The Man Under the Hood

by ash818

Summary

Two years ago, Jonathan Queen learned the truth about the family business, and now he is determined to carry on his parents' legacy.

"You'll spend most of your time in pain from one injury or another," Oliver warned him. "You might get help from SCPD, or they might take a shot at you. When you make mistakes - and you will - people will pay for it with their lives. You'll see things you'll never get out of your head, and you'll do things that most decent people wouldn’t understand. You will not get any awards. Most of the time you won't even get thanked."

"It seems like it would be worth it," Jon said.

But nothing could prepare him for just how much this crusade might cost him and his family.

Notes

This story never would have been written had it not been for Rosie Twiggs and effie214.
and that's just facts. These two beautiful ladies are both thoughtful, emotionally adept writers whose input and guidance anyone would be lucky to have. They gave me months of support, enthusiasm, excellent ideas, insightful commentary, and kind words. Both of you - seriously. I cannot thank you enough.
November chill gusts through Starling, the roof of the police department’s main headquarters is ninety feet off the ground, and I forgot to bring an extra set of Under Armour to the lair tonight. Huddled close to the rooftop service door, I am freezing my ass off.

The wind blows the hood back onto my shoulders. That's the sixth time now.

Dad claims the hood always stayed on for him, no problem. Mom’s theory is that the buzz cut provided traction, and every time the subject comes up, she finger-combs my hair and bites her lip ruefully. She has given up telling me when I need a haircut. Abby, on the other hand, cheerfully reminded me this morning that her stylist would be happy to see me if I ever get tired of looking like the back end of an Angora goat.

I tug the hood down around my ears, which started aching with the cold about an hour ago, and I adjust the lock picks slightly. A little twist, the barest wiggle and –

“Ha. Gotcha.”

Warm air washes over my face. Out of petty spite, I put a little swagger into my step as I stroll into Police Chief Len Broussard’s secure building.

SCPD is not out for my blood the way they were for Dad's in his first year as the Arrow. For one thing, I'm not dropping bodies. For another, they have neither the manpower nor the expertise to spare for someone who's been basically helpful anyway. They're not the force that Captain Lance commanded back in the twenties.

"After the tech bust," Mom explained, "the city's revenues plunged, and SCPD just couldn't pay the salary they used to. They started hemorrhaging qualified people, and now half their officers moonlight on private security details to make ends meet. Ask Dig about their ethics and professionalism. He'll tell you some stories."

"You mean the details turned into protection rackets?"

"I mean that some officers got creatively... entrepreneurial about keeping the peace. Chief Broussard hasn’t exactly discouraged it either."

So yes, I take a little perverse joy in fritzing out the security cameras in the hallway with magnetized flechettes.

I head for the secure archives, where their most sensitive files are stored, isolated from the cloud where Mom can’t get to them and locked behind a steel door with a thumbprint scanner. The first time I ninja'd my way in here, I stole a Coke can with a set of beautiful, un-smudged pizza grease fingerprints from the head of Internal Affairs. We lifted the prints, sent them to Central City, and Barry sent us back a funky little latex thumb glove that looks kind of naughty but works like a charm.

Dig says Captain Lance used to just give case files to Team Arrow, just that easy, like Christmukkah presents. These days, if I want to know what SCPD knows about Starling’s psychotic lowlife community, I have to find out the hard way.
After eight months of regular visits, I know the floor plan like it’s my own house, and I slip from shadow to shadow down the deserted hallways to a door marked: Restricted Area, Authorized Personnel Only. I pull out my official authorization keys - the torsion wrench and the hook pick - and I make quicker work of this lock now that my fingers aren’t stiff with cold.

Archives are a couple doors down. The thumb condom gets me in, no problem, and in the pitch darkness I hear the faint hum of the three mid-thirties model data storage libraries Mom calls Larry, Curly, and Moe.

I slip the drive key into Moe, and I whisper into the comm, "Done. It's all you."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Mom says in my ear. Things start flashing to life on Moe’s display, and I resist the urge to drum my fingers on the plastic Wayne Enterprises logo while I wait. Breathe in, breathe out, and focus, Dad would say. If you’re bored in the field, you’re not paying enough attention.

Dad knows his shit. The moment I zone back in, I notice the footsteps. I turn the library’s monitor off to mute the light, and I melt into the shadows. The footsteps - high heels, by the sound of it - pass right by the door without so much as a pause.

"Got it," Mom says on a yawn. "Time to pack up for the night."

"On my way."

I ease the door open a crack, and I look up and down the pitch black hallway. Just because it’s new and cool, I flick on the night vision Mom recently integrated into my mask, and I glance up and down the hallway. All clear.

“Hey,” I whisper into the comm. “What exactly is an Angora goat?”

“Oh, you know,” Mom says sleepily. “They’re all curly and silky, and people make mohair sweaters out of them. The junebug gave me one for my birthday - a sweater, not a goat - and it’s the softest thing I’ve ever…” She trails off. I hear another yawn, and I can picture her rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Come on home, Arrow.”

I swing home through the night exactly like a silent guardian, or maybe like a watchful protector, and definitely not at all like a shivering dumbass with his nose running from the cold. Arrowing is extremely glamorous and sexy, let me tell you.

Back at Panoptic, I slip into the storage closet, through the unmarked door, and down into the lair. Please stop calling it a lair, Dad always says, so Mom and I refuse to call it anything else.

Down in the warm flicker of the synthetic torches, my parents are waiting up for me on the oversized sofa. At least Dad is waiting up. Mom is asleep on his shoulder, her glasses folded up on the end table next to him. He smiles at me, mouthing a “Shh.” I snort back the snot that’s threatening to run down my face. He gives me a look – I thought we trained that out of you when you were six – which I shrug off.

Mom’s computer glows to life when I sit down in front of it. I slip in the drive key, pull up George Miranda’s case file, and print a copy for Dad. He doesn’t like reading on screens, says his eyes aren’t what they used to be.

When I get out of the shower, he’s perusing the last page. “I’m not a lawyer,” he says in a murmur that won’t wake Mom, “but this looks like enough to convict him. There’s only one reason Laurel would drop the charges.”
"One of the cartels," I say, nodding along. "Miranda is either Salvatrucha or..." I take a breath, "or Black Hand."

The Hand took it on the jaw two years ago when the FBI received an unmarked package containing a single data key, on which they found enough information to incriminate half the mob captains on the West Coast. Since then, the Feds have been gleefully arresting mobsters left and right. A year ago, Jason Mora was limping up the steps of the courthouse to testify against his former employers when he was shot in a drive-by.

I admit I read that headline with a certain amount of satisfaction. May the imps of hell winch his intestines from his guts and cut him in quarters every morning before breakfast.

While the Feds landed the big fish, I’ve been drag-netting the little shrimp. It's not going nearly as well for me as for them. The fifth time that Laurel’s office let one scuttle right back into the water, the Arrow called her from a ghost phone to demand a meeting on her rooftop.

“Ms. Lance,” I said, hood down and morphvox on. “I’m getting a little tired of gift wrapping scumbags and watching you return them with the tags still on. Four times is unfortunate, but five is just rude.”

She closed her eyes and took a calming breath, as she so often does with that brat Jonny Queen. There was no way in hell she didn’t recognize me. But if she wanted to playact having no personal connection to the Arrow, I was willing to do that song and dance.

“I have to work with the justice system as it is,” she said, “not as I’d like it to be. If witnesses shut their mouths and lab work disappears and judges rule evidence inadmissible, I don’t have a case. It doesn’t matter what I know, it only matters what I can prove.” She crossed her arms and shifted her weight over her sensible shoes. “I’m not sure you understand how complicated the situation can be.”

I shrugged. “How do I un-complicate it?”

She shook her head. “You do your job, and let me do mine.”

Back at the lair, Dad did his best to explain. "She's not wrong about the systemic challenges. And on top of that, I wouldn't be surprised if somebody were leaning on her."

I tried to imagine the District Determinator running scared from a threat. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing she’d put up with."

"It didn't used to be." Dad leaned back against the desk wearily. "You were still in high school when it happened, so you probably don’t remember the Hennessey murders. Rick Hennessey was on Laurel's team when she was lead prosecutor on the Dozier case. She took it hard when he was killed."

“Somebody bumped off a city attorney?”

“Him and his whole family,” Dad said quietly. “His daughters were thirteen and fifteen.”

I whistled. And I shut up judging Laurel Lance.

Besides, I can’t say I’m eager to tangle with murderous international crime syndicates myself. This one in particular. “Much as I enjoy pissing in the Black Hand’s cornflakes,” I tell Dad, “I’m kind of hoping it’s not them this time.”

“So am I. Wounded animals are not famous for their calm and compliance.”
I give him an irritable look. “Yeah, that. Also the bit where it’s fifty-fifty their jefe knows exactly who sicced the Feds on him.”

Jason Mora knew our names. The night we burned down his little fiefdom, he went straight into federal custody before he could report back to his boss, and he probably preferred it that way. The leader of the Black Hand, known only as Galen, makes a Darth Vader severance package available to those who fail him. But in Mora’s year negotiating a plea deal, there’s no telling what information he might have passed along from behind bars.

Of course, if Galen knows who we are, he also knows that the last time his organization went up against our family, their Starling headquarters got blown up and their unhackable computer got hacked and their super secret trafficking operation got shut down and their sensitive data got mailed to the FBI. All in all, kidnapping Felicity Queen was the worst strategic blunder the Hand has ever made in North America, with the possible exception of that turf war with the L.A. Bloods.

But if Warlord McMurder decides we each need a bullet in the brain, there’s not a hell of a lot we can do to stop him.

I roll my lips together. “We never should have left Mora alive.”

Dad shakes his head. “Let’s not have that argument again.”

“I’m just saying.”

He casts me a dark look. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I throw my hands up. “If our secret identities are such a big secret, you’d think we ought to work a little harder to keep them, you know, secret.”

“How would you have done it?” Dad says, voice so low it’s nearly a growl. “Shot him? Bludgeoned him? Strangled him? Would you have looked him in the eyes while he died?”

I don’t have an answer to that.

I used to think Mom struggled with insomnia. I’d catch her in the kitchen at two in the morning, we’d share a midnight pint of ice cream, and she’d wander back to bed. A few weeks after I learned the truth about the family business, we killed a pint of Ben and Jerry’s Salted Caramel together, and she told me the real reason she was awake at 1:42am.

“He has nightmares. They wake me up sometimes.”

I thought of the island, of the grandparents I never had a chance to meet, of the man I would have called Uncle Tommy if he’d lived. “You think he dreams about people he lost?”

“Most of the time,” Mom said wearily. “Tonight it was about people he killed.”

Dad stares me down, and I look away first.

“If there’s no getting to Miranda legally,” I say, “I guess the Arrow will have to pay him a friendly visit.”

“Tomorrow night,” he says, jostling the shoulder Mom is sleeping on. “Felicity, wake up. Time to go home.”

Her eyebrows scrunch together, she makes an irritable noise, and she burrows closer.
“Hey. Mrs. Queen,” I try. “Your son’s been arrested again.”

