity can't meet his gaze, refusing to let him see the deep pain of his rejection. "Well then... I'll just gather my things."

"Felicity, God no, that's not what I meant," Oliver says, stepping towards her. Gently, he places both palms on her upper arms, imploring, "Please. Stay and talk with me?"

The warmth of his hands, hands she knows and trusts, on her cool skin threatens to melt her protective layers. Tentatively, Felicity lifts her questioning eyes to the answer waiting in his.

"This is where you belong, Felicity. Of course I want you back," Oliver vows. "But not like it used to be. I want... I need all of you back. With me."

"How, Oliver?" she whispers. "We screwed this up. Hurt each other. I don't know the way back."

His hands skim slowly down, past her elbows, her wrists, to her fingers which naturally twine with his. "You asked me once, if you could trust me."

Felicity remembers that late night at the diner, before she knew anything of hoods and arrows, of wounds and scars, heroes and madmen. It was the innocent time of before. Before Oliver touched her heart, when it slept unawares in her chest, waiting to be awakened by the man who would soon live there.

"I remember," Felicity murmurs.

"I promised you that night—"

"It was so long ago..." Felicity recalls, a little lost in the blue of his eyes, the low timbre of his voice, the touch of his skin on hers.

"I promised you could trust me," Oliver reminds her, stroking her knuckles with his thumbs. "You still can."

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Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Felicity and Oliver address more of their personal issues. Roy's timing needs work. A courier delivers a critical weapon from S.T.A.R. Labs. The wronged girl and Moira endure sleepless nights before a fateful meeting.

Chapter Notes

I've spent this week hammering out a new chapter instead of responding to all of your comments, so I apologize profusely for my tardiness and hope that you will think I made the right choice. Your comments mean so much to me and are a significant source of inspiration to my writing. I promise to respond thoughtfully to each and every review and beg your indulgence as I juggle my schedule of obligations.

Every night, while Moira Queen sleeps in her castle and her son clashes with the Chinese Triad in the dark city streets, Isabel Rochev and her men plant incendiary bombs and combustible fuel throughout the mansion’s hidden channels. Cheated of her right to ever live there, Isabel resolves that soon, no one will. The wronged girl will have her revenge by sacrificing the last of the Queens on a fiery funeral bier of her making.

In a stroke of good luck, Isabel's agents have been assigned to the uneventful night watch, when the manor is usually quiet and considered a secure fortress. Moira's few remaining bodyguards, the ones genuinely dedicated to her protection, are on duty through the day and at any events when "the queen bee is out of the hive."

If Moira had not been so distracted by her mayoral bid and worries about her beloved offspring, she might have been more present to detect the odd little thumps and creaks in her home, but the hundred-year old structure was vast and known to have its peculiar noises. Every day on the campaign circuit was long and demanding. Although exhilarated by the challenges of public life, most evenings found Moira exhausted and craving sleep.

On a good night, Moira slept soundly and awoke the next morning ready to tackle a full agenda of speeches and strategy sessions while attending to campaign details. But her rest was often interrupted by disturbing nightmares where her son or Thea were endangered by dark, faceless enemies that she was powerless to stop.

On those long, miserable nights, Moira understood the meaning of the adage, “ignorance was bliss.” Her peace of mind was shattered by a piercing awareness that Oliver was in peril every time he wore the hood. And her willful daughter had chosen to abandon her home, estranged from family and committed to an unknown future with her wretched father, Malcolm Merlyn.

Despite her initial instincts, Moira had come to recognize a lifeline in Felicity Smoak. Most of the pretty girls who orbited her son were attracted by his wealth and prominence. But Miss Smoak's honest devotion had amazed her as had Oliver's obvious affection for the resourceful Felicity. Moira
had never seen him so affected by a romantic conquest. But for Moira, the critical worth of the intelligent blonde at his side was this simple realization—Felicity was her best chance at keeping her son alive.

"You should have told me."

"Which time?" Felicity murmurs, her forehead crinkling in a slight frown. Which secret? Is Oliver asking about her baiting Slade or continuing to stealthily provide overwatch?

"Both actually," Oliver answers wryly. "But more recently, you didn't have to pretend it was Sara helping us."

"How did you find out it was me?" she wonders aloud, still surprised that he discovered her covert role so quickly.

Oliver answers her question with a pointed blue contemplation and waits for her to come to the obvious conclusion.

"Oh, of course," she mutters in exasperation while waving him off. "You tuned in your private Felicity channel."

"You could have just come back, Felicity," Oliver calmly reiterates.

"Could I, Oliver?" Felicity reacts, her voice rising along with her temper. "After what you said to me? After you walked out on me?"

"I... I regret that. I should have stayed and talked it out," he admits, his steady gaze never leaving hers. "Hell, Felicity, I should have stayed and fought with you. Fought for you."

"Oliver, you called me an actress," Felicity reminds him, letting him hear the hurt his acidic accusations caused. "You questioned whether my feelings for you were real. You insinuated that I pretended... to care about you."

"Felicity, you know I didn't mean those things I said," he protests, shaking his head at the memory of their earlier bitter fight. "I was just so rocked that Slade was watching us. In our private moments. And that it was you who invited him in."

Felicity cringes at the truth of his words, accepting the distrust she introduced to their budding romance.

"I know, Oliver. If I could change the past, I would," Felicity earnestly says, her emotions leveling. "I should have told you about my plan to draw Slade out. I was wrong to not discuss it with you. But I need you to honor the reason I made that choice. I did it for Laurel. And I did it for you, so that you wouldn't have to endure the loss of another person you love."

Oliver's half-stunned by her statement. Shame washes over him. "You're right. I should have known that."

"Really?" Felicity asks, her eye widening in surprise.

"I know you feel responsible for each of us in every crisis we face," he explains. "I should have remembered that you put yourself in harm's way for the sake of others because I know you, Felicity. I know your heart."
"Oh..." she sighs, her indignation blown away by his sweet, earnest admission.

"It seems we have a problem with secrets," Oliver observes, mindful of the irony as the words leave his mouth.

Felicity snorts in mock astonishment, "Geez, you think? Oliver, you're a freaking black hole of secrets."

*You want to live with my secrets?* Oliver's eyes lose focus as he looks beyond her, lost in the shadowy void of his past, of torture and death, hearing the screams, his own and those he caused.

Felicity brings him back to her by softly calling his name, "Oliver?"

Ducking his head for a cleansing breath, he confesses, "Felicity, my secrets are... unbearable. To know and to hear."

She wars between a compulsion to run to him, or maybe from, his repressed suffering. Felicity honestly can't imagine the acts that have scarred his body, as well as his psyche. If she's honest with herself, Felicity wonders how she might cope if Oliver unburdened himself and shared the horrors of those five lost years. *Is she better off not knowing?*

His voice pulls her from her reverie.

"Felicity, I'll *try* to be more open with you about my past. But I need you to know this—you can tell me *anything,*" Oliver promises, closing the distance between them, but allowing her to keep a boundary of personal space. "That's not to say I'll agree with every idea, especially if I think your safety is on the line."

"Says the man who risks his life every night while I helplessly watch," she implores, her eyes shining with fresh tears. "You think it's easy for me to see you hurt? To see you lying unconscious in the street, not knowing if you're dead or alive? You think I can just get on with my life if you're not a part of it?"

"Felicity..."

"It cuts both ways, Oliver." Felicity bluntly reminds him.

"I can't change how I feel, Felicity," he sighs, his eyes closing at the agonizing memory of nearly losing her to Isabel. To Slade. "Those days and nights when you were missing... they nearly destroyed me. I just can't go through that again."

Felicity pauses to absorb his confession, believing the raw emotion and pain in his words, but not abandoning her stance.

"Then don't let your compulsion to protect me push me away, Oliver. I need you to understand that you don't have the right to tell me what I'm allowed to risk in this crazy life we've chosen. And it is *my* choice. To be part of this," she quietly asserts, her hand reaching for his, pleading, "I know you will do everything to protect me because I'm committed to do the same for you. But each of us needs to bring our different strengths to the fight. To protect *us,* to defend *both* our lives, so we can come home to each other every night."

"Felicity, do you still want to come home to me?" Oliver asks quietly, his eyes searching her face as he releases her fingers to gently caress her cheek.

The awkward clearing of a throat disrupts their conversation, causing Felicity and Oliver to separate.
and see a clearly-embarrassed Roy standing in the Annex doorway.

"Um, sorry. I can come back," Roy offers, shuffling his feet and unable to make direct eye contact.

The expression on Oliver's glowering face is positively murderous, giving Roy a valid reason to flee, but Felicity flashes him a sweet grin that convinces him his intrusion may be forgiven.

Felicity's phone chimes, further breaking the mood and diverting their attention from personal ones to the over-arching mission at hand. She reads the text and pumps her small fist with glee.

"Good news?" Roy timidly asks as he edges into the room, avoiding Oliver, who is silently tracing the head of a lethal-looking arrow he's picked up.

"Excellent news!" she happily reports. "But first, full disclosure," Felicity adds with a pointed glance at Oliver, "Isabel is buying up an arsenal of explosives and weapons. That's so definitely not the good news because I've no idea what or where she's targeting. Anyway, I've asked S.T.A.R. Labs to replicate another batch of Mirakuru antidote. A courier is headed to my place now with more vials of the serum. And... That's. Good. News."