Dad can give me all the side-eye he wants. It works.

“You are not funny at all,” Mom informs me when she’s lucid. “Do we think Miranda is working for a cartel?”

“We do.”

“Mmm. Friendly visit?”

“Very friendly.”

The next morning at the ungodly hour of seven o’clock, Uncle Roy picks me up in the old, worn-out Jeep he loves too much to replace, and we head for Blue Falls National Park in a fine mist of rain.

“Good morning,” I mutter, passing him a thermos of coffee.

Bed-headed with dark circles under his eyes, he sums up my feelings on the matter: “Yeah, we’ll see.”

It is not our best training day ever. The compound bow doesn’t mind the wet, but I definitely do. Soggy and cold and tired, I scale trees and leap over fallen logs and roll down banks of leafmeal, cursing under my breath the whole way. I dutifully shoot whichever tree trunks Uncle Roy designates as the enemy, but after an hour, I start getting sloppy.

“Elbow up,” he growls for the third time. “God damn it, Jon, you know better.”

“Yeah, I do!” I snap right back. “And yet you keep saying it.”

His expression darkens, and I wonder if we’re about to throw down. But instead he holds out a hand. “Give me the bow.”

I admit to some sulkiness as I hand it over.

“We’re wasting our time here,” he says, turning on his heel and stalking away.

I scowl at his back the whole way to the Jeep. When we climb back in and crank the heat up, I slide down low in the seat, strip my gloves off, and hold my hands up to the vents. “I know I kind of sucked today.”

“Did you hood up last night?”

“And the night before. Five hours of sleep in two days isn’t really enough for this.”

He nods vehement agreement. “Believe me, I know.”

After four years as Arsenal and nearly three as the Arrow, Uncle Roy of all people knows exactly what I’m talking about. If I’d shot him a text saying, Hey, out til three burgling SCPD’s archives, don’t show up til noon, he would probably have given me a few extra hours. “So that’s my problem. What’s yours?”

His jaw sets. “Look, you’re coming along fine,” he says evenly. “You’re picking it up even faster
than I did.”

“Not as fast as Dad,” I grumble.

“Nobody picks it up as fast as that freak.”

At my age, Dad was some kind of weird, implausible savant with a bow, and I doubt I will ever be the archer that he is. Of course, I’ve only had two years to get there. I’ve studied martial arts since the age of seven, but I never touched a bow until the day after Dad finished physical therapy for the reconstructive surgery on his knee.

“Good as new?” I asked him when the therapist left the house after their last appointment.

“Maybe not new,” he said, reaching into the fridge and snagging a water bottle. “Good as any other fifty-four year old knee.”

“Maybe Mora’s goons did you a favor, forcing you to finally get it fixed instead of just limping around being stoic and grumpy.”

He shot me a glare. “I’ll send a thank-you note.” He cracked the bottle open and gulped down most of it in one go.

Really, it worked out very conveniently to our cover story. The emergency surgery after that crazy rescue mission was easily concealed as a long-overdue, scheduled procedure to repair old damage that had been getting progressively more painful every year. My broken ribs were harder to explain, but given my history of emergency room visits after telling someone, “Hold my beer and watch this,” no one was too suspicious.

“So, you’re all healed up,” I said, taking a seat at the kitchen island. “And, you know, “I patted my ribs, “I’m all healed up. So I was thinking we could head to Panoptic, maybe go down to the basement, and I could kick your ass.”

He grinned, crumpling the empty plastic bottle in his fist. “You could try.”

It was fucking glorious.

We started unarmed, then we did a little knife work, moved on to some ground fighting, and to cap it all off we broke out the staffs and had the time of our lives trying to bash each other’s faces in for an hour or so.

Sweat-drenched, panting, and still chuckling, we both sank down on the mats and leaned against the wall.

I figured I had him in the right mood, so I went for it: ”You know, we saved those people at the Port Authority.”

Dad turned to look at me, and his mouth quirked into a smile. “Yeah, you did.”

"For once, I didn't feel like a screw-up."

His smile started to fade. He knew where this was going. “I've never been prouder.”

"But if we hadn't been there for our own reasons,” I said slowly, “no one ever would have known they were there. We got Mom back, but other people - people who don’t have money, or connections, or a very specialized skill set... who’s going to swoop in and save them?”
He looked away from me. "There will always be someone out there who needs help."

"What you did back then," I said, gesturing to the glass cases at the other end of the room, where the green-clad mannequin stood in shadow, flanked by bows and specialty arrowheads. "It helped, didn’t it?"

"I like to think so," he said quietly.

I looked him in the eyes. "Teach me how."

Dad closed his eyes and took a slow breath, like he’d known for weeks that this was coming. Then he just looked at me. Ten or fifteen seconds feel like an eternity when Oliver Queen is silently staring you down, but I didn’t dare do anything but wait.

At last, he said, "Please don't ask me for that."

"If shit like that is going on in my city - people in shipping containers, for fuck's sake - then I want to do something about it."

He shook his head. "There are other ways."

"Yeah, but this is the only way I don't suck at."

Dad got to his feet, and he turned the full weight of his attention on me, so heavy I could almost physically feel the pressure. "You'll spend most of your time in pain from one injury or another," he said in a low, gravelly voice I hadn't heard since the night we went to get Mom. "You might get help from SCPD, or they might take a shot at you. You will lie to people you care about, and when you stand them up or let them down, you won't be able to explain. When you make mistakes - and you will - people will pay for it with their lives. You'll see things you'll never get out of your head, and you'll do things that most decent people wouldn't understand. You will not get any awards. Most of the time you won't even get thanked. You won't be able to save everyone, and sometimes it will feel like you can't save anyone."

Dad had never emotionally unloaded on me quite like that before. It took me a few seconds to recover. "Ok, so all of that," I managed to say. "But there are people out there who are alive because of you. Kids who still have their parents. There's that too, right?"

Slowly, just once, he nodded. "There's that too."

"I don't know, but it seems like... like it would be worth it."

His smile had an unmistakable sadness in it when he held out his hand. "Tomorrow morning we'll go out to Blue Falls and see how you are with a bow."

I took the hand he offered, and he pulled me to my feet. “Thank you.”

He headed for the showers. "Five o'clock," he tossed over his shoulder. “You'd better be awake."

In the quiet depths of the forest, soaked to the ankles by the chill September dew, I loosed my first arrow from the carbon fiber longbow that Dad carried on Lian Yu thirty years before.

It disappeared among the trees. I reached for another.

Arms crossed, Dad said, “No. Go get it.”

I didn’t bother with surprise or indignation. I sighed, and I went to find the arrow. Then I went to
find eight more after that one.

But after two years, after hundreds of hours of practice, after thousands of murdered tennis balls and mortally wounded trees, after getting fussed at by Dad and Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea in turn, after pulled muscles and aching flexor tendons and bowstring bites…

Let’s just say I hit what I aim at.

“You’re coming along fine,” Uncle Roy repeats. “I probably didn’t need to be that much of a dick to you.”

We don’t really do heart to hearts, but it’s worth trying again: “Yeah, what’s up with that?”

He presses his lips together. “Thea’s starting that treatment today.”

“Is she nervous?”

He chuckles. My aunt has a sixteen year history of chatting casually to nurses like a stone cold badass while undergoing medical procedures that would make me swoon like a Victorian maiden. It’s Uncle Roy who gets edgy and prickly and unbearable over these things.

“It’s not a big, invasive thing,” he says, shrugging. “Just a shot.”

She’s had approximately a zillion of those. Uncle Roy still can’t look. “They don’t expect any nasty side effects?”

“Fatigue, mood swings, low grade fever, muscle cramps, aches and pains…”

I live with two women, neither of whom is shy. I know where I’ve heard all that before. “Gene therapy gives you PMS?”

He frowns at me. “Well, that’s creepy.”

“You’re telling me.”

“No, it’s just,” he shakes his head, eyes on the road, “that was Thea’s reaction, word for word.”

I grin. “So, not so bad.”

We are ignoring here that the list of possible side effects of any given attempt to make my aunt walk again includes: edgy, prickly, unbearable husband; fighting with husband over appropriate level of optimism; accusing husband of wanting you to stay in the wheelchair; accusing him of resenting you for the wheelchair; indignation at husband’s snarky insensitive replies; and, finally, storming out of the house to stay with your brother for weeks.

Aside from the repeated, heartbreaking disappointments, there are reasons Aunt Thea has not agreed to an experimental therapy in eight years.

“We’ll see,” Uncle Roy says, leaning back in the driver’s seat and draping his hand over the wheel. “One day at a time.”

I take that as my cue to drop the subject, and we spend the drive home talking single cams versus hybrid cams, aluminum alloy versus carbon fiber. The rain pounds on the roof of the Jeep, and the windshield wipers squeak out a steady rhythm.

“See you Monday,” Uncle Roy says when he pulls up in front of my house. “Don’t wear the tie with the Budweiser frogs.”
I’m not allowed to wear the Jim Beam t-shirt whose logo shows through my white button-down either. “Our clients need to feel like we are taking their cases and their concerns seriously,” Lyla said. “If you’re going to walk around as a billboard for whiskey, you could at least wear a respectable Scotch.”

Much as I love working for Panoptic, their dress code is fascist and their Executive Vice President is kind of a smartass.

When I open the car door, I spot Abby coming up the sidewalk, still rumpled and bedheaded from her sleepover a few blocks away. She perks up when she sees the Jeep.

Uncle Roy calls out his open window to her: “Hey, sweetheart, you going to come tell me hello?”

She steps up on his running board and pecks his cheek. “Hello. How was guy bonding time?”

“Terse. Manly.”

She leans her elbows on the window frame. “You don’t happen to know if Aunt Thea finished my winter formal dress, do you?”

He knits his brows at her. “Which one is that?”

“The only one I asked her to…” Abby’s eyes widen. “She’s making another one?” Both her hands patter excitedly on the steering wheel. “She’s making another one!”

“Well, shit.” He lets his head thunk back against the headrest. Then he looks up sternly at her. “When she gives it to you, you had better act surprised.”

“Oh, I will,” she says, beaming.

“And I mean really sell it.”

“Someone will have to give me an Emmy afterward.”

She’s still grinning as we head up the front walk together. But as we come through the front door, the first thing we hear is Mom screaming.

I bolt for the sound, Abby close on my heels. It’s coming from the kitchen. We round the corner, my wet boots skidding on the wood floor, and -

Giggles.

God, my parents are enough to put you in a diabetic coma. A fucking tickle fight. Honestly.

“Do you people have to get up to cutesy bullshit the second you have the house to yourselves?”

They’re still laughing, Mom hanging over Dad’s arm where she’s been trying to escape the corner of the counter he’s backed her into. Flour streaks his shirt and puffs from her hair.

“Blame Dad!” she says. “I was minding my own business, making pumpkin spice bread, and he...” Her brows draw into a frown. “Abby?”

Next to me, pale as the flour, Abby approximates a smile. “I thought - sorry, it was stupid.”