"They could deliver it here," Oliver suggests. "Then you could stay. And brainstorm."

"Is that what you two call it?" Roy quips, immediately regretting it when each of them raises an insulted eyebrow in his direction.

"I need to go anyway," Felicity says, grabbing her purse. "I have a conference call with a client scheduled at three."

"Oh, okay," Oliver responds, replacing the arrow in its assigned slot in the weapons rack. "I can give you a ride."

With a light shake of her head, Felicity announces, "Nope! That's the last thing you need to do." She gives his shoulder a consoling pat and adds, "Roy can give me a lift while you get some rest. You look like a wreck."

But she takes the sting out of her remark by stretching up on tiptoe to press a soft kiss to his temple.

"And Oliver?"

"Hmm?" he answers, wishing Roy would conveniently disappear from the planet so he could return her sweet farewell kiss with a proper one.

"Promise me, you'll stay in tonight."

"Felicity, the Triad is dangerous—" Oliver protests with a growl.

"Yes, I know. I'm looking at fresh evidence of that fact," Felicity whispers, her hand lightly touching his heavily-bandaged arm. "But I'm sure Digg, Sara and Roy can handle China's thugs for one night. With my help on the coms."

"You'll come back?" Oliver asks, his hand wandering to her waist. Roy who?

"Isabel herself couldn't stop me."

The courier's van waits at the curb of Felicity's condominium when she and Roy arrive. She signs the delivery receipt and returns to Roy's car to check the contents of the sealed case, packed with two
dozen glass vials of serum. Felicity carefully removes three of the pre-loaded syringes and pockets them before securing the container and entrusting it with Roy.

"Roy, I need you to take the antidote to Oliver and help him load these syringes on arrows," she instructs as he gingerly sets the box in his floorboard.

"Okay, I'll take care of it after hittin' the paintball course," Roy answers.

Felicity throws him a shrewd glance but he can't maintain a serious expression. "Kidding!" he laughs. "Do you want me to walk you up?"

Rolling her eyes, Felicity says, "Not necessary. Oliver has this place secured like the Pentagon."

Roy pauses, then follows her toward the building, earning him a questioning look from Felicity.

Raising his hands up, he explains, "He's gonna ask if I made sure you got in safe and sound."

Felicity giggles at his wide-eyed fear of Oliver's wrath and adds, "Come on up. I've got a new stash of Jelly Bellies."

"I love you, Felicity Smoak," he exclaims happily. "But don't ever tell Oliver I said that."

Felicity completes her conference call, agreeing to investigate a cyber breach for Starling General. Besides promising a lucrative fee, the job of protecting individual health records is ethically appealing to Felicity. She's glad she made time for the independent business opportunity because it's rewarding and necessary work that benefits the community.

During a quick shower and wardrobe change, Felicity replays her conversation with Oliver. Although it hadn't gone as she'd expected, a vibrant glimmer of hope blossoms in her chest. They'd managed to touch on most of their hot button issues without the exchange becoming too explosive. He'd spoken from his heart, saying those things she'd thought were no longer possible between them.

It felt as if, in Oliver's eyes, she was still his girl. His girl. His girl.

With an optimistic bounce in her steps, Felicity gathers the gear she needs for a late evening providing overwatch from the Arrow Annex. The last item she snags are her car keys.

Adrenaline floods Isabel's veins with burning anticipation as she snakes through the winding tunnel beneath the Queen residence. A nocturnal creature, she's made this journey through the shadows every night for weeks, bearing the means of her target's destruction. In her bones, she's certain this is her final time to set foot in this abhorrent place, the beloved home of Moira and Oliver Queen. Just as it will be theirs.

As she climbs through the hidden paneled door, Isabel is startled to discover the bedroom is awash in lamplight. The unused boudoir should be dark, as always. But this night is different.

Moira Queen coolly observes her intruder from a high-backed Edwardian armchair, where she sits with regal posture. Except for the .38 pistol aimed at Isabel's poisoned heart.

"Good evening, Ms. Rochev. I've been expecting you."
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Hellzapoppin on all fronts as Isabel unleashes her wrath on the Queens. Felicity needs a ride. A mystery warrior rises.

Chapter Notes

This chapter practically wrote itself -- I love it when that happens! I couldn't continue this effort without the support of faithful readers (you know who you are) so kudos to each of you for keeping me writing. Hope you all enjoy this action-packed update!

Moira didn't know why the realization, waiting patiently in an obscure corner of her subconscious, had jumped to the forefront of her mind when she'd awakened that morning. Maybe it was jarred loose by Robert, who'd haunted her dreams just before sunrise. But the solution to a weeks-long quandary had crystallized for her, answering the question of who could have entered the mansion without detection.

Isabel.

Ten years had passed since Moira had caught her husband in bed with the young Russian temptress, who had made the mistake of leaving the hidden panel opened, revealing a secret tunnel designed for trysts just like the one she'd stumbled upon. Robert had brought his mistress into their home—her home—in a glaring breach of trust that Moira could never forgive. He'd broken it off with Isabel soon after, for the sake of their children and social standing. Robert had even sworn to Moira that he'd had the tunnel sealed.

Another lie in a long chain of deceit. Another classic sham by a serial cheater. How very tawdry and tiring and sad it was to remember. But her painful past had yielded the answer she needed: Who had invaded their sanctuary to spy on her family? What ominous intruder had violated their privacy as part of Slade Wilson's scheme to destroy them.

It was Isabel. All along, the perpetrator of their nightmare was Isabel.

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Oliver and Roy had rigged arrows with antidote syringes relatively quickly and cautiously stowed them in racks with the team's other weapons in the mansion basement. By late afternoon, after Roy had left for supper, Oliver grudgingly admitted to himself that Felicity was right. He was in no condition to hit the streets tonight. His head was pounding and every movement pulled painfully at the myriad of stitches extending from his shoulder down his arm.

Oliver slowly made his way to his bedroom on the mansion's second floor, where Raisa met him with a tureen of chicken and dumplings, his favorite comfort food from childhood. He gamely ate half of the soup, mainly to please Raisa, before giving up and gratefully crawling under the covers,
where he immediately drifted to sleep.

An hour later, Oliver was dead to the world when Isabel's trio of Mirakuru soldiers swarmed his room.

"Moira..." Isabel gasps, her usual self-control blown by the armed and dangerous matriarch tracking her every move with sharp gray eyes and a .38 special.

"I would welcome you into my home," Moira purrs. "However, I don't believe you're invited."

Isabel's face twists in a bitter smile. "There was a time, Moira, when I had a standing invitation to visit this very room."

"It's been rescinded." Moira evenly states, making her point by cocking the pistol gripped in her hand.

"A gun, Moira?" Isabel laughs without mirth. "Maybe you haven't heard. I'm, shall we say, enhanced now. And really hard to kill."

"Ah, you mean the Mirakuru," Moira answers with a subtle nod. "I'm aware."

"Listen to you!" Isabel crows in mock admiration. "Moira Queen come down from her ivory tower and mixin' it up with the street rabble."

Moira gracefully rises and widens her stance, like a trained shooter, warning, "You may be stronger than I. And perhaps quicker. But, at this range, a jacketed hollowpoint can do a lot of abrupt damage to a lady's brain pan."

Isabel can't help the glimmer of admiration sparked by her longtime nemesis. No wonder Robert was afraid to leave his steely wife. Abandoned as in infant in a Russian orphanage, Isabel has no memories of the parents who gave her up. However, she feels a pang of regret that she never experienced the fierce devotion of a mother like Moira Queen.

"That would be a valid argument, Moira—"

"I prefer you call me Mrs. Queen," Moira remarks, fully aware that the younger woman once imagined the name would one day be hers.

"Thank you for reminding me why I'm here, Mrs. Queen," Isabel retorts, her words dripping with acid. "However, before you pull that trigger, I think you might be interested in the welfare of the others in your household. Particularly your son."

With careful, calculated motion, Isabel reaches for her phone and flicks it to open a series of photos, time-stamped within the last hour. With her screen raised for Moira's benefit, Isabel deliberately scrolls through images of longtime security men, unconscious —perhaps dead?—on the grounds. There's Raisa, wild-eyed and restrained in the kitchen pantry. And Oliver, battered and bleeding, held captive but glaring at the camera with menacing determination.

Moira blanches. Isabel has broken a chink in her resolve. With a sigh of resignation, Moira opens the chamber of her pistol, up-ends it and allows the bullets to fall harmlessly to the thick, silk rug at her feet.

Advancing confidently, Isabel says, "Why, thank you, Mrs. Queen. Now, let's join Oliver for a cozy
reunion, shall we?"

Felicity's phone pings with another security alert as she rapidly descends the stairs of her condo. When she checks the warnings, she's exasperated to see a stack of little red triangles on her screen.

"Oh, Freckles..." Felicity murmurs, noticing that the offending alerts have been backlogged for the past two days.

Seeing that all of the notifications have been triggered by video cameras in the parking garage, she's less concerned. Mrs. Baker, who lives in the adjoining condo, has a Calico cat named Freckles with a penchant for crawling under Felicity's mini Cooper to sleep beneath the hood.