Abby scared me some, in the weeks after our run-in with the Black Hand. She slept too much and then not at all, ate too little and then binged on comfort food. She woke sobbing from nightmares
that people were coming to take Mom away again or that they were bursting through the front
door to line us up against a wall and shoot us. It was over two years ago, but right now her
shaking hands make it feel like yesterday.

My parents break apart, Dad to a stool at the kitchen island, and Mom to the shelf full of
cookbooks. “You up for a challenge?” she asks Abby, pulling one down. “I want to try making
this semolina souffle cake with pistachio creme anglaise. What do you think?”

Swallowing down her embarrassment, Abby goes to look at the recipe. As she passes Dad, he
scoops her into a quick hug, then lets her go on her way like it didn’t even happen. I think my
parents just executed a perfect flanking maneuver of got-your-back and no-big-deal.

Before I knew about the family business, I was well aware of how seamlessly Mom and Dad
could work together to guilt trip, lecture, and scare me straight. They did a hell of a good cop/bad
cop, swapping roles depending on who was more pissed.

It never occurred to me that they also strategized with Abby, who never seemed to need any
parenting, perfect little unicorn with a mane of woven rainbows that she is. Now I can’t unsee the
tactics and tag-teaming at work, and I admit to being impressed.

“I meant to ask,” Abby says, hands busy with saucepans and whisks and measuring cups. “Where
was everyone last night? I stopped home to pick up clothes, and nobody was here.”

And here comes my absolute least favorite part of my night job.

“I was at Panoptic late,” I say.

The trick to lying, my parents always say, is to tell the most innocuous version of the truth.

“Dad and I had a nice night out together,” Mom says, smiling over her shoulder, and since she
must regard this as technically true, I have to resist the urge to scoff at my parents’ idea of date
night.

“You were at Panoptic at eleven o’clock?” Abby says to me. “I know Dig and Lyla aren’t
working you that hard.”

The trick to lying to Abigail Queen is to develop ugly yellow calluses around your soul until it
resembles the big toe of a long-distance barefoot runner. I shift my weight casually to lean against
the doorjamb, give her a you-caught-me smirk, and mutter, “I, ah, may have gone out afterward.”

She gives me a look I can’t decipher, but which I am ninety-nine percent certain does not mean, I
admire and look up to you as a positive role model, big brother, and I appreciate your honesty
and straightforwardness with me. Then she shrugs and turns back to the standing mixer.

I go have a shower, and I wash three pine needles, a burr, and what I think might be dried bird shit
out of my hair.

Like I said. Arrowing. Extremely glamorous and sexy.

The following night, I gear up and head out for my come to Jesus meeting with George Miranda.
On the ride across town, I rehearse in my head the various communication strategies I can use to
get through to him, convince him to alter his life trajectory, and motivate him to fulfill his potential
as a human being.
Threaten another juror in an ongoing trial, and I will nail your feet to the floor and use you for target practice.

Too specific. It’s only fair to make clear the full range of actionable offenses.

If you ever come to my attention in a criminal scumbag capacity ever again, we will not be having a nice chat like this. I will be putting an arrow in your guts. You will be shitting through a bag for a long, long time.

No, Dad said that threat was juvenile and gross.

I will be putting an arrow through one of your kidneys. I’ll let you pick which.

Ooh, concise. I like it.

But when I skid down the roof of his shed and get my first good look at his back yard, the door is already hanging askew from one hinge, jagged splinters protruding from the jamb.

Someone beat me here.

I start running when I hear the first scream.

It’s not a big house. When I burst into the living room, arrow nocked and raised, I find my guy on the wrong end of a vicious beatdown. Miranda is curled on the floor, yelling his head off in Spanish. Two ragged-looking men and one woman crowd around him, kicking the shit out of him.

Well, I can’t have that.

My first arrow lodges in the nearest scruffy bastard’s ass. Literally. His ass. It’s the least likely place to nick an artery or cause permanent debilitating damage, but it will definitely slow him down, and it’s hard to remove without help.

“I’d rather you didn’t shoot people in the ass while wearing my hood,” Dad said the first time it happened.

I told him all my reasons. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” he admitted. “It’s just… tacky.”

Scruffy the Bearded Thug isn’t a fan either. Grubby and Grunge aren’t even a little bit grateful to get matching arrows in the shoulder and calf. All three roar with pain and instantly forget the crumpled, broken mess on the floor.

Then they rip the arrows out like Nerf darts, and they rush me.

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss, because even if they are sloppy and predictable as a rom com, three psychotically determined attackers at once are going to be a problem. I sidestep Scruffy’s wild haymaker and rattle his skull pretty good with the leading edge of the bow, but then the woman is on me with her grungy fingers clawing for my eyes. I grab her wrists and swing her into the wall before Grubby takes a flying leap and slams his shoulder into my gut.

Not good. If they get me on the floor, they’ll do exactly what they did to Miranda. Not good at all.

I slip a little leaf-bladed knife into my hand, and I send Grubby tumbling away with blood pouring into his eyes from a slash across his forehead. Scruffy reels from a gouge across his quads.
Anyone sane would reassess their chances at this point and back the hell off.

But they don’t.

Grunge tugs up my sleeve at the wrist, and sharp pain closes around my forearm. I drop the knife.

“What the hell? You don’t bite people!” I yell, grabbing her by the throat and trying to figure out a way to get her off me without tearing the skin even worse.

That’s when Scruffy brings the lamp down on my head.

It rings my bell so good it doesn’t even hurt. Just nauseous numbness reverberating through my skull.

This would be such a stupid way to die. So I lash out viciously and in all directions, letting muscle memory take over. All three have been losing blood fast since they ripped those arrows out, and they’re finally starting to fade. A punch to her arrow wound puts Grunge down, moaning in pain. An elbow to the head does it for Scruffy. Grubby I have to bounce off the floor a couple times before he stays down.

Then I stumble over to Miranda, who has fallen silent. I half-sink, half-fall to my knees next to him, and I reach for the pulse in his neck. Nothing. His skin is warm through the thin material of my glove, but he’s wholly still.

Stupid with the blow to the head, I say, “No, wait,” and I roll him prone. Stare into his pallid face, search his half-lidded eyes.

He was alive just a minute ago.

I roll him back onto his side. Then I throw up in the pool of blood I’m kneeling in, and when I hear sirens I wonder vaguely what CSI will make of the Doritos in their evidence.

I don’t know how I get out of the house or down the alley, but eventually I remember to tap my comm back on. “Watchtower? Hey. Watchtower.”

It’s Uncle Roy who answers me. “Arrow, what happened?”

“Thought I got there in time,” I mutter.

There’s a pause. Then, very firmly, “Tell me where you are.”

“Twelfth and Marion. No, I mean Market. Twelfth and Market.”

A slightly longer pause. “Go to the overgrown lot on the corner and stay hidden. I’m coming to get you.”

“What about my bike?”

“You parked it out of sight, didn’t you? It will survive a night in the Glades.”

In the brambly lot, the grass has grown up tall enough to hide a pony. It keeps me well hidden until Uncle Roy comes to get me in my X5 and guides me to the car with a hand on my back. The passenger seat is covered with a towel to soak up the blood all over me.

“So prepared,” I say. “Didn’t take you for a Boy Scout.”

“I called Elaine,” Uncle Roy says. “She’s just ending her shift at the ER, and she’s going to come
When he gets me to the lair, Elaine is waiting for me at the base of the stairs. She shepherds me to the med table and says, “Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

Her voice is pitched low for a woman’s, and she keeps up a calm, steady stream of nothing in particular while she shines a light in my eyes and makes me follow her finger. When I was little, she did the same thing when she smoothed band-aids on skinned knees or pressed ice packs to bruises. She’d put my hand on her shoulder and say, *Squeeze as hard as it hurts.*

“I hold out your arm for me, honey, thank you, now let’s have a look, ooh that’s deep, but no worries, we’ll get it patched up for you, here we go.”

I close my eyes, try not to sway with the dizziness, and I let her clean out the two semicircular bite wounds on my arm. Uncle Roy hovers nearby keeping one ear to the police scanners.

They are the best possible people to whom I could come home injured. Dig and my parents always look tempted to lock me behind a baby gate, and Aunt Thea expects everyone to share her pain tolerance and nonchalance toward scary medical instruments.

But Elaine sounds good and smells good, and her hands move so smooth and sure that I hardly feel a thing. It’s like laying down in a bubble bath and getting up clean and bandaged.

My head clears, but in case I get dizzy again, Uncle Roy stays within earshot while I change out of my blood-drenched leathers and have a quick shower.

“Take these,” Elaine says when I emerge with a towel around my neck. She holds out two white pills and a bottle of water. “It’s a grade one concussion, and you’re going to hurt for a while. It’s fine to go home and sleep it off.”

I down the pills. Then I skim my hand up her arm, and I give her shoulder an affectionate jostle. “Thanks, Lanie.”

For the first time, she lets the mask slip, and she looks at me with something other than pleasant professional care. Her mouth twists in a rueful smile. “You know, two summers ago,” she says, reaching out and finger-combing my hair away from my face, “when you went to get Felicity at the Port Authority…”

I frown at her.

She drops her hand, shakes her head. “I was just thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“When Dad told me the story, I knew you’d end up here.”

“Here, like concussed with somebody’s teeth prints in my arm?”

“Here in the Arrow’s secret lair, wearing green leather and eye makeup. Dad and I weren’t exactly crazy about the idea. We tried to talk Roy and Oliver out of it.”

Uncle Roy’s crossed arms confirm this story. I’m not going to lie, it stings a bit. “Why?”

“I used to babysit you, remember? It was my job to keep you safe.”

My eyes ache, I’m pretty sure I can feel my pulse in my brain, which would freak me out if I had
the energy for it, and Elaine is being ridiculous. I let my heavy head fall forward and head butt her shoulder. She knows what I mean by it.

After she’s gone, Uncle Roy asks me for the story. I tell him in as much detail as I can.

“They were on something,” I conclude. “Had to be. They just would not go down.”

“Thrill kill?” he suggests. “Or it could have been a rival gang. The Black Hand isn’t short of enemies.”

“If it was a hit, why were they unarmed and tripping balls?”

“They got the job done.”

I cast my eyes down. Five minutes sooner, and I would not be replaying the listless fall of George Miranda’s head when I rolled him over.

“Hey.” He pulls my gaze back up with the force of his. “I spent years watching one self-centered jackass named Queen beat himself up over how everything bad that ever happened was his fault, because obviously the world revolved around him and his choices.” He leans back against my mom’s desk. “Don’t really need a repeat performance.”

“Wow.” I nod appreciatively. “Truly you have a gift. Have you considered a career in the helping professions?”

“I’m serious. It gets old.”

“I bet.” Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “I’ve never touched anybody dead before.” Maybe I’m still concussed. “I mean, at a wake, sure. When they’re all prettied up and framed like a picture. But not…”

Uncle Roy nods. “One second, there’s a person there, and the next,” he snaps his fingers, “there’s a body. Just like that.”

“Yeah.” Just like that.

As with so many things down here in the lair, I barely need to explain, because I’ve got a whole team of Yodas who’ve already lived it. I can’t imagine how Dad did so much of this shit on his own.

Uncle Roy drives me home, I sneak upstairs without waking anyone, and I collapse gratefully into my own bed.

Chapter End Notes

References:

"He's a silent guardian. A watchful protector."
- The Dark Knight

"And I think calling him that is an insult to the psychotic lowlife community."
"Don't taunt the fear demon."
"Why? Can it hurt me?"
"No. It's just... tacky."

- Buffy the Vampire Slayer
Getting up for work the next morning is a special kind of suck. My head pounds, my muscles ache, and my mouth tastes like mildewed cotton balls.

Milena, who spends weekdays keeping this sprawling house in decent shape, stands at the stove when I come downstairs. Abby sits at the kitchen island, leaning on one elbow and doing last-minute homework. When they look up at me, their expressions turn to a mix of sympathy and disappointment.

“Mr. Jonathan,” Milena says, with the slight lilt of her Ukrainian accent. “You had a good weekend?” She obviously anticipated as much, because those hash browns, eggs, and toast are her standard hangover breakfast the morning after parties.

“A little too good.”

“Come eat. You’ll feel better.” Milena has known me since I was six months old, and even when I let her think I’m still the dumb jackass who racked up all those drunk and disorderlies, she takes better care of me than I deserve.

“Did you even brush your hair?” Abby says when I sit down next to her.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Nevertheless, she finger combs it roughly, and I jerk away when she jabs the tender bump where the lamp struck me. “Cut it out, Abigail.”

Her face falls, and she says nothing more to me except, “Have a good day at work.”

That seems exceedingly unlikely. But I soldier on and head downtown, because, you know, heroic fortitude and stuff.

The odd thing about working for Panoptic is the clientele. Some of them I know from school, through Queen Consolidated, or through the yacht club; I guess you could say we move in the same circles. In the past year, I’ve seen five guys Dad hates and three he invites to our Christmas parties. Others I’ve only read about in newsfeeds. One of them already sold out tickets to her concert a month away, and Abby would die to meet her.

This morning’s eleven o’clock meeting is a brand new client.

“Dr. Cuvier,” Lyla says, shaking his hand. “Please have a seat.”

Abel Cuvier has salt and pepper hair and a firm handshake. I’ve never heard of him, but apparently he is a rock star among people in lab coats. A French-born geneticist at the University of Gotham, he’s spending a few months in Starling to collaborate with other rock stars on research into viral-somatic-I-don’t-know-I-stopped-listening.

“My work has always been controversial,” he explains in his slight accent, leaning his elbows on our conference table. “People hear the word ‘genetic,’ and they fear Nazi eugenics or worse. You may be aware of the bill currently before the Senate, the Kobel Act, which would ban my research entirely.”

“Have you experienced escalating harassment recently?”
He slides a glassfile across the table. Lucky for us, the doctor has kept meticulous notes on his threatening communications, and I scroll through them while Lyla continues to walk him through the assessment.

...playing God ...hope you die in a fire... deserve to watch your children die... burn in hell...

It’s fairly typical anonymous vitriol, going back a few months, and not a single threat strikes me as specific, credible, or imminent.

“You didn’t say whether you’d noticed an escalation, Doctor,” I point out, laying the glassfile flat on the table. “You’ve been doing genetics work in the public eye for decades. If this is the first hate mail you’ve gotten, then your crazies are slower on the uptake than most.”

“It’s the timing,” he says stiffly. “The Bioethics Conference in May will likely sway the Senate vote. My daughter Laetitia is in school here at Starling U - it’s part of why I accepted this fellowship - and I’m afraid as the conference gets closer, she might become a target.”

“A target for whom?” Lyla says. “Is there a specific individual or group that has you worried?”

“Extremists of various stripes. Vigilantes who believe my work is dangerous. Your Green Arrow, for instance.”

I wince. Mentioning the “Green Arrow” is the fastest way to advertise that you are not From Here. Mom says the name is a shibboleth.

"It's a what, now?" I said the first time she used the word.

“In the Book of Judges, to catch their enemies the Ephraimites trying to sneak across a river, the Gileadites gave them a simple test. ‘Say ‘shibboleth.’ If a man pronounced it ‘sibboleth,’ they knew he was an Ephraimite. So, you know, ‘they would seize him and kill him by the fords of the Jordan.’ Like you do.”

Starlingers talk about the Arrow, the Archer, the Bowman, or - for those who still consider him a dangerous psycho - the Hood. None of us would be caught dead alluding to his greenness.

“People want to be heard,” Dr. Cuvier continues, “and nothing speaks quite so loudly as a pipe bomb, does it?”

That all sounds completely reasonable, but the lack of an answer to my very straightforward question sticks with me like a splinter. Did he notice an escalation or not? And if not, what makes him think this conference is going to be any more dangerous than the hundreds of others he’s attended?

“Sir, if there’s something you’re not telling us - “

“Such as?” he says coldly.

“ - we can’t protect you effectively with partial information.” It also endangers our people, but clients tend to find that less persuasive. They’re big guys with guns, aren’t they? Danger is what they’re for.

His gray eyes turn steely. “I don’t care to be interrogated by an intern here by virtue of his family connections.”

Maybe we could seize him and kill him by the fords of the Duwamish.
Lyla slides the glassfile out of my hands and smoothly takes over the interview.

“People come to us frightened,” she tells me afterward. “They’re here to take some measure of control over the scary things that are happening to them. If you want to earn their trust you’ve got to let them set the pace.”

“He’s holding out on us.”

“Obviously. But putting him on the defensive just leaves us that much farther from the truth.”

“What if it’s something shady?”

“He’s a client.” She smiles and pushes the glassfile against my chest. “You can’t beat it out of him.”

Down by the hall by the big double doors, the doctor gathers up his paperwork at the front desk. Before he leaves, Uncle Roy stops him to shake his hand.

“Dr. Cuvier,” Lyla and I hear him say, “I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate the work you do. My wife is trying out a treatment right now based on your research.”

“Oh, with Dr. Sukesh? She’s in good hands. I wish you both all the best.”

“Well,” I mutter to Lyla, “now I feel like an asshole.”

She pats my shoulder, smiling fondly at me. “But you bounce back so quick.”

On the upside, my headache is finally gone. On the even upper side, the sitting-in-chairs-wearing-ties portion of the work day is over. It’s time for the real reason I’m here. Six Panoptic protectors and two trainees show up for my class, and I get to spend a couple hours teaching submission holds.

Almost all of Panoptic’s employees have at least five years on me, but bodyguards are intensely practical people. The new guy, Darius Jones, calls me Prince Pretty Boy and offers to break my nose - “Give you a rugged look, somebody might take you seriously” - but nobody has a problem following my instructions once I’ve laid them out on the floor a couple times.

They don’t quite understand what Prince Pretty Boy is doing here, though. As far as they’re concerned, I belong on the other side of the limousine privacy glass.

I don’t explain myself, in the hope that they’ll assume Mom’s abduction pushed me into this field. Noble quest to prevent my family’s trauma befalling anyone else and all that. But really, the decision was mostly strategic.

“Have you been thinking about what you’d like to do when you graduate?” Mom said when I started my senior year at SCU.

The question honestly threw me. “Well, I was planning on shooting violent felons full of arrows.”

She sighed. “You have to do something at least vaguely career-like, preferably someplace where people can see.”

“Um, why? Useless trust fund brat with no day job sounds like an awesome cover identity to me.”

Dad shook his head. “Be careful which masks you put on, Jon. They’re harder to take off than you might think.”
“And keep in mind that someday it’ll be time to hang up the hood,” Mom said. “So maybe start thinking on a time horizon longer than the next couple of years?”

I cast a skeptical look at Dad. “Did you have some kind of retirement plan when you started?”

“I honestly didn’t expect to live that long.”

Mom glared at him.

“Yeah, okay, sure,” I said. “But every place my business degree might take me is going to be demanding and time-consuming and take over my life. I know you CEO’d and Arrowed at the same time, probably five miles uphill both ways from the lair to the executive suite, but I am not you. I will crash and burn.”

“You’re right,” Dad agreed smoothly. “This is an insurmountable obstacle. It’s not as if there is a company where your skill set would be useful, where you’ll have unhindered access to your base of operations, and where your employers would gladly accommodate your other responsibilities.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, wait.”

My father can be kind of a dick when I try his patience.

I crossed my arms and looked between both my parents and grumbled, “You want me to work at Panoptic?” It was a really good idea, for all the reasons Dad mentioned. I hate when my parents come up with really good ideas for my life.

“Just talk to Dig about it,” Mom said. “When the time comes.”

Not long before I graduated, Dig told me, “You know I can’t use you as a bodyguard. You won’t be free to travel, and you’re too attractive a target yourself.”

“I figured, but some part of my skill set has got to be useful, right?”

He looked me over thoughtfully. “My martial arts instructor is moving to Coast City. Come fill in for her, we’ll see how you do. Plus you can shadow Lyla and Roy, learn the ropes.”

“I’m going to work for you, and in return I get to fetch your wife coffee?”

Dry enough to lower the room’s humidity by a few percentage points, he said: “It pays as well as your previous career plan.”

Like the bodyguards, I went through the eighteen-week training course that Dig and Lyla designed. The time spent on fitness, martial arts, and simulated combat was good fun.

The emergency preparedness was the hard part. I discovered that there is a special kind of CPR for babies, that near-drowning victims can die of pulmonary edema up to seventy-two hours after the incident, and that automated external defibrillators are everybody’s friend. I am now qualified to perform an emergency tracheotomy, which I hope to God never happens because it is profoundly creeptastic.

“Hey!” someone yells from over by the doors, “The village sent me. We seem to have lost our idiot.”

I point at McGinnis, and I call to my roomful of sweaty people, “Who let this asshole in the building?”

McGinnis gets me in a headlock and noogies me, because he is lame enough to think that noogies
are still a thing. His knuckles dig right into the bruise. “It’s not like it’s an asshole free zone, Queen.”

I jab an elbow in his gut - hard, because that fucking hurt - and slip free. “What are you doing here?”

“I have a formalwear fitting,” he says, so sarcastic it bends over on itself into seriousness. “What do you think I’m doing here, dumbass?”

Formalwear fitting. The suit. I said I wanted to see it before he took it back to Gotham, didn’t I? “So how long are you in town?”

“I fly out Wednesday.”

“Oh. I guess you’re staying with us then.”

“Provided I don’t have to room with you.”

“Haha, fuck you, ungrateful bitch. I’ll tell Milena we’ve got one more for dinner. Just let me get showered and we’ll grab a beer.”

We walk two blocks to The Bulldog before heading to his appointment. On the way, two pedestrians nod acknowledgment as we pass, and one man I’ve never seen before in my life tips his chin to me and says, “Afternoon, Mr. Queen.”

When I say hey right back, McGinnis laughs. “God, I miss Starling.”