Felicity pauses in the foyer to view the most recent motion-activated video. Sure enough, the garage video camera has captured Freckles scooting beneath the car's front tire only minutes before.

Great, Felicity thinks, now I've got to fish a kitten out from under the mini before I can meet the team across town. Fortunately, she's chosen to wear jeans, a leather jacket and flats since the weather is so dismal with thick layers of fog and drizzle rolling in from the bay. Perfect attire for a pet rescue on a cold garage floor.

Stepping outside, the chilly damp air slaps Felicity's face as an exploding fireball rips a hole in the world.

Oliver's fairly sure that some of his ribs are at least cracked, if not broken. He's lost most of the bandages on his arm, which is bleeding freely from the popped stitches. And he’s fucking tired of taking strikes to his bad knee. But he’d like to kick his own ass for leaving the Mirakuru antidote downstairs. Even at full strength, Oliver wouldn't have stood a chance against the jacked wall of thugs now dragging him through the mansion corridors.

Recognizing two of men’s faces, Oliver realizes that half of his mother's security detail are traitors, probably planted by Isabel herself. He recalls Digg's mention yesterday of "staffing issues," but all he'd found so far were letters from employees resigning for jobs with Wayne Enterprises in Gotham City. Bruce Wayne, the arrogant bastard, hadn't returned Oliver's phone call.

Why had Oliver assumed they were safe inside the mansion gates? Obviously, the house still had a hidden entrance, one that was familiar to a mortal enemy like Isabel. Oliver’s mind calculates the survival options open to the household. He fears that his mother and Raisa are at risk, along with the remaining loyal members of the security team. He's disoriented about the time of day and the heavy overcast skies have darkened the mansion windows all afternoon. But he's guessing it's near sundown. His team should be arriving to suit up within a couple of hours.

Can he keep his household alive until then?

Following the racing line of fire trucks, John Diggle grips the steering wheel of the heavy SUV with both hands as he speeds down the slick pavement. Felicity's brief text said she was okay, but the car bomb news has him rattled nevertheless. The flashing lights from the emergency vehicles reflect off the low-lying clouds, turning them to cotton candy shades of pink and blue.

When he brakes to a stop in the next block, Digg only has eyes for long blond hair. He sprints to the
scene, where the parking garage smoulders, an ugly black pit outlining the space that was occupied by Felicity's demolished mini Cooper. The car's axle has landed in the street, having been blown eighty yards through the air. An assortment of neighbors and curious onlookers wander the area.

Digg frantically scans the site, finally spotting Felicity, wrapped in a blanket and sitting on the tailgate of an ambulance. A paramedic is finishing up after applying a butterfly bandage to a cut on her forehead. When Digg reaches her, his hug completely envelopes her.

"I'm okay, John. I promise. I'm alright," she babbles into his broad chest, but there's a telling tremble in her voice.

"Jesus, Felicity," he declares, holding her tightly. "You're killing me, girl. You're nearly as danger-prone as he is."

"It's not my fault," Felicity protests, lifting her eyes to meet his. "He kind of asks for a fight with his pointy attitude."

Digg laughs at her valid description before asking, "How's your apartment? Any damage?"

"Don't think so," she answers, "But they won't let us back in until they've checked the gas lines."

"Let's get you out of the cold," he suggests, grasping her slender hand in his large warm one. "Do you need to hang around any longer?"


"Condolences?" Digg questions, uncertain what she's meaning.

"About Freckles," she sniffles sadly. "He was just a sweet innocent kitty. My car was innocent too."

Diggle comforts his soft-hearted friend with soft pats of her shoulder before pulling Felicity to his side, as they walk together toward his vehicle.

To distract her from the latest attack, Digg jokes, "You know, this may be the first time that Oliver is safe and sound at home while the rest of the team is in jeopardy."

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When she sees the dead bodies lying on the perimeter of the mansion, she immediately reverts to her martial arts training, which has lately become second nature. Staying close to the stone exterior, she stealthily circles the vast edifice to enter the back garages, punching in the security codes before invading Arrow's headquarters.

Stunned by the wide array of weapons and disguises, her strategy forms quickly. From her leather duffel, she extracts the all-black garb of a ninja warrior and pulls it on like a second skin. With an air of reverence, the fighter arms herself with her personal set of swords, throwing stars and knives. She covers her hair and lower face with a black scarf. With no idea what lethal force she may need to bring to bear, she shops from Oliver's arsenal of guns, bows and arrows. Having been briefed about Mirakuru and the cure, she adds the loaded syringes to the quiver at her back and into a blowgun from her supplies.

Like a phantom, she silently ascends the stairs to the main floor, relying on all five senses to scan the mansion’s familiar kitchen area. A slight scuffing noise draws her to the pantry. Wielding a ninjaken sword, she quietly opens the vented door to find Raisa, lying zip-tied on the tiled floor. With nimble fingers, the ninja frees the older woman and helps her stand, supporting her until she's steady on her
feet.

Raisa studies the mysterious warrior who has proven her deliverer.

"Leave the house. Run!" the ninja harshly orders, but Raisa gives a winsome smile of recognition before she flees the manor.

The tiny woman in black eases along the banister of the grand staircase, noiselessly climbing to the upper landing, listening and watching for any hint of motion. She detects muffled voices at the far end of the east wing as she slinks through the shadows in search of prey.

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"Slade prolonged his vendettas by regaling his victims with speeches," Isabel says impatiently, checking the time. "But we're on a bit of a schedule here so I'll make this quick."

She paces at the library's hearth before Moira and Oliver, both forced to their knees with their hands tied at their backs. Isabel's three soldiers stand guard behind them.

"I came back to Starling City for one reason," Isabel declares, hatred twisting her delicate features. "To bring down the House of Queen. And although the plan has not played out exactly as planned, here we are. With you at my mercy. And spoiler alert: I've got none to give."

Isabel draws a pistol from the back of her belt, steps toward Oliver and presses the muzzle to his forehead. "Say goodbye to mommy," she whispers.

"No!" Moira screams, tears springing to her eyes. "Isabel, if you ever cared for Robert, spare the life of his son. Can you not see Robert's image in Oliver's face? Take your vengeance on me, for keeping Robert from a life with you. You can punish me, but the last thing Robert would have wanted was for his son to be harmed."

"No, Mom!" Oliver protests over his mother's anguished pleas. "Don't..." He struggles furiously against his bonds to no avail.

"He is pretty... like his father. The same piercing blue eyes," Isabel observes thoughtfully, gently running her fingers through Oliver's hair, causing him to flinch at her poisonous touch. "Good in bed, too."

Moira is taken aback by Isabel's crass cruelty. Despair rises in her chest as she accepts that her words are falling on a shrunken heart of stone. There may be no way to save her beautiful boy.

"My only regret," Isabel sighs as she cocks the pistol aimed at Oliver's face, "is that your daughter isn't here to die with her family. But I'll see about her soon."

Oliver roars with fury, trying to rise against Isabel, when a small dark wraith flies from the doorway, colliding with Isabel as the gun fires.

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Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Roy gets the phone call he's waited for. The last of the Queens comes home. Mayhem breaks out in the library. Felicity requires fancy coffee. The Queens have a burning need for a phone. Diggle runs into Isabel.

Chapter Notes

[SPECIAL NOTE: This chapter and the following one were edited in May of 2018 to change a couple of plot details that have been bothering me. I have never gone back to correct a story, but these edits are a needed fix and I'm much happier with the result. Mainly, this affects Isabel's fate. The only readers who will notice are those who are returning to TWG for a second time.]

FAIR WARNING: This chapter ends with another cliffhanger, which I agree is hella ridiculous, but I've lost complete control of these crazy characters. So... if you can't stand any more suspense in your life, wait and read this chapter when the next one's posted. Surely, there will be some crisis intervention by then.

This update is a wild mix of scenes because nobody's on the same page...yet. So, some characters are having light-hearted fun while others are in love or mortal danger, kind of like the Weasleys' clock at The Burrow.

Welcome, new readers! Please leave your comments or kudos, if so inspired. And special Valentines to those lovely followers who have hung with me on this story for the past year!!

Thea Queen had walked out on her life, abandoning her family and everyone she loved. Now—tonight—she's taking it all back.

For six months, Thea surrendered her identity and allowed Malcolm Merlyn to recreate her as a fighting machine. Day and night, she'd relentlessly trained in the martial arts, weaponry and self-discipline. The exhausting, physical regimen stripped her down to a bare bones existence, allowing no time to think or feel or cry.

Malcolm called her “a natural” when she demonstrated remarkable aptitude for the demands of the martial arts. Thea was a quick study, lithe, nimble with powerful legs that built enough momentum to deliver lethal strikes in hand-to-hand combat. Her natural coordination, keen reflexes and uncanny
balance honed her skills with throwing stars, iron gloves with sharp claws, knives, weighted chains and swords.

In the moments when Malcolm talked, he planted seeds of poison, wrapping her in the swath of lies told to her by her family. He revealed that her brother was hiding a secret existence as the hooded vigilante. And he related the tangled web of deceptions spun by her mother and Robert, the man she'd grown up loving and depending upon as a dad. In the beginning, she felt hollow inside, the perfect vacuum to be filled by her new father's insidious version of the Queen legacy.