“What?” I say blankly.

“My first semester at SCU, you know how long it took me to get used to the way random strangers smile at each other on the sidewalk? The first time one said hi, I spent ten minutes racking my brains for how I knew her.”

“Huh. I forget sometimes that you’re not from here.”

You might have moved here at the age of ten, but to qualify as From Here, you must have been born at Charity Hospital or Starling General, and your parents must remember exactly where they were the moment the quake of ’13 hit. You must know how to pronounce Nuxalk Street.

Honestly, Starlingers are fucking snobs about being Starlingers. The most destitute resident of the Glades, whom the city has failed hardest, will jump down the throat of any outsider who dares to criticize her hometown.

At The Bulldog, we sit down and shoot the breeze. Work is fine, both day and night shift. His mom is stressing about the holidays, his little brother is in college now, which - how weird is that? Wayne’s heart condition is getting worse, but no worries, the old man is too stubborn to die.

“And you?” he says, leaning his elbows on the table. “How’s your family?”

I think of Abby, asking us why she came home to an empty house the other night.

When the Black Hand took Mom, my sister had cops and counselors and classmates and caring adults asking her a thousand questions about the kidnapping and the shooting. It seemed unfair to ask a traumatized twelve-year-old to lie for us, so we gave her the official story. Panoptic got credit for arranging a ransom, and Abby got to pour her heart out to whomever she liked with no chance of sending us to prison for grand theft auto, assault and battery, reckless endangerment,
mayhem, or illegal possession of a firearm.

After that, the longer she spent in the dark, the easier it was to leave her there.

When Dad agreed to train me last year, he asked, “What are you going to tell Abby?”

“Um, nothing?”

“I lied to my sister about the hood for years. That did not work out very well for me.”

So I’ve heard, but when he began his crusade, his sister was at least old enough to drive. Mine was an eighth grader with braces who thought that watching R-rated movies made her cool. “Just not yet, okay? I’m going to tell her eventually.”

“Eventually.” Dad sighed. “It’s your secret, not mine. But if her not knowing does more harm than good, I’m taking it out of your hands, you understand?”

I frown at McGinnis. “What do you tell your little brother?”

He gives me a knowing look, then shakes his head at his beer bottle and leans his chair back on two legs. “Lies, man. I tell my whole family lies.”

We leave the half-empty beer bottles on the table, and I drive us to McGinnis’ fitting.

Aunt Thea and Uncle Roy live a few blocks from us in Starling’s historic Garden District, but our houses were built a hundred and fifty years apart. Ours is some robber baron’s 1882 white columned mansion, which Mom calls Italianate and Uncle Roy calls pretentious. He and Aunt Thea finished construction on theirs ten years ago, and though it obediently matches the character of the neighborhood as specified by zoning law, it is only one story, and on a first walk-through it feels oddly proportioned. Halls and doorways gape wide, counters and cabinets stand at unusual heights, and the wood floors extend smoothly throughout the house, uninterrupted by a stair. Even the back patio and garden are all on the same level.

“I refuse to feel disabled in my own house,” Aunt Thea said when they first met with the architect. “No steps. None. Do you understand me?”

McGinnis and I go around the side of the house to her studio, whose big windows overlook the garden, all gray-green and dreary this time of year. She must see us coming, because she’s holding the door open when we get there.

“Come on, come inside quick. It’s cold out there.” She reaches right past me when we come through the door and grabs both of Terry’s hands. “So good to see you, sweetie.”

He leans down to kiss her cheek. “You too, Ms. Queen.”


“I saw you last week,” she scoffs. “Terry is an event. Come on, come see.”

She takes us deep into her studio, past mannequins decked out in ballgowns and dinner jackets and stage costumes and runway couture. I notice some nametags pinned to the fabric. Funny how many clients Panoptic and Aunt Thea have in common. Uncle Roy likes to joke that he and his wife are both in the business of covering celebrities’ asses.

“It’s hanging in the dressing room,” Aunt Thea says, eyes shining in anticipation. “Try it on.”
Two minutes later, McGinnis stands in front of us looking like some kind of high-tech supersoldier. Plus bat ears.

"Holy shit," I say.

"It’s not quite as flexible as your previous one, but it will protect you a hell of a lot better,” Aunt Thea says proudly. “The reinforced tri-polymer has overlapping and interlocking kevlar plates sewn into it - which, let me tell you, was not easy to do in this material, and you should be very impressed - so it functions kind of like plate armor.”

He smiles as if at some private joke and mutters something about a knight.

“How does it feel?”

He just grins a really stupid, kid-at-Christmas grin.

I swat Aunt Thea’s upper arm lightly. “How come mine isn’t that cool?”

“Because Terry sent me a thank-you note after his first suit, and you didn’t.”

She puts the suit in one of her black garment bags with her design house’s logo printed in silver.

On our way out, I remember she just started that treatment, and I try to think of a tactful way to ask her about it in front of McGinnis. “Hey, um, how are you feeling?”

She smiles wryly. “Mostly I’m feeling annoyed with how many times Roy has asked me that in the past forty-eight hours.”

“Ah. Gotcha. I’ll shut up about it then.”

Now she finally reaches for me too, and I get a full-on hug. “No, Jonny. Thank you for asking. I’ll see you Thursday, ok?”

“Bring liquor,” I say firmly. “It’s very important that you bring liquor.”

“Thanks again,” Terry says, laying the garment bag over his arm.

“You are extremely welcome. And boys,” she adds as she gestures us out the door. “If you’re going out tonight, be careful. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Don’t do anything stupid?” McGinnis repeats as we get back in the car. “Who the hell does she think she’s talking to?”

“Couple of morons who like to jump off of perfectly good buildings.”

“Speaking of.” He raises a hopeful eyebrow at me.

“Aw, that’s cute,” I say. “You think now you’ve got your party dress, I have to take you out on the town.”

“It would be polite,” he says with dignity.

At home, McGinnis gets welcomed like family by everyone except Abby, who spends the entire evening faintly pink and unnaturally quiet. I have never once teased her about her crush, partly because I am a saint, but mostly because if I do, she might never speak in his presence again. That would be both inconvenient and not nearly as funny.

After dinner, she shyly suggests a movie. “Popcorn and Watch on the Rhine?”
McGinnis and I look at each other. “I wish we could, but we’re heading out,” he says.

She frowns at me. “It’s a Monday night.”

“Terry’s not in town for very long,” Mom says, coming to the rescue. “And junebug, you have homework anyway.” She nods to me and McGinnis. “Just be careful, ok?”

That night, the Bat and the Arrow go fishing for information on George Miranda’s murder. We snag a bunch of driftwood and a couple of soggy boots first, but eventually we turn up an extremely talkative bottom-feeder.

“Miranda made enemies, his line of work,” McGinnis says, all up in the guy’s face, because it’s his turn. “Tell me who.”

“All due respect,” the guy says, eyes squeezed shut tight. “But, uh, do you want that alphabetically or chronologically?”

Not very many people can let out an honest-to-God growl without sounding ridiculous. My father is among them. Apparently so is McGinnis.

“Oh, Jesus. Ok, um, he didn’t exactly get along with the Three-Sixteen, and half the Bratva got a reason to kill him. But lately he kept looking over his shoulder, you know? Waiting on a threat from his own. I think he was on the outs with the captain.”

It’s bad etiquette to interrupt, but McGinnis isn’t From Here, and he might not spot that lie. “Jason Mora has been dead for months.”


He can tell us nothing more about her. We unhook him and throw him back.

The Starling City Black Hand has a new leader. That information is probably worth my sister thinking I’m kind of an asshole.

Probably.

The next day, I find out that one of the three scruff balls, whose name turns out to be Eugene Bridges, died at Charity Hospital a few hours after I shot him. Blood loss, plus a few other complicating factors unrelated to the ragged hole I put in him. If he hadn’t ripped the arrowhead out, he would have been fine. Whatever he was on, it must have been some serious shit.

He’s not the first man who’s dead because of me, but he’s the first dead by one of my arrows.

Dad, Dig, Uncle Roy, or Aunt Thea would all understand, if I went to them. But I find myself headed to St. Joseph’s Hospice.

“Hey, Captain,” I say, hanging off the doorjamb of his private room. “That cannula is stylin’.”

“Hey, smartmouth.” Smiles look wrong on him these days. His skin is papery grey, and his eyes are sunken and strange. But at least it’s a smile.

“I’m here for the pudding. When’s dessert?”
“Word is, half an hour.” He takes shallow breaths between phrases. “But I’ve been lied to before.”

I take a seat next to him, and I kick my feet up on his mattress as if this were any other visit on any other Tuesday. We catch up, which mostly consists of him asking after all the people who don’t visit. On the TV above our heads, a news anchor is going on about the turkey the President will pardon on Thursday.

Pudding arrives on schedule, and the nurse brings an extra for Mr. Lance’s guest without even being asked.

"I saw the news," Captain Lance says as I’m licking the spoon. “Man dead from complications related to an arrow wound.”

I never told the Captain, Hey, that new guy with the hood and the sweet compound bow? Totally me. From the time the Arrow showed up in Starling after a fifteen-year hiatus, he just quietly assumed.

I set the empty pudding cup aside, put my feet on the floor, and lean in close enough for his failing hearing. Elbows on my knees, chin resting on my interlocked fingers, I murmur, "I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't."

"He's just as dead."

There’s a long silence. He’s gathering his thoughts, or his breath, or both. "You know that law enforcement officers are trained to aim for center mass," he says at last. "If you point a gun at somebody, you’ve got to be justified killing him. Wing him and he might die anyway, so better to be sure of your shot. Nobody who knows anything shoots to wound."

"I do."

"I guess an expert marksman with a bow can afford a higher standard. But at the end of the day, there’s no big thick line drawn in Sharpie between lethal and non-lethal force."

"I'm not an executioner.” Dad and I had multiple long talks about this before he ever gave me the hood. “The Arrow protects the innocent. He doesn’t punish the guilty."

“It was a fight, Jon. Fights are messy and unpredictable. You can do everything right, and it still goes to hell. Plus you’re talking about innocent and guilty like you can tell the difference by looking at them. People are messy and unpredictable, and very rarely do any of them get what they deserve."

"Then what's the point? Why get all jumped up about justice if we're never going to get it?"

Again he pauses to suck in slow, measured breaths. "The first chief I served under had a plaque over his office door. Fiat justitia ruat caelum."

It sounds odd in his Lower Starling accent, but I took five years of Latin classes. I’m familiar with the phrase. "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall."

He nods appreciatively. "But the law is only there to hold up the sky, keep it from falling on our heads. The law serves people, not the other way around."

“And it does a bang up job,” I say on a sigh, leaning my forehead on the heel of my hand.
“Kiddo, we get as close as we can,” he says softly, “this side of the grave.”

I look up at him. "With Bridges, was I close enough?"

"I don't know. Tell me what you should have done different."

I talk out the whole scenario. I could have gotten more space, made use of my flechettes, stayed off the floor where shit gets messy, moved this way, hit that weakness -

"No," Captain Lance says impatiently. "Tell me what you could have done without being able to tell the goddamn future."

I've got nothing.

"So climb down off the cross, moron."

His breath is coming short now, so I turn my attention back to the TV so he doesn't have to talk. Local news is breathlessly speculating on Black Friday sales numbers. When the Captain turns it off, I take that as my cue and get to my feet.

“Tell your mother thank you for the flowers,” he says when I shake his hand. “Tell your father to stop anonymously covering my tab here. I’m dying, not stupid. I know it’s him.”

“I’ll tell them.”

I’m almost out the door when he calls after me, with more weight than a casual goodbye, “Take care of yourself.”

I glance over my shoulder. “Yes, sir.”

At four in the afternoon the day before Thanksgiving, I’m ignoring the threat evaluation matrices I’m supposed to be working on, and instead I’m poking through Panoptic’s database for anything I can find on this supposed new captain of the Starling Hand.

“Oh, great,” I mutter. “There are only six bajillion Desilvas on the West Coast, and a half jillion in Starling alone. Awesome.”

Then my phone rings. It’s a blocked number, and they’re calling the Arrow.

I seriously consider ignoring it just this once. For one thing, tomorrow is a holiday. For another, a very limited set of people have this number, and I’m not feeling particularly charitable toward any of them at the moment. I slipped Laurel the number in case she ever decided to be a pal and pass along some useful information, but mostly she has used it to lecture me about rules of evidence and the value of confessions made under duress.

“Frankly, Ms Lance, admissibility sounds like your problem, not mine,” I said the last time we had one of our bonding sessions.

“You neither understand nor appreciate the legal system you’re stomping all over,” she replied coolly, “and I don’t expect you to. I do, however, expect you to refrain from making my job harder than it already is.”

So I roll my eyes, I slip into the empty conference room, and I answer the phone with a flat
“What?”

The Arrow can get away with the phone etiquette of a grumpy old man. It’s part of his mystique.

“Detective McKenna Hall, SCPD head of homicide.”

Not only is it not Laurel, it’s a gorgeous woman who has never once been pissed off at me. My mood lifts right away. “How did you get this number?”

“A mutual friend at St. Joseph’s.”

Squared away, then. Almost definitely not a plot to ambush me with handcuffs. “What do you want, Detective?”

“A meeting.”

“Give me one good reason.”

“I need you to look into a murder. Midnight, roof of the Municipal Courthouse.”

Then she hangs up. God, her phone etiquette is worse than mine.

I leave Panoptic an hour and a half later than usual, and when I get home Milena puts me to work prepping for Thanksgiving dinner. She already has Dad chopping onions and carrots, which he can do faster than anyone in the house except her. Good with a knife, that guy.

Mom and Abby are carefully braiding dough into elaborate lattice patterns to lay on top of little individual pumpkin pies. I try to steal a pinch of dough, and Abby slaps my hand away. She’s not even being playful about it; the girl takes dessert very seriously.

Abby loves holidays in the gleeful, unironic way that small children love bubbles. I’m pretty sure her insistence on an interfaith household is actually a ploy to maximize the amount of time we spend eating rich food, lighting special candles, and singing stupid songs. Mom enjoys ritual and tradition, and Dad is a sentimental sop about Christmas, so my sister generally gets her way.

“Why are there twelve pies?” I ask her. “Queens plus Harper plus Diggles plus Lances equals eleven people.”

“Bad weather in Gotham,” Mom says, smoothing out more dough with a rolling pin. “Terry can’t get a flight home, so he’s going to do turkey and latkes with us.”

Growing up, I thought latkes were standard Thanksgiving fare nationwide, like stuffing or cranberry sauce. Mom claims that ever since Thanksgivukkah in 2013, she doesn’t see the point of turkey if there are no latkes.

Guess who gets to peel and julienne the potatoes.

Milena goes home at ten, leaving us with a ridiculous amount and variety of food for tomorrow. All we have to do is slide it in the oven and avoid burning it. Mom and Abby go to bed not long after, leaving me and Dad to handle a few finishing touches.

“So,” I say as we put the extra leaf in the dining room table, “you think it’s ok if the Arrow meets with McKenna Hall about a murder case?”

Explain, Dad’s cocked eyebrow says.

“She called this afternoon. Captain Lance gave her the number.”
“She’s a friend and a good cop,” Dad says slowly, “but she used to be on the task force hunting down the Hood. You’re not necessarily playing on the same team.”

“But it was the Captain.”

“Yeah.” He smooths a hand over the seam where the leaf lies flush with the table. “Yeah, it was.”

The bells tolling midnight at St. Mary’s are just fading when I swing onto the roof of the Starling Municipal Court. Detective Hall waits for me, hands in her pockets.

“So you’re Arrow 3.0,” she says when my feet touch down.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I fib.

She gives me a look. “My colleagues and I can count, kid. If you were the original, you’d be in your fifties by now.” She looks me up and down. “And you’re a few inches taller than Arrow 2.0.”

She might be thirty years older than me, but I have seen her in cocktail attire and she has killer legs. I layer as much innuendo as I can into asking her: “Did you call this meeting to size me up?”

One eyebrow arches disdainfully. “What do you know about the murder of Tracy Howard?”

Thirty-something African American woman beaten to death in her home, way downtown in an un-gentrified corner of the Glades. Probably gang-related. I watch the news. “It’s not the kind of case SCPD generally needs my help sorting out.”

“We’ve made no arrests yet,” Hall says, radiating resentment at having to admit it. “We can’t get witnesses to talk to us, and forensics are dragging their feet. To top it all off, the traffic cams in the St. Stephen corridor were smashed by the Jokerz a few months back and never got replaced, so we’ve got no surveillance video either. There are…” She really is pretty. I wish she would stop making that lemon-sucking face every other sentence. “There are a lot of reasons this isn’t moving forward.”

Right. A lot of dumbass, chickenshit reasons. “You think your witnesses are going to talk to me?”

“That’s half of what you do, isn’t it?” she says, regarding me cautiously. “Get people to tell you what they won’t tell us.”

I hold my hand out. “Give me the file, and I’ll go see how much better they like me than you.”

She drops a data key in my hand, and as she does it, she subtly ducks her head to try and get a look at my face.

I snatch the key and turn on my heel. Jumping off the side of a building and firing a grappling hook in midair is always a stylish way to make an exit. Plus, it’s more fun than taking the stairs.

Feet planted on the next rooftop, I pull out my phone and tap Hall’s name. “This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” I say when she picks up, “if you could just not try to sneak a peek under the hood.”

“I’m a cop,” she says, unrepentant. “I couldn’t not try any more than you could resist taking this
I open my mouth to answer, but I’ve got nothing. The woman has me figured.

So I hang up on her. “Happy Thanksgiving to you too,” I mutter to no one.

The Queen-Harper-Diggle clan celebrates National Gluttony Day in style.

The whole house smells of roasting turkey, and it looks like autumn exploded in the foyer, rolled on into the dining room, and finally settled in the living room. I think Mom and Abby went a little too heavy on the oddly-shaped gourds, but no one ever asks for my opinions on interior decorating.

Dad carves turkey with the same unnervingly efficient knifework he showed off chopping onions. Aunt Thea brought liquor, as requested, and she mixes brandy milk punch until we run out of whole nutmeg to grate.

McGinnis sits next to Elaine at dinner, and they make polite small talk about Gotham, where she went for undergrad. It takes me an hour to realize that the small talk has turned into straight-up flirting. It takes me ten minutes to realize she’s flirting back. Idly I muse that it would only take me five seconds to pin his hand to the table with the carving fork.

Mom and Dad kill a bottle of wine between them, the rest of us kill another two, and even Abby is allowed a glass. By second helpings, everyone is a little silly.

“So then I get a phone call from Mr. Singh,” Mom says, gesturing elaborately. This story has been told so many times it’s become a performance piece. “‘Mrs. Queen, we need to meet immediately.’ And of course, this is not my first rodeo getting a call from the principal, so I have to ask, ‘What did Jonny do this time?’”

Big laughs at my expense. Dad only smiles, leaning back in his chair at the head of the table, enjoying the show.

“But he won’t explain over the phone. So I rush to the school, run straight to his office, and he points to the corner and says, ‘Do you know what that is?’ And leaning up against the wall is the fake musket Jonny brought for the Revolutionary War thing. So I say, ‘Of course, it’s a prop for the play they’re doing in class.’ And Mr. Singh sits me down and says, ‘Mrs. Queen, that is a fully functional replica Brown Bess.’ And I still don’t see the problem. ‘Yes, a replica. It was hanging on the wall at home, and Jonny thought it would be perfect for this.’ And he sighs this long sigh and says, ‘Mrs. Queen, it’s a gun. If you load it with black powder and a lead ball, that thing will fire. It is actually a real gun.’”

Then Mom reenacts the face she made upon receiving that news, and everyone at the table cracks up laughing.

“And that,” I announce loudly, “is the story of how I brought a gun to school.”

“I would have told you, if you’d asked,” Dad tells Mom, grinning and shaking his head.

“You said replica! I thought that meant fake! Why would your father bequeath you a working black powder musket?”

“Because rich people are nuts,” Uncle Roy mutters, and McGinnis snorts on his brandy milk punch.
“What are you going to do with it?” Mom talks with her hands even more when she’s drunk. “Take your ramrod and your powder horn and go hunt some ducks? Of course it didn’t occur to me that it was actually a real gun.”

Between giggles - and he’s had enough to drink that they are, in fact, giggles - Dig says, “Jon, you chased the other fifth graders around the playground with a working Brown Bess? I hope you were playing a redcoat.”

“Yes, historical accuracy is the concern here,” Lyla says.

“I’d never been so glad I was on the board at the school,” Mom mutters.

Before they can move on to the story of how I threatened to jump out of a second story window because I didn’t want to do my homework, or the story of how I nearly got arrested in Mexico, I stand up and ask, “Who wants pie?”

Everyone starts bringing their dirty dishes to the kitchen, but McGinnis tells Elaine, “Don’t get up,” and clears her plates for her. There is a knife in my hand. I bet he’d stop smiling like Mr. Suave if I threw it at him.

Suddenly I recognize the stabby, homicidal feeling for what it is. McGinnis and Elaine are flirting with each other, and I am jealous.

Oh, crap.

What’s worse, now that I think about it, Abby has been getting a hangdog expression every time they make each other laugh. The Queen kids are kind of pathetic today, huh?

“Jon, could you help me clear the sideboard for dessert?” Mom says. When she’s got me in the kitchen, she gives me a knowing look. “I wouldn’t have invited Terry if I’d known it would ruin your whole day.”

“Mom.” I wrap my hands in dishtowels to pull the tray of mini pumpkin pies from the oven. “Leave it alone.”

“Ok,” she says mildly. “If you’ll stop sulking.”

Somewhere in the middle of coffee and pie, Dig and Lyla move to the sofa and sprawl out comfortable and relaxed. “So we’ve been thinking,” Dig says, and his tone is serious enough to get our attention.