But then, in the sixth month, Thea had dreamt of Oliver and her parents, not the deceptive strangers painted by Malcolm, but her true family, her foundation, her heart's home. In her sleep, she'd revisited the lake house where her fondest childhood memories had formed. Separated from social appearances and boarding schools, her family's time on the lake shore had been grounded in a private reality and normalcy that Thea and Oliver craved from—and with—their parents. It was a brief, golden time of nurtured innocence that she'd come to cherish, especially after The Gambit went down, cleaving her home and heart in two jagged pieces.

When Thea awakened on a recent morning in Corto Maltese, the scales fell from her eyes. She finally saw Malcolm clearly. Seizing on her fury with her mother, Malcolm had been intensely grooming her for battle. For the first time since leaving home, she was determined to find out why.

Fortunately, Thea had mastered the art of stealth under her father's tutelage. Now, she used it against him, to ferret out his motives and ultimate plans for her. It was not long before she overheard a private conversation between Malcolm and an archaically-dressed stranger in black robes. The visitor spoke tersely of a death sentence to be carried out by a group of assassins at the behest of an immortal demon named Ghul. The condemned was none other than Malcolm Merlyn.

Thea's sense of betrayal ran deep, chilling the blood in her veins. Under the guise of fatherly devotion, Malcolm had invested all these grueling months molding her into his personal bodyguard. Despite the endless hours they were together, Thea had never felt a trace of affection or concern from her bio-dad. She felt like a fool, not understanding that he was simply exploiting and tricking her while accusing her family of similar warped behavior. For the first time since leaving, Thea was desperately homesick. So she reached out to the one person she could trust to tell her the truth.

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Her phone call at four o'clock in the morning caught him totally off-guard. He'd stopped hoping, to avoid the hurt he'd felt when the weeks and months passed without hearing from her. When her special ringtone played, he'd awakened instantly even though he was dead tired. He'd fumbled for his phone in the bed, chasing the lit screen that displayed her delicate, beautiful face.

"Thea?" he'd answered, hope and fear mixing in his chest.

"Roy?"

"Yeah, baby," he'd answered softly. "It's me."

"Roy..." Her voice sounded hoarse with emotion, reviving the ache he'd been nursing since Thea disappeared from his life.

"Thea, where are you?"

"Far. I'm so far away," she admitted, not even trying to mask her sadness. "But Roy, I need you to tell me..."
"I'll tell you anything, Thea. Everything."

"I need the truth, Roy, about my family. About my mom and brother. It feels like forever since I left. I just need to know, if I come home, what I'll be coming back to."

They'd talked for three hours, sharing laughter and tears, until he'd answered her every question and recounted the considerable drama that had swept into their lives during her extended absence. Thea was less forthcoming about her time away from Starling City, however she told him that Malcolm had divulged Oliver's secret identity. She had cried when Roy admitted his own role with Team Arrow, but had listened intently, sorrowfully, to his struggles after being poisoned with Mirakuru. Thea learned how Oliver had shielded, rescued and ultimately saved Roy with the antidote.

He described the dangers that had stalked her family and friends in Starling City after the arrival of Slade Wilson and Isabel Rochev, both consumed with hatred for the Queen family. How Moira had discovered and accepted Oliver's mission as the hooded vigilante. Roy related the harrowing rescue at sea and decisive showdown with Slade. Thea was enraptured by his observations on the growing romance between Oliver and Felicity after her near-murder. Roy expressed his fear that a ruthless Isabel was still out there and that all of them, especially Moira and Oliver, were targets of her blind rage. Finally, he confessed his heartache and loneliness without her in his life.

When their words ran out, the young lovers silently cradled their phones, listening to the other's breaths, resting in the simple solace of her promise to come home.

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"My only regret," Isabel sighs as she cocks the pistol aimed at Oliver's face, "Is that Thea isn't here to die with her family. But I'll find her soon enough."

Oliver roars with fury, struggling to rise against Isabel, when a small dark wraith flies from the doorway, colliding with Isabel as the gun fires.

A sword flashes over Oliver's head. He dodges the blade's reach, stunned to discover the invading ninja has cleanly severed the bonds at his wrists. Now free to fight, and boiling mad, the Arrow launches into his nearest captor, who's momentarily caught off-guard.

The ninja's kick strikes Isabel's jaw with bone-shattering impact. Isabel pivots to unleash a return kick, but the woman in black isn't there. She's already danced into a new zone, slamming her boot into Isabel's kidney.

Oliver's bitten off more than he can chew with the trio of Mirakuru fighters. But his goal is to separate them from his defenseless mother. If he has to take a beating in the process, he's willing to act as their punching bag.

The ninja works the room like an artist and swiftly drops a bow and loaded quiver at Oliver's side while shooting one of his attackers with a blow-dart of antidote. She instantly spins back into her engagement with a rabid Isabel. With Oliver hurt and the Mirakuru advantage on Isabel's side, the dark ninja bears more than her share of the fight.

Now armed, Oliver uses the bow as a melee weapon at close range and stabs syringe-tipped arrows into his attackers with his bare hand when they present an opening. The level of violence in the contained space is brutal as the fighting drags on. In a surprise tactic, Oliver whirls away from his primary fight and plunges an antidote syringe into Isabel's back while she's distracted by the mysterious martial artist. The Russian woman screams with rage, immediately sensing a slow, measured loss of strength.
The first set of incendiary explosives rips through the entry level of the mansion's west wing, closely followed by a second cluster of concussive blasts running along the structure's north side. From then, a series of booms continue as if the castle was suddenly on the front lines of a warzone.

The hand-to-hand fight devolves into chaos. As wooden cabinet frames shatter, avalanches of books rain down from the library walls onto the combatants who choke on invading clouds of dust and smoke. When a heavy solid oak wall of shelving falls into the room, it crushes one of the Mirakuru soldiers beneath it.

Taking advantage of the bedlam, Isabel retreats and disappears in a smoky haze. Teaming up, Oliver and the ninja team put down the other two soldiers, inject them with the cure and secure them.

"Oliver?"

The sound of his mother's voice instantly jerks Oliver's attention to finding her. Scanning the room, he finally sees her struggling to rise from the floor. Kicking a path through the wreckage, he kneels at her side, shocked by the blood staining her neck and chest.

"Mom, stay still," he urges, cradling her slender shoulders in his lap. "You're hurt."

Moira Queen reaches toward the black-garbed woman, pleading, "Thea?"

Thinking his mother must be in shock, he frowns with concern, explaining, "No, Mom. That's not Thea."

Dropping to her knees beside Moira, the ninja clasps her hand, green eyes connecting with grey. "I'm here, Mom."

Moira smiles weakly at her astonished son, declaring, "I know my children."

Diggle indulges Felicity's craving by making a run through the Starbucks drive-through. He has such a weakness for this sweet, adorkable girl, well aware that he's unable to tell her no, although placing their order gets sticky when she asks him to get her a four-pump Grande Cinnamon Dolce Skinny Latte.

"Nuh-uh. I'm not saying that." Digg rebels in stoic fashion.

"What? Why not?" she exclaims in genuine surprise as Digg moves forward in the line of cars.

"Just not. Those girly words are not coming out of my mouth," Digg professes.

"But Oliver orders them for me," she argues, bewildered by his obstinacy.

"He has to. He's the boyfriend," Digg reasons, pulling up to the speakers.

When a perky voice asks for their order, Digg releases his seatbelt and steps out of the vehicle.

"Digg?" Felicity calls, peering at his empty spot.

Diggle taps at the passenger window, pointing to her locked door. She flips the switch on the door panel and opens it.

"Scootch over," he says with a waving gesture toward the driver's seat.
The voice on the intercom chirps, "I'm here to take your order when you're ready."

With a satisfied grin, Digg adds, "Go ahead. Now, you tell her."

With a dramatic roll of her eyes, Felicity hops over the center console and settles behind the wheel. She orders her latte and turns back to Digg. "You want anything?"

"Large coffee. Black."

"I didn't know Starbucks sold those," Felicity mutters to herself. But then she buys the man his ridiculous coffee.

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Thea unwraps the black scarf covering her hair and presses it to staunch the flow of blood from a gunshot wound they've found high in Moira's chest. Her mother blacked out minutes ago.

"Thea??" Oliver repeats for the third time.

"Yeah, Ollie. This is me, now, at the badass Queen family reunion," she announces forcefully. "So. Focus! The house is on fire. Mom's been shot. We need a phone."

"Don't have it," Oliver realizes when he reaches for his cell and remembers he's in his sweat pants, having been hauled out of bed, straight into this clusterfuck. "Where's yours?"

"In my duffle. Downstairs." Thea grouses.

"See if Mom's got hers," he suggests, coughing from the smoke.

After Thea checks her mother's empty pockets, she shakes her head, grumping. "Okay, maybe we're not so badass."

Oliver gets to his feet, reaching to lift his mother. "We have to get her out of here."

Keeping her palm flattened against Moira's wound, Thea helps support her limping brother as they slowly make their way to the corridor. A wall of fire blocks them from the main staircase so they're forced to turn back, desperate to reach the back stairs. Halfway there, the overhead support beams crack like gunshots, followed by the fiery collapse of the floor above them.

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When Diggle and Felicity are within a mile of the mansion, the windshield is filled by an ominous orange glow burning above the treeline.