“We’re going to Afghanistan in the spring,” Lyla says.

The rest of us exchange baffled looks.

“Kandahar is supposed to be really beautiful now, and we want to go back to where we met, see how far it’s come.”

“For how long?” Mom says.

“Oh, a month.” Lyla smiles. “Maybe two. Retired people can do whatever they want.”

In the chorus of Oh, wow, really? and Well, you’ve more than earned it, and Aww, it’ll be like a second honeymoon, I blurt out, “You’re leaving Panoptic?”

“In very capable hands,” Dig says, nodding to Uncle Roy, who has obviously already gotten the
skinny on this.

I join in the congratulations to him, even though internally I'm crossing my arms and pouting. Looks like I’ll be sulking over all of the Diggles this evening.

Later, refilling our coffee at the sideboard, Lyla tells me, “We’ll never be too far away to come running if you need us, you know.”

“I know. It just won’t be the same.”

She actually seems touched that I’m being such a kindergartener about this. “I’ll miss working with you, Jon. It’s been a pleasure watching you grow into all these responsibilities.”

“Obviously. I am a delight.”

“Of course you are. Pass the sugar.”

“So how much longer have we got you?”

“Six months, more or less. We’ll make the official announcement on Monday and start the transition. And you know those capable hands we’re talking about - “

“Yeah, Uncle Roy’s gonna - “

“They’re yours too.”

My mouth falls open a little bit. Before I have to figure out how to reply to that, she’s already heading back to the sofa with her coffee.

At dusk, we pack up three days worth of food, including two personal pumpkin pies, and we bring it all to St. Joseph’s.

“Hey, Captain Lance,” Mom says. “We come bearing gifts.”

Captain Lance looks like today is a bad day. His face is already lined with pain before he grimaces and mutters, “When are you people going to learn that my first name isn’t Captain?”

Laurel smiles up at us from the chair next to him. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Hugs and kisses all around, and then a nurse comes to fuss at us for crowding him. The limit is two people, so we rotate in and out. When I send Abby to go get Mom and Dad for their turn, I take the opportunity to speak to the Captain privately.

“You know, ordinarily I wouldn’t mind you giving my number out to the ladies.”

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t do you the favor.”

I pull a chair up to his bedside. “I’m going to go digging like she asked me to,” I say quietly. “And I’m going to find exactly what I expect to find. What her department would find themselves, if they bothered to look. It’s always the Three-Sixteen in the St. Stephen corridor.”

“Probably so.”

“Which means she gave me the file because they’re not bothering.”

The Captain closes his eyes. “I am not a religious man,” he says slowly. Takes a deep, preparatory breath, opens his eyes. “Not expecting much from any afterlife. Near as I can tell, the only
immortality any of us gets,” slow breath, “is whatever lasting mark we leave on this earth.”

He’s not looking at me. He’s not even looking at the opposite wall, where his eyes are pointed. His vision has turned inward, and I don’t presume to imagine what he’s seeing there.

“Forty-five years,” he murmurs.

It’s hard to look at him, wasted features twisted with regret, and see so little of the man I have known my whole life. Instead I stare down at my clasped hands.

“My life’s work,” he says.

When the Captain handed over the baton to Police Chief Len Broussard twelve years ago, SCPD was a model police force, the gold standard for professionalism in law enforcement. His officers were in high demand to train other departments all across the country.

Last year, the Justice Department officially investigated them for civil rights violations. Nothing stuck except the popular backronym Starling Corruption and Profiteering Department.

“All of the scuzbuckets you put away,” I tell him, “all of the people who are safe and whole because of you… none of that got erased.”

“Don’t blow smoke. That’s not why I’m telling you this.”

I look him in the eyes. “Why, then?”

“The hood, the badge - they’re both bigger than the man wearing them. McKenna understood that, from the very first day. If anybody’s going to salvage it, it’s going to be her. I’m asking you to give her what help you can.”

I reach for his bony shoulder, and I lay my hand there the way Dad does when he’s making solemn promises. “I’ll help.”

Chapter End Notes

References:

"Don't do anything stupid? Who the hell is he talking to? A bunch of morons who volunteered to jump out of a perfectly good airplane."

- Band of Brothers

"Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

- Casablanca
Black Friday night, I go to the St. Stephen corridor, and I start asking polite questions.

Of course, polite questions are extra effective when asked in an inhumanly deep voice from the shadows above somebody’s back porch.

“Tell me what you saw, Ms. Groves.”

Tracy Howard’s next door neighbor drops the garbage bag she’s carrying, and she spins a full three hundred and sixty degrees before she spots me crouched up here on the slanted roof of her shed. “Oh,” she says, hand to her chest. “It’s you.”

I find it’s best to cultivate an aura of omniscient calm, so I say nothing. Of course it’s me.

“You here about Tracy?”

“You were the one who found her.”

Her fingers curl at the base of her throat. “I been hoping you’d take an interest. Ain’t nobody in this neighborhood gonna talk to SCPD.” She narrows her eyes at me. “You gonna pass this along to them?”

I shake my head, exaggerated enough that she’ll see it even through the shadows. “Same game, different team. Whatever you tell me stays between us.”

Her shoulders relax, just barely. “I heard screaming and crashes from next door. I called 911, and I ran to Tracy’s front porch, but I was too scared to go in. When I finally did, it was all quiet. The room was like a hurricane came through, and Tracy was...”

Tracy Howard was found with a fractured skull, broken collarbone, broken knee, and half her ribcage practically caved in. The defensive wounds on her forearms meant she put up a hell of a fight. There were pictures in the file Hall gave me. Ugly as they were, it must have looked worse in person.

“Couldn’t do nothing for her.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“She broke up with a boyfriend not long ago, moved back with her Nana. Shawn something-or-other, got some tattoos that make me think he did time. I’d start with him.”

“Was she involved with anyone else you would consider dangerous?”

“Her brother’s locked up for armed robbery.” She jerks her head at the rows of houses beyond her chain link fence. “About half the neighbors got something on their record. Take your pick.”

“Come on, you know what I’m asking. Jokerz? Three-Sixteen? I know the Black Hand had their dirty little fingers in this neighborhood too.”

“Nothing like that,” she says, raising her palm. “My hand to God.”

“Anything else you think I should know?”

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Chapter 3

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“Anything else you think I should know?”
Ms. Groves hugs herself, shifts her weight over her feet. “She was taking classes at Ridgewood Community College, going for a nursing degree. She would’ve been thirty-seven tomorrow. I already bought her present.”

I don’t know what to say to that.

She sinks down onto her porch steps, peering up at me with pained hope in the lines of her face. “You’re going to make somebody pay, yeah?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Well, then.” Ms. Groves is From Here, and when she smiles at me, grim and expectant, my stomach knots up. Now I’ve got to live up to that look. “God go with you.”

On my way to my next appointment, I tap the comm back on. “Watchtower,” I say, “tell me what you can about a Shawn who lives in the St. Stephen corridor, possibly ex-con.”

It’s Mom’s voice that answers this time. “Sure thing, honey.”

In the background, I hear Dad: “Felicity, don’t ‘honey’ him in the field.”

“I delivered him without an epidural after twenty hours of labor,” Mom says, and though her hand is covering the receiver, it’s not nearly muffled enough. “I will call him what I want.”

“Can you just…” I sigh. “Shawn the ex-con, please.”

“Shawn Friend,” she says a few minutes later. “White, thirty-four years old, did time for possession with intent to distribute back before legalization, released in the general amnesty. Two previous arrests for domestic violence, but no charges were ever filed. 1735 French Street.”

“Sounds like our guy.”

“He was already questioned in connection to the murder. He’s a line cook at Vincent’s, and he was in the kitchen that night. Two co-workers corroborated his alibi.”

“I’m paying him a visit anyway.” It’s not far. Just a few rooftops down now. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, pumpkin.”

“God damn it, Mom.”

She clicks off, and I leap onto the gravel roof of somebody’s carport. A few houses down, I perch carefully on the edge of a cheap shingle job that might slide me down into the overgrown alley any second, and I peer down into Shawn Friend’s living room. He’s slumped low on his couch in the blue light of a blaring TV, looking half-comatose.

He wakes up pretty quick when I cannonball through his window.

“What the fuck?” He leaps up, hand going to his waistband.

I roll to my feet through the shattered glass and draw the bow on him. The morphvox makes me sound really impressive when I bellow: “Don’t. Move.”

Slowly, he puts his hands in the air. When the hem of his T-shirt hikes up, I see the pistol grip poking up out of his jeans.

“First of all, Mr. Friend, that is not how you carry a firearm.” One accidental discharge, and they
will be gluing his balls back on with Q-bond.

His face scrunches up like I’ve just spoken Urdu. Good. Throwing him completely off guard was the point.

“Second, I’m here to ask you why you beat your ex to death.”

The jaw-clenching, fist-shaking rage that washes over him tells me what I need to know. “I did not. Kill. Tracy.”

“So you told SCPD.” I’m pretty sure I believe him, but I’ll stand under the wrong tree and bark a few more times before I back off. “I guess it depends what I think your buddies’ word is worth.”

“Fuck you,” he grits out.

“Other than alibis, no one has much to say to the cops. They didn’t see anything, they barely heard anything, and they definitely don’t know anything.”

“Who the fuck are you, coming to this neighborhood like you know shit?”

“I’m the guy who’s going to make sure somebody burns for this. Are you going to help me or not?”

He tilts his chin at me defiantly. A commercial for “Fast cash now!” blares on the TV behind me. A muscle jumps in his jaw.

“You’re watching infomercials armed, with a line of sight on the front door,” I observe. “Who are you expecting to come busting through there?”

He glances at the door, which has the deadbolt and chain fastened in addition to the security bar. His eyes snap back to me. “Ain’t shit you can do about it.”

My bow’s got eighty percent let off, which means only fourteen pounds of weight at full draw. I can hold it on him all night.

Slowly, Friend’s arms come down to hover at about waist height, hands held carefully away from his body. I lower the bow a few inches, which is probably not reassuring as now it’s pointed somewhere much more threatening than his chest, but I like to think it’s the gesture that counts.

“I told her not to do it,” he mutters.

Finally we’re getting somewhere.

“Six weeks ago, she saw an SCPD officer beat the hell out of a kid who lives round the corner. He’s seventeen, he’s fucking deaf, and he had no idea what the asshole was telling him to do. Next day, Trace went and filed a brutality complaint.” His mouth presses into a thin line. “I told her. I told her not to.”

The capslock key slams on in my head. HOLY SHIT, you are not saying what I think you’re saying. You don’t seriously think a cop murdered a civilian in retaliation. Are you fucking kidding me right now?

“Three nights after that, she was dead,” Friend says bitterly. “What do you think happened?”

I try to keep my voice level when I say, “Who was the officer?”

“Javier Bloom.”
I repeat it three times in my head the way Dad trained me to, though I don’t think I could forget regardless. Then I lower the bow. “My apologies for the window.”