"Is that a fire? You don't think..." Felicity asks, afraid to finish her question.

She punches the gas pedal to the floor. When they clear the final curve as they speed toward the bridge, Diggle and Felicity are horrified by the sight of the Queen mansion engulfed in flames.

Felicity fumbles for her phone in the console.

Diggle pulls his own phone and pushes her hand back toward the steering wheel.

"You drive. I'll call the team," Diggle tersely volunteers.

Her hands trembling, Felicity grips the wheel, dragging her attention to the winding road.
Caught in the headlights, a figure cuts through the darkness, dashing across the bridge. Despite Felicity's heroic effort, the SUV slams into the person—it looks like a woman—hurling the limp body upward into the foggy mist as if in slow motion.

Felicity slams on the brakes, clutching the steering wheel and fighting to control the SUV that is threatening to roll. Diggle loses his phone as he grabs onto the dashboard.

When the vehicle shudders to a sideways stop, Felicity and Digg exchange a wide-eyed shocked look, blurring, "Was that—?"

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Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Nothing draws a crowd like a five-alarm disaster. The whole gang's finally gathered at the burning mansion and time is running out for the Queen family. Diggle reminds Felicity of her special connection to Oliver.

Chapter Notes

[SPECIAL NOTE: This chapter and the following one were edited in May of 2018 to change a couple of plot details that have been bothering me. I have never gone back to correct a story, but these edits were a needed fix and I'm much happier with the result. Mainly, this affects Isabel's fate. The only readers who will notice are those who are returning to TWG for a second time.]

This may be the longest rescue in history, but I hope it doesn't feel that way. I'm pulling many scattered characters together in this chapter as we stagger headlong into the final act. Here's hoping you're entertained! Thank you for your following and interest in this story. I'm genuinely grateful for feedback, if you're so inspired.

Isabel exults in her triumph as she careens down the stone corridor, her boot steps echoed by the muffled explosions overhead, wreaking destruction in the Queen mansion. The lights in the underground tunnel flicker, adding another surreal aspect to the bizarre last hour. She'd done what she set out to do although her master plan nearly went off the rails—twice. Isabel had almost panicked at the sight of that old Queen bitch, so regal and in charge of her fuckin' castle. Well, how's Moira liking it now that she's being buried alive beneath her grand marble and mahogany manor?

And that crazy-ass ninja... what the hell? One side of Isabel's face throbs like she's been walloped with a sledgehammer. The kick she took to her jaw has loosened a few of her back teeth and one of her eyes has already swelled shut. Isabel's clueless as to the identity of the mystery fighter, but he/she was obviously well-trained and highly motivated to protect the Queens. With any luck, the unknown martial artist, who stopped her from killing Oliver, is presently being blown to pieces by the detonating bombs she left behind.

Isabel regrets she didn't have time to taunt Oliver by telling him of Felicity's death. But she'd made certain Moira was down, the castle was being destroyed and Isabel got out alive. Reliving each sweet moment of her vengeful mission, Isabel hurtles out of the tunnel's hidden entrance. Sprinting from the bridge's shadows, she's disoriented by the strange glowing wall of fog that's backlit by the flames from the burning mansion.

Isabel realizes a second too late that the lights to her right belong to a speeding, 3/4-ton vehicle barreling down on top of her.
Felicity is momentarily frozen by the image of Isabel Rochev's slight figure, caught in the headlights as she's thrown overhead, propelled by the sickening impact with the front fender of Diggle's SUV. Seconds later, Isabel's spinning body slams into the wet pavement of the bridge.

"Stay back," Digg orders Felicity with a stern glance as he bails from the vehicle, only seconds after the vehicle has skidded to a stop.

"We ran over Isabel," Felicity gasps in disbelief as she ignores Diggle's instruction, unlatching her seatbelt and jumping down from the driver's seat. It's raining in earnest now, the chilling, wind-driven drops stinging her skin. She blinks to focus, unsure why Digg is suddenly stepping back.

Then Felicity sees.

Isabel, or a deformed bloody version of what's left of her, rises from the roadway, her crooked silhouette framed by the SUV's headlamps. One of her arms hangs limply at her side, clearly broken. Leaning at an awkward angle, she staggers through the curtains of rain. Isabel's lovely heart-shaped face is ruined. Blood pours from a deep gash in her forehead, the crimson rivulets outlining her features in a macabre mask. Half of her face is bruised and garishly swollen, one eye gone beneath a bulging eyelid.

But the true horror of Isabel's visage is the blood-stained, lop-sided sneer as she lurches forward to challenge Diggle and Felicity, who gape at her — and each other — in shock.

"I've done it!" Isabel shrieks, pointing with her good arm at the burning manor. "I've destroyed the House of Queen."

Felicity begins to babble softly about being trapped in a Wes Craven movie while Digg pulls his Glock from his shoulder holster.

"You're too late," Isabel laughs derisively. "There's no way to save them now."

Digg and Felicity exchange a look that says they've heard more than enough from "the roach," whose malicious presence has been a curse on Team Arrow since Day One of her fateful arrival in Starling City. For Digg's benefit, Felicity flashes him a wink while waggling the loaded syringe she's pulled from her pocket.

"Girl, you're like a division of Marines," Digg remarks with a relieved grin.

"Come on, Digg, you know I'm always packin'," she quips as they move forward together to deal with the freak show in their headlights.

The takedown is relatively easy due to the considerable damage Isabel's taken and, to their surprise, the Arrow syringe they find in her back. As Felicity injects an extra dose of cure, she says, "I see Oliver left you a souvenir."

"He did," Isabel seethes while Diggle zipties her wrists. "And I paid him back with a bullet between those pretty eyes. After I killed his mother."

Felicity throws her fist into the side of Isabel's face. The broken side.

As the latest doses of antidote overwhelm Isabel’s system, she begins to convulse violently, her one
visible eye rolling back into her skull. Diggle pulls Felicity a safe distance away from the Russian as she twists and writhes on the wet asphalt with groans of agony. When the convulsions fade, Isabel falls eerily still. Silent. Dead.

Felicity stumbles back in shock until she’s caught by Diggle, who wraps her to his chest. "Felicity—"

“I killed. Again,” Felicity realizes in horror.

They're both soaked by the ongoing downpour and he does what he can to shield her, covering the exposed side of her face with a large, warm hand.

“No, sweetheart,” John answers, his deep voice rumbling beneath her ear. “That woman gave up her humanity all on her own. She’s been dead for a long time.”

"And she's killed them — Oliver and Moira!" Felicity cries, broken and trembling. "They're gone, Digg. I've lost him."

"We don't know that," Digg insists, giving her shoulder comforting pats. "We don't know anything for certain yet. We will find Oliver, but for now, I need you to be strong. Can you do that, Felicity? If not for your own sake, then for his?"

Felicity draws a shaky breath, nods into Digg's powerful chest and pulls back to wipe the tears from her face, although the rain quickly replaces them.

Digg tips her chin up so their eyes connect, his kind and warm, hers chilled by fear. With a soft smile, he gently asks, "You okay?"

"No," Felicity confesses in a ragged exhale.

"Whatever's happened in there, we'll face it together," he promises. "Because that's what we do."

"It's what we do," Felicity echoes, feeling hollow and held together by fraying threads. "We find each other."

Sirens and a fast-moving parade of swirling colored lights descend on the Queen estate as first responders assess the unfolding disaster. The explosions have mercifully ended. Towers of flames and smoke rise to challenge the dampening waves of rain. Emergency personnel canvass the sprawling property, discovering the cold bodies of four downed security guards on the outer perimeter.

Quentin Lance huffs in frustration when he gets word that foul play is involved in the fire now devouring the Queen home. Of course. Any drama surrounding the Queen family has to be a full-scale clusterfuck. He's just relieved that Laurel's on the outs with Oliver and there's no chance she's on the premises tonight. This site has now become a crime scene and tabloid dream since a prominent mayoral candidate may be inside the scorching structure filling his vision. News crew vans are already screeching onto the property.

Reaching for his cell phone, Lance rapidly texts Sara, asking, "R U safe?"

Her response, a thumbs-up emoji, pops onto his screen seconds later, allowing him to return full focus to the job at hand.

"We've got a survivor!" shouts a firefighter, who sprints toward the small, older woman, soaked to
the skin and shivering. Lance stalks toward the lady, vaguely recalling that she's a longtime member of the Queens' house staff.

Now wrapped in a blanket and followed by a hovering paramedic, the agitated woman darts toward Lance.

"Kapitan? You are the police, yes?"

Arriving at her side, Quentin responds, "Yes, ma'am. I'm Captain Quentin Lance. And you are?"

"Raisa. Raisa Fedorov. I am the head housekeeper for the Queens. For many years, " she explains, the stress obvious in her pleading expression. "They need help. You can save them?"

"You're sure they're in the house? How many were here tonight? " Lance asks.

"The family was home. Mrs. Queen was upstairs, working on a speech. Mr. Oliver was not well and was resting in his room. Miss Thea came later and saved me from the bad men."

"Bad men? Did you know them?" Lance demands to know, his heavy brows beetled.

"They were the new bodyguards," Raisa says, grimacing as if the thought of the traitors leaves a bitter taste in her mouth.

"How many?" Quentin probes.

"I was captured by two, but there were four new men hired to protect Mrs. Moira. How could they do this terrible thing?" she cries, gesturing at the fiery destruction behind her. "Please, Kapitan," Raisa begs. "You will get them out?"

Taking pity on the distraught maid, Quentin awkwardly pats her shoulder, promising, "We'll do everything we can. But we're going to need your help figuring out the layout and where the family might be."

Raisa nods quickly, "I can do that. I know it well. I help in all ways."

Quentin steers Raisa to work with the on-site fire chief, who's managed to pull up a floor plan of Queen castle on a tablet.

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"That was weird," Sara comments, reading her dad's text.

"Whuh?" Roy asks through a mouthful of his Big Belly burger.

"Chew. Swallow. Then talk," she chides him. "It's like talking to a Labrador."

He noisily slurps down a big gulp of Dr. Pepper, burps loudly, and repeats, "What's weird?"

"I owe an apology to Labradors," she mutters, sending the emoji reply.

Her phone screen immediately blows up with social media posts and an Instagram from Laurel. "Oh my god..."

Roy's cell mimics the alerts she's receiving. They both stare at their screens, thrown into action by the images of Queen manor consumed in flames.
"There's no way they're letting us in there," Diggle decides as he and Felicity watch from a distance while the emergency crews gear up to attack the blazing structure. With his phone, he quickly snaps a photo of the eerie sight, sending it to Lyla with the cryptic message "911."

He notices that his partner's attention is focused behind them, on the darkened bridge.

"Felicity?" Digg asks, perplexed by her distraction.

"Why was she there, Digg?" Felicity wonders.

Diggle can't see her frown in the darkness, but he hears it in her voice.

"What was Isabel doing at the bridge if she came from the mansion?" Felicity muses, mapping the routes in her head.

From experience, Digg doesn't doubt her deductions. "Let's find out," he suggests, leading the way.

Felicity averts her eyes from Isabel's now-cold body as they skirt her death scene to make their way toward the shallow ravine beneath the bridge. After a thorough search of the bridge's structure, they locate the concealed entrance to the underground corridor. Having lost power, the tunnel is pitch black so they rely on Digg's flashlight as they make their way down the sloping pathway, moving rapidly.

Five minutes later, Felicity and Diggle crawl through the hidden panel into the mansion, opening a private gateway to Hell.

"Ollie! Ollie!" Thea cries, tugging at her brother's hand.

She lifts as much of the debris from Oliver's chest as she can, throwing it out of the way while choking on dust and smoke. When the ceiling fell, he had pushed his sister and mother in the direction of a heavy, ornate oak bench to protect them. But Oliver has been buried in the collapse.

She's encouraged by the sound of Oliver coughing, trying to clear his lungs to draw a breath of air. With her mother wounded and unconscious, Thea desperately needs her brother for morale and physical support if the three of them are going to make it out alive.

Thea continues to dig Oliver out, relieved to finally see the blue of his eyes and his now-active struggle to shift under the weight of sheet-rock, tile, insulation and paneling. Working together, they've managed to clear his upper body.

"How is she?" he rasps, looking past his sister to their mom, who lies deathly still.

"I think she's the same, Ollie, but we need to move."

The menacing growl of spreading flames spurs their frantic efforts.

"Thea, I'm stuck," Oliver confesses as he works to pull his legs free, to no avail.

"What? No, Ollie, we can get you out," she promises, scrambling through the rubble to figure out the problem. But her heart sinks when she finally reaches the bottom layer. Oliver's legs are pinned beneath a massive wooden beam.
"Oh, no," she laments, her attentions now twisting between her wounded mother and trapped brother. "Oliver, are you in pain?"

With a firm shake of his head, Oliver answers, "It's not bad. But you've got to get out of here."

"I'm not leaving you," Thea declares. "Either of you."

Grabbing his sister's wrist, he argues with fresh intensity, "Speedy, it's her only chance. And, you're the only one who knows where we are and can go for help. There's no time to debate. Please."

Oliver's right and Thea hates abandoning her family with every fiber of her being. But once she accepts the hard truth, she leans forward and drops a kiss on her older brother's forehead before moving to Moira's side and gently pressing her cheek to her mother's with a whispered "I love you."

With tears in her eyes, Thea gracefully rises, vowing, "I'll be back with help in a few."

"Go, Thea," Oliver implores. "Head for the south stairs."

"I save your ass and you're still bossing me around," Thea sasses as she disappears into the smoky haze.

"Which way?" Diggle asks, deferring to his blond partner.

They stand in the doorway of the castle's remote guest bedroom, scanning the wide murky corridor. The vastness of the dark burning structure is overwhelming. Flames have not reached this corner of the mansion, intentionally spared by Isabel so that she could make a safe getaway.

"They could be anywhere," Felicity moans, sounding as lost as she feels. "Digg, we'll never find them in time."

Digg pivots to face her, bracing her slender shoulders with the weight of his reassuring hands. "Felicity, I don't pretend to understand the special connection between you and Oliver, but I know it's real. I saw him find you when no one else could."

"But John, it was always Oliver," she insists. "He's the one with the gift. It's all him."

"I know that's not true, Felicity," Digg asserts while turning her and lightly pushing her ahead of him. "Just focus on Oliver. Then follow your instincts."

Felicity throws an uncertain glance over her shoulder, but cannot ignore the advice from her faithful, wise friend. Briefly closing her eyes, she stands still, quieting her thoughts and letting her feelings for Oliver flood her heart. The intense blue of his steady gaze. The sound of her name on his lips. The controlled power and grace of his physical presence. The strong beat of his heart beneath her hands. The sensation of his skin pressed to hers while lying in his embrace.

All that they have shared. All that he is to her – protector, partner, challenger, supporter, lover. Oliver.

My Oliver.

Felicity starts walking.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Resolution comes for those trapped by holocaust, but at a painful price.

Chapter Notes

TISSUE ALERT: This one's gonna hurt. That's all I'm going to say about this short, pivotal chapter (which is not the story's end). **sorry**

I'm behind on responding to your comments because I felt compelled to devote writing time to this update, but I promise to get caught up now that #31 is complete. Thank you for your patience and amazing support!!

Allowing Felicity to work her mojo, Diggle silently follows in her footsteps, watching for potential hot spots as she concentrates on an unseen path. The deeper they travel through the endless mansion passages, the heavier the smell and density of smoke. The walls, floors and support beams moan as if in pain from the crackling flames eating the foundation. With the loss of power, the only shafts of eerie light shine through the windows from outside floodlights set up by emergency responders. Overhead, fire crews are splintering vents in the manor's roof with powerful swings of their axes, opening the upper floors of the family's living quarters to the merciful rains.

At one point, Digg steps into a recessed alcove and accesses a hidden compartment containing emergency supplies and weapons. He gathers up a fire extinguisher and first aid kit.

Felicity briefly notices her partner's actions and the secret stash before remarking with a bewildered shake of her head, "Huh. Rich people..."

But she's immediately moving forward again, seeking Oliver in the smoky darkness.

They hear the staccato footsteps of the sprinting ninja moments before she appears and is almost on top of them as John Diggle pulls his Glock.

"You've got to be kidding," Felicity says, halting in her tracks in the direct path of the approaching intruder.

Digg snicks off the safety of his weapon and takes aim at the oncoming black-robed figure, who exclaims in a familiar female voice, "Oh, thank God..."

"Thea?!?" Felicity gasps, grabbing the wrist of Digg's raised gun hand.

He immediately lowers his weapon as Thea yanks down the scarf to reveal her face. She flings her arms around Felicity's neck in a desperate, grateful hug.

"Are you okay?" Felicity asks, exchanging a stunned expression with Digg.
Thea doesn’t pause, simply grabbing Felicity's hand, pulling and pivoting back in the direction from which she's come. "We've got to hurry! There's no time. They need us."

The rising heat is oppressive, competing with his lungs for the limited oxygen being consumed by the hungry fire that is stubbornly crawling toward them. The rumbling and splintering of the burning mansion foretells structural failure. Oliver can see fountains of flames rising from the floor below.

At least I'm home.

Oliver Queen has faced death many times, in such dreadful circumstances, but always far removed from here. It's a bit easier to let go, now that he's where his life began, scant feet from his mother’s side.

He tells himself that she's alive, that it takes more than a bullet to the chest to kill the indomitable, majestic Moira Queen, matriarch of all she surveys. It's unimaginable that she could die. Surely she’s above such ordinary consequences, not affected by details as common as mortality.

"Mom?" Oliver calls out, the word choking in his parched throat. He's desperate for signs of movement, a flutter of her lashes, the slight rise and fall of her chest, a twitch of those perfectly-manicured fingers. But it's hard to see her through the smoky haze, even as close as she lies to her son. Feather-light ashes drift around them like sad, grey snowflakes.

His legs ache with the weight holding him prisoner. The fatalistic part of his mind wishes that the beam had at least knocked him cold. Being burned alive is a fucking bad way to go. Felicity will never forgive him for dying on her.

Felicity.

Will she be all right? Who will keep her safe? How long will she grieve for him? In all honesty, Oliver can't bear the thought that she might one day replace him, that she'll find a love again with the same intensity and tenderness they've shared. But he immediately berates himself for being so shallow and selfish. Of course Felicity will recover. She'll move on. Without him. Leaving them—and the bond they've known—behind. As she must.

"Oliver!!"

And out of the hellish haze, she is suddenly here with him, her touches and kisses as reassuring as her babbling sweet voice, asking him a hundred questions in a single breath. "Oliver! Oh, my Oliver! She said she'd killed you. Did you think we wouldn't find you? Are you okay? How is your knee? Do you think we can lift this, this what? It's a support beam, right? It looks really heavy. I'm so sorry. Is anything broken? Can you believe that's our Thea?"

Knowing that Oliver's in good hands, Digg recognizes Moira as their triage priority. He kneels at her side, locating the life-threatening wound, still bleeding. He rips open a large gauze pad from the kit and applies it to staunch the blood loss. Texting Lyla, Digg makes his decision after learning that ARGUS help is still miles away.

"Thea, keep your hand pressed here and stay with me. We're moving now," Digg commands in the urgent manner of an Army medic. Glancing to Felicity, he asks, "You got him?"

Responding to Digg's critical tone, Felicity blurs, "Yep. We're good."

Smoothly lifting the unconscious woman to his chest with Thea rising in concert, Digg says, "Help's
on the way, guys. Use the extinguisher. Lyla's not far out, but Mrs. Queen can't wait. We'll see you up top."

With Thea hovering at his flank, Diggle rushes out of sight in the direction of the secret tunnel, where the fire danger is lowest.

"Felicity, follow them. Now! While you still can," Oliver insists, shocked that she's staying behind with him.

"No, Oliver. No!" Felicity fervently pledges. "I'm your vigilante. I didn't come to die with you. I'm here to save you."

Tiny live sparks float past them, burning holes in their clothing and starting small fires where they land. Felicity stamps out the minor flames and uses the extinguisher to keep the larger encroaching ones at bay.

"You can't stay. It's too dangerous," Oliver argues in absolute frustration.

"I can't go, Oliver. It's too late for that," she calmly asserts.

"What?! It's not. You just need to follow—"

Ignoring his protests, Felicity settles beside him, urging his head and shoulders into her lap and raising his palm to her lips for a kiss.

"You made me your girl, Oliver. I know now what it is to be loved by you. I'm changed. I can't leave you. We belong to each other." Kiss. "And we'll see this through." Kiss. "Together."

She slips a hand beneath his Henley to lay it protectively over his heart. Her skin is cool and soft against his over-heated chest. "You let me in, Oliver. And I live here now."

The fight has gone out of him. How can he dispute a confession like hers? Words of such tender truth that perfectly reflect his own feelings. Even in nightmarish moments like this, he can't let go of her.

"Felicity..."

Suddenly, it's becoming easier to breathe as a fresh breeze of cold air flows down from above. A few welcome drops of rain splash onto the ashy couple. Hopefully, they look upward to see that a large hole has been broken out of the roof a floor above, where the winking lights of a helicopter can be seen. Long lines of steel cable drop through the breach, controlled by the two descending figures attached to them—Roy and Sara.

Help has come from above.

A relieved grin eases the tension of Oliver's face, his teeth glowing white against his smoke-stained skin. Felicity beams back at him and lowers her lips to press a grateful kiss to the unmarred center of his forehead, miraculously spared from the lie of a bullet she'd so dreaded. Together, they would live to see one more day, finally freed of the curse of Mirakuru, but bought at a terrible cost.

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Heavy sheets of chilling rain fell through the night, extinguishing the fires to leave the historic mansion a blackened, crumbling shell of its former opulent glory.
Moira Dearden Queen died in the arms of John Diggle, whose whispered prayers sanctified her soul's departure. In her last conscious thoughts, as life inevitably slipped away, she was aware her body had caught the bullet meant for her son, her beautiful boy, who would live on to save the lives of many more. Her beloved daughter, Thea, was home again, stronger than before, restored to her family and her rightful place.

Moira surrendered in peace, assured that her legacy—her cherished children—survived as living testaments to her sacrifice. Her passing swept clean a heavy slate of regrets, her life given in atonement. It was the righteous death of a Queen.

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Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Felicity watches over a suffering Oliver while Thea looks to Raisa for support. The wrong girl leads a hero out of lonely darkness.

Chapter Notes

This is it, sweet friends, the concluding chapter of The Wrong Girl, a story that has lived and grown within me throughout the past year. You will never know how much I have treasured the support, faith and encouragement that you so generously shared with me. It has truly been a privilege to take this creative journey with you. So, here it is, the final corner of the picture I painted for you. Enjoy!

Felicity huffs in worried exasperation, listening to Oliver's deep racking cough that ends with him retching in her guest bathroom. He's been regularly hacking up globs of gray grossness after each breathing treatment. She hears water running at the sink before he staggers back to her living room and collapses, weak and ashen, onto her darling sofa, that's dwarfed by his frame.

Muttering incomplete sentences under her breath about freaking masochist, against doctor orders and the walking dead, Felicity reattaches the oximeter on his index finger and carefully slides the oxygen cannula onto his face. His oxygen level is hovering at ninety percent which is not great, but not in 911 range either. The brace is back on his knee and both legs are deeply bruised, but thankfully, no bones are fractured.

Walking briskly into the bathroom, she quickly returns with a cool, damp rag. Kneeling at his side, Felicity gently bathes Oliver's face and neck. His weary eyes close in exhaustion, surrendering to her care, sighing his thanks. After leaving a soft kiss at his temple, Felicity covers him with two of her comfiest fleece throws, one for each half of him. Starting a Dr. Who Blu-Ray disc with the volume muted, she sits on the floor, propping her back against the sofa and resting her head on Oliver's bicep, sliding one hand beneath the blanket to lace her fingers with his.

Despite her unusual silence, Felicity is deeply afraid for Oliver because of the physical damage he’s endured from smoke inhalation, being beaten by Mirakuru thugs and pinned beneath a big-ass support beam. He should be in a hospital under the watch of skilled medical professionals instead of a technology geek who gags at the thought of sutures. Digg had insisted he could stay to keep an eye on their obstinate patient, but Felicity sent him home, promising to call for help if Oliver's oxygen levels dip into the scary range.

Equally concerning is the grief that Oliver's spiraling through after learning of his mother's death. It was wrenching, witnessing his and Thea's raw pain when Diggle told them Moira's injuries were fatal, that nothing could be done to save her, that she was truly gone. Felicity's fully armed with an understanding that, when hurt, Oliver goes to ground, seeking a hiding place to suffer in silence, alone.
This night has cost the dwindling Queen family dearly. Their sprawling palatial estate has been reduced to a charred skeleton, along with their possessions and the home of their childhood. Since The Gambit's sinking, material things mean little to Oliver, although he's affected by the loss of those unremarkable touchstones from his past. The miniature catamaran he carved from balsa wood with his dad's guidance. The protective amulet leather bracelet Raisa had woven for Oliver to wear when he was fourteen. The family photo albums reflecting a time when he mistakenly thought his family was whole and healthy and happy.

Felicity has mapped his wounded-animal pattern through bitter experience. He'd fled Starling City after Tommy's death, abandoning The Arrow's mission as well as his friends and family, to wall-off his guilt and sorrow with angst-ridden solitude. Oliver is too sick to run this time, but Felicity recognizes his instinctual compulsion to crawl inside himself, putting up stony barriers to hide his emotional suffering. She's determined to prevent his withdrawal, to keep him present and engaged, so that he can heal in a new place. With her at his side.

There will be little sleep this night.

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It should have been me.

The gunshot echoes in Oliver's mind, as he relives those terrible few minutes in the mansion library as Isabel's prisoner. The cool unyielding steel of the pistol muzzle pressed to his forehead. Isabel's hysterical ranting. Her squeeze of the trigger at the critical point when Thea's strike kicked the gun away from his face, to the side, toward their mother. While Oliver had been distracted, swept into the fight, Moira lay mortally wounded, on her way out of their lives, already leaving them, taking her last private journey.

She deserved to live, to see Thea become the amazing beautiful woman that is her destiny as the endowed daughter of Moira Queen. To age gracefully and dote upon grandchildren. Moira's path should never—would never—have intersected with Slade Wilson if Oliver had not led him to her door. Slade's vendetta had lured Isabel back to Moira, rekindling the hatred harbored by his father's Russian mistress.

There's no atonement Oliver can make, no way to take this night back, no chance of restoring his mother's life. Now that the smoke has cleared and the flames smothered, Oliver can't avoid the harsh reality; the responsibility for protecting his mother was his. And he alone had failed her.

It should have been me.

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Toward dawn, Felicity jolts awake from an awkward position curled against the sofa. She stiffly stretches out the kinks in her back, neck and legs while scrutinizing Oliver in the dim light. She hadn't intended to fall asleep, but exhaustion had finally overtaken her after she got still.

Oliver fitfully sleeps where he collapsed earlier, his breathing labored. Felicity lays her palm to his face, checking for fever. He's warmer than she likes so she decides it's time to regroup. After a quick run through her bathroom, Felicity enters her bedroom, arranging pillows at the headboard. She gathers the bottles of medicine prescribed for Oliver at the hospital and organizes them at her bedside with a tall glass of fresh water. Now, time to deal with her incorrigible patient.

"Oliver?"
Nothing.

"Oliver, wake up."

His hand jerks at his side so he curls it to his chest, then sleeps on.

"Oliver!" Felicity persists, affectionately stroking the hair above his ear. "Wake up, baby."

His heavy lashes raise and his shadowed blue eyes take in the room as he mumbles, "Where— Um, what?"

"Oliver, we're okay. You're in my apartment, remember?"

He sits up, launching into a strangled coughing fit that sounds as if he's shredding a lung. She brings a lined trash can and a box of tissues to sit beside him, rubbing comforting circles across the tensed muscles along his shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs as he chokes and spits, his diaphragm convulsing beneath her fingers.

When the coughs begin to subside, Oliver tilts sideways, intending to reclaim his nest on the couch. "Whoa, Oliver, not yet. I want you in my bed. Yeah, I heard it as it was coming out of my mouth."

Shaking his head and continuing his descent, he mutters something about "fine here," but Felicity's clutching his bicep with both hands. Recognizing her determination, he relents, allowing her to drag him down the short hallway to her bedroom.

Felicity turns back the bedding while Oliver drains the glass tumbler of water. The blue of his eyes is brighter, his alertness markedly improved since she brought him into her condo six hours ago.

"I can get you something to eat," she offers, "If you're hungry?"

Oliver answers, "No, not yet. But you go ahead if..." His voice just fades mid-sentence as if he's too listless, too sad to complete the thought.

"Hey," Felicity murmurs, stroking the scruff along his jaw. "You okay?"

Oliver silently raises his lost eyes to meet hers in the soft lamplight. His guard is knocked down by the familiar concern, the love, in her voice. Felicity recognizes naked sorrow and hurt in his expression.

"Oh... Oliver."

Felicity slides into the bed, scooting against the pillowed headboard and opens her arms to him in quiet invitation. He surrenders, crawling onto the mattress, collapsing alongside her, letting his weight fall heavily against her and burying his face in her breasts, his powerful arms clinging to her.

And then he breaks.

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Freezing drizzle further darkens the mansion's charred corpse, haloed in the morning light by rising wisps of steam and smoke. Beneath an umbrella's canopy, Thea Queen leans into the maternal support offered by Raisa as they stand facing the ruined remains of the estate.

"It was a weird place to live, wasn't it, Raisa? It never really felt like a home. More like inhabiting a museum," Thea reflects, her voice sad and wistful. "I used to wish the lake house was our only
place. We at least were a real family when we lived there. Or I thought we were."

Raisa kisses Thea's temple and murmurs, "Houses can be too big, milka. With too many hidden places for secrets to live. And this house, it hid many hurtful things."

"I'm so sorry for the terrible things I said and did. To her," Thea confesses raggedly, a tear slipping down her pale cheek.

"Thea, you came back to your mother when her need was greatest. You saved our Oliver," Raisa says with a mix of kindness and pride, yet firmly adding, "You, malyshka, you are too young for such regret. Your mama died to save the children she loved. And so much she loved you and your brother. Mrs. Queen, hers was an honorable death."

Both women's eyes are glazed with tears.


"Your mama, she was zagadochnyy... always a mystery," Raisa observes. "The only certainty about Mrs. Queen was her devotion to you, malyshka, and your brother. It was the reason, the way of her life. You honor her memory by living your luchshaya zhizn'—your best life."

Wrapping a maternal arm around Thea's slender shoulders, Raisa smiles down at the woman-child she helped raise. With a stroke of Thea's hair, the older woman says, "Come, little rabbit, I have your favorite, potato soup, on the stove. Your home now is with me."

A persistent knocking drags Felicity from the deepest level of sleep with no idea of where, when and who she is. Shoving the cobwebs from her brain, she takes inventory of her senses, reluctantly opening her eyes. Burrowed in a nest of pillows and linens, she's aware of a warm, heavy weight anchoring her in place.

Oliver.

He is lying on his side, with his leg, arm and upper body draped across her. His face, peaceful in sleep, is pillowed by her breast. Felicity finds his light, even snores reassuring now that his breathing is no longer labored. She tenderly touches his cheek. His scruff has grown longer and feels soft beneath her fingers.

The rapping has resumed against her front door. With a sigh, Felicity squirms and pulls herself away from her bedmate, who burrows his head into her pillow with a muffled snort, never fully waking. She gently covers his bare back with the comforter. With a quick glance at her reflection in the dresser mirror, she groans at the hopeless cause she sees there and tiptoes out of the bedroom, silently closing the door behind her.

Felicity opens her door, leaving Digg's raised knuckles in mid-air. Her friend has plastic-sheathed clothing draped across one muscular shoulder, a bakery sack and Starbucks cups balanced in a cardboard carrier.

"Come to mama," Felicity moans, reaching with grabby hands for the coffee as the rich aroma instantly revives her will to live. "Which one? Which one?"

"And good morning to you too, Felicity. It's the one marked 'F'," Digg grins down at her as she takes a deep, satisfying sip of her favorite brew, sparking a goofy expression of pure pleasure.
With a death grip on her cup, she gives him a side hug and says, "Digg, you even ordered a girly coffee for me. Thank you, friend."

Following her into the apartment, he lays the dry cleaned clothing on her sofa, observing, "After the night you had, I figured you earned it. Raisa had me pick up Oliver's clothes and there's scones in the bag."

"You're my hero, John Diggle," Felicity declares taking the sack of goodies from him and carrying them to the kitchen counter, where he perches on a barstool to drink his basic, black coffee.

"So, how's he doing?" Digg asks as she pulls napkins from a kitchen drawer, handing him one.

"He's sleeping now. It was a rough night," Felicity admits, taking a scone from the bag. After savoring a bite of pastry, she adds, "Have you seen Thea?"

Nodding, Digg answers, "She's under Raisa's wing so she's in good, familiar hands. And Roy's hovering at her elbow with no clue what to do."

They share a knowing look and Digg reluctantly pulls a scone for himself, commenting, "This would be better if it was a donut."

"Will they be okay, John? I mean, Oliver and Thea. After the awfulness of last night," Felicity worries, her eyes searching his for assurance.

"Financially, yes," Digg says, adding, "The estate was well-insured with Lloyds of London so they'll be able to rebuild, if that's what they want. But handling their grief, it's just going to take time and lots of support from the people who care about them."

"Us."

"Yes, Felicity, as always... Us," Diggle agrees with an understanding smile. "And, how about you? Have you gotten in touch with insurance about your car?"

"Oh, my poor little car... Yes, that's on my list of things to get done today," Felicity explains sadly. "I'm just hoping that my policy covers psychotic bomber."

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It's late afternoon when Oliver awakens, disoriented and weak, but finally able to draw a full breath without triggering an uncontrollable fit of coughing. Emotionally, he's drained, but his breakdown with Felicity had released the immediate pressure of his grief, leaving a dull, hollow ache in his chest.

After checking the clock on Felicity's nightstand, he's stunned by the realization he's slept through the better part of the day. Dragging himself from the cocoon of bedding, Oliver gingerly stands. He moves slowly, adapting to the twinges of soreness throbbing throughout his diaphragm and legs. A neatly-pressed queue of his clothing hangs inside a layer of thin, sheer plastic on Felicity's closet door. Besides his spare underwear, some sweats and the hoodie stored at Felicity's apartment, these are the only clothes of his to survive the fire.

He and Thea have lost so much in one fateful night. The family home. Arrow headquarters. The trunk he brought back from Lian Yu. His weapons and leathers. His mother.

It's not Oliver's first encounter with profound loss. He's an old-hand at the stages of recovery by now, but it seems almost worse this way, knowing the breadth and depth of the hard days that lie ahead. Last night, after falling apart in Felicity's arms, she'd reminded him that the unavoidable pain
of loss can't be sidestepped. Running away only prolongs the suffering.

"The only way past grief is to go through it, head-on with eyes open," she'd said, her voice muffled beneath his ear where it rested against her warm breast. "But you won't face this alone, Oliver. I know this flies in the face of your lone wolf instincts. But this time, you need to stay, to lean in. To rely on us. On your sister. On your team. On me."

Felicity's quiet, sure presence in the tranquil twilight, her body solid and welcoming beneath him, had allayed his anguish, walled off the monsters of his past, eased his hurt, comforted his tortured soul. He didn't need to run anymore. The only sure peace to be found was here with this remarkable woman at his side. She would be there, her hand in his, giving him the strength to surrender his mother's body to the grave and her life to the ages.

Together, they would start over, rising from the ashes of hate and treachery, to build a life centered in a shared search for justice. The Arrow and his partners would bring their well-paired strengths to protect the innocent, to free the oppressed. Shoulder-to-shoulder, they would stand for those who could not.

Oliver's salvation was brought by the wrong girl. The one he could so easily have overlooked and, in his blindness, had damned near lost. In the long, disreputable list of women he'd known, the brilliant, quirky IT specialist was the least likely candidate to lead him out of lonely darkness. Only when she had been ripped from his life had he realized how precious she was, how much he depended on her guidance, her righteous anger, her unconditional love. It was Felicity Smoak—the girl with the glasses—who saw through him, who beheld the clearest vision of the man she refused to give up on. Her beautiful eyes looked beyond the pain and the isolation to discover and unleash the hero's heart beating within the chest of Oliver Queen.

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