He raises his eyebrows. Then he puts on a melodramatically deep voice and some melodramatically angry eyebrows, and he mimics me. The asshole mimics me. “My apologies for the window.” His expression turns to disgust, and he puts a hand on the pistol grip. “You are one glib motherfucker.”

I nod, just once and very slowly. “And I’m sorry about Tracy.”

He shakes his head, and he pulls the pistol free. Instantly an arrow points at his face, but all he does is toss the 9 mm on the sofa. “Get the fuck out of my house,” he says wearily.

I leave the way I came.

“There is an anonymous complaint from that date, matching that description,” Mom confirms over the comm. “It was the fifth one against Officer Bloom. Internal Affairs was beginning disciplinary procedures. Wow, he’s got a lot of weapon discharge reports on file. Most officers never fire their weapons outside of the range. But if he weathered all these brutality complaints with his job intact, why commit murder over this one?”

“You don’t believe Friend?” Please let’s not believe Friend. I don’t want to believe Friend.

“I’m not defending Bloom. But he can be a bad guy without being our killer.”

“Hall suspects it’s one of her own,” I say grimly, weaving through deserted streets on the Ducati. “Why do you think she came to me in the first place?”

I want to go hold him at arrowpoint and demand answers right the fuck now. I want to hear him swear on his life that it’s not true.

I don’t want it to be true.

As if she’s read my mind, Mom says firmly, “You may not point arrows at officers of the law without compelling evidence that they deserve it.”

“You need your net woven tight if you’re going after a cop,” Dad adds, loud enough for the comm to pick up, “or he’ll slip right through.”

“Yeah, okay, we’ll do it your way. Just one more stop.”

“Arrow, it’s four in the morning.”

“I want a word with Hall.”

“What did I just say about pointing arrows at law enforcement?”

“Relax. It’s not that kind of stop.”

“McKenna’s a friend,” Dad reminds me.

“Actually, they briefly dated,” Mom supplies, “which everybody kind of laughs about now.”

She dated my father? I kind of hit on her a little bit. Ugh.

“We have to be nice to people I dated thirty years ago?” Dad says in the background. “That’s a
rule now? Because I seem to remember the last time Helena Bertinelli was up for parole, you – “

“Just come on home, Arrow.”

I give her my very best whine: “You never let me do anything cool.”

But I come home.

When you don’t have to worry about civil rights or standards of evidence, it’s not even that hard to gather incriminating evidence against a suspect.

“It would also be really easy to frame someone,” Mom says thoughtfully when we come up with the plan. “You’d have to cover your tracks if you altered any of the audio or cut it together to -- “

“Sounding like a supervillain again, Felicity,” Dad cautions.

Mom turns to me, smiling. “Bet you can’t slip a data key into Bloom’s desktop drive at SCPD without getting caught.”

It’s an old joke. After Mom discovered that Bet you can’t… worked a hell of a lot better on her hyperactive kindergartener than Could you please…, she shared that Jonny-hack with every single one of my elementary school teachers.

I roll my eyes. “Your cheap Jedi mind tricks will not work on me.”

Except for how they totally do. Not only do I make another late night trip to SCPD, I beat my previous best time sneaking in and out. Mom does her magical computer fu and uploads what she calls “some harmless spyware” to Bloom’s drive, and the next time Bloom docks his phone, the program jumps its bones too.

Mom pulls up the GPS tracker’s recent history, and she combs through the last three weeks. The night of the murder, Bloom’s phone was following the well-worn path of a police beat on the other side of town.

“Moving on to the next suspect,” I say with some relief.

Dad isn’t convinced. “Look deeper. Financials, maybe. Let’s get a better idea of who this guy is before we write him off.”

“Money doesn’t lie,” Mom agrees. “Even shady people have to get uncomfortably honest when they’re paying each other.”

While she spends a couple hours in her home office combing through Bloom’s bank statements, Abby ropes me into running lines with her. She’s playing Puck in Starling Youth Theater’s production of A Midsummer Night’ Dream, which is apparently a huge deal for a high school freshman.

I’m standing in for Oberon, king of the fairies - which seems like a thankless job - and I’m not a hundred percent sure what’s coming out of my mouth right now. “How now, mad spirit! What night-rule now about this haunted grove?”

“My mistress with a monster is in love. Near to her close and consecrated bower, while she was in her - um. Crap,” Abby says. “I mean, not crap! Tish says I’ll get in the habit of cursing when I mess up and I’ll do it onstage.”
“Who?”

“Tish. She plays the fairy queen.”

“What kind of name is Tish?”

“I don’t know,” Abby says distractedly. “Near to her close and consecrated bower, while she was, um. Close and consecrated bower, while she… Crap.”

“Not crap,” I remind her. “Do you have the line?”

She shakes her head. “Feed me.”

After half an hour, she knows the scene back to front and upside down, and she flops down on the sofa next to me. “Are you coming to see it?”

“Will I embarrass you if I do?”

“Probably, but come anyway.”

That night before bed, I check in on Mom in her office. “Anything?”

She rubs the bridge of her nose. “Bloom is Treasurer of the Police Association, and he didn’t keep his personal and professional records as neatly separated as he should have. It looks like he’s been siphoning money from PASC, a little at a time. Then, two days before the murder, he made a twenty-thousand dollar payment to an anonymous offshore account.”

“But all we’ve really proved is embezzlement.”

She nods, biting her lip. “So far. But I think I know a way to find out what the twenty thousand was for.”

Her plan is elegantly simple. She just transfers another thousand dollars to the anonymous offshore account.

The next morning, Bloom calls a ghosted number. “You son of a bitch. I don’t know how you did it, but I know it was you. I want my money back.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” a bored voice with a faint Southern accent echoes through the lair, where Mom and I sit listening. “And I don’t do refunds.”

“That voice sounds familiar,” Mom whispers to me, “but I can’t place it.”

There follows a lively debate over who is a bigger fucking liar, who will do more time if the other one rats him out, and whose mother was a bigger whore in her misspent youth. Mom and I exchange impressed glances a couple of times. I don’t think either of us has ever heard anyone called a “goat-sucking clownfaced shitstain” before.

Then we get the money quote: “The bitch is dead, and our accounts are settled. That’s the end of it.”

The call clicks off.

Mom and I sit silently for a long time, looking at nothing in particular.

“Fuck this whole case,” I say at length.
Mom nods, just once and very slowly.

“Well, at least we’ve got the dumb bastard,” I mutter.

Mom frowns at Mary’s screen. “It’s like we put a quarter in the confession vending machine.”

“Yeah, your plan worked. We got intel.” Mostly to convince myself, I say, “Tonight is a win.”

She glances over her shoulder at the glass cases where two previous generations of the Arrow’s gear stand silent and shadowed. “It doesn’t feel as much like winning as it used to.”

No, it really fucking doesn’t.

Then she sits up straighter and pulls Mary toward her. “I’ll see what I can get from the metadata on the call. Maybe we can find our mystery man.”

An hour later, she comes over to the weight bench and says, “Sorry, honey, our hit man knows how to cover his tracks. Couldn’t get anything.”

I replace the bar and sit up, tugging at my sweaty T-shirt. She’s got a troubled, faraway look on her face, which I guess means optimism is my job tonight. “We’ll get him some other way.”

Soon after I have showered, Dad arrives to pick us up. Mom greets him with a hug, but then she doesn’t let go.

His hand covers the back of her head. “What’s wrong?”

“The Howard murder. It’s what we thought.”

He says nothing. Just closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, he seems to have reached some decision I can’t begin to guess at.

“We were supposed to have made it better,” she says quietly. “Cops ordering hits on civilians… things like that weren’t supposed to be able to happen in our city.”

They pull apart just enough to look each other in the eyes. This is about the thousandth time my parents have made me feel like I’m not even in the room, and it’s just as uncomfortable as the first time.

I have to ask: “How did this happen?”

I understand why no one picked up the bow again. Team Arrow has other weapons in their arsenal now, and the shadows are not the only place to hunt the city’s enemies. They have established foundations and scholarships, they’re board members for every nonprofit and charity in the universe, it seems like, and Dad alone has raised and donated so much money to various institutions that there are buildings all over the city with his name on them.

Decades of that, and we ended up here?

“You spent your whole lives cleaning up Starling,” I say, “and it’s like as soon as your back is turned, it all goes to shit.”

That was cruel, I realize the very next second when they both wince and look away from me.

I found out my parents were human in June of 2039. In the two and a half years since, I’m still surprised every time they remind me that they are no more omnipotent or omniscient than the next featherless biped.
Dad walks over to the glass cases full of his old gear, unseals and eases one open, and runs his fingers over the arm of the bow Mom designed for him almost thirty years ago.

He’s just one man. Even his shoulders can’t hold up the sky.

And very rarely does anybody get what they deserve.

That night, I meet Detective Hall on the roof of SCPD headquarters.

“If I find out that you knew about this the whole time, I’m putting an arrow in your foot on principle,” I say by way of greeting.

“What did you find?” she says, reaching for the data key. I toss it at her feet, and she glares at me.

“Call it: left foot or right?”

“It wasn’t the ex-boyfriend, was it?” she says impatiently, rescuing the key from the gravel surface of the rooftop.

“Dealer’s choice then. Left it is.”

“What did you find?” she demands.

My fingers tighten around the grip of my bow. “Your own officer ordered a hit in retaliation for a brutality complaint.”

I don’t think the heartbroken surprise on her face is feigned. “What?”

“Javier Bloom.”

She does not look nearly as surprised to hear that.

“Vice cop. Ten years on the force,” I snarl. “All due respect, ma’am, but how did that happen on your watch?”

Hall closes her eyes, head bent, and in a carefully controlled tone, she says, “I work under one of the most corrupt police chiefs who has ever been responsible for a major American city. Just to get this far, then to keep this job, I had to make… compromises along the way.”

“Murder was a compromise? This was your nice middle ground between honoring your oath and what, death squads roaming the city killing people at random?”

Her head snaps up. “I didn’t know about Tracy Howard.”

“You suspected. That’s why you gave me this case. I bet you knew Bloom had more weapon discharges on file than guys who’ve been on the force twice as long. You knew he was a thug.”

“I’ve tried to get him fired. Believe me, I have. But there’s a whole thicket of employment law and union rules, you understand? The Police Association pours money into campaigns every election season, they’re friendly with judges, and they’ve got real power over the department. It’s not as easy as just showing him the door.”

“What would you need?”
Her eyebrows knit. “To fire him?”

“Prison!” I snap. “Jesus Christ, let’s shoot for actually sending the murderer to actual prison.”

“We’d need indisputable evidence, a team at the D.A.’s office brave enough to prosecute, a jury
that hasn’t been tampered with, and a judge who hasn’t been bought.” She raises her chin. “Are
you going to get me all that, Arrow?”

“The evidence is in your hand. Laurel Lance will put together that team. And anybody who
breathes wrong at that jury will answer to me.”

“I hope you’re as good as you think you are,” she says quietly. “This is a hornet’s nest you’re
about to kick.”

“Someone has to.”
She shakes her head at me. “I knew you were too young to be the original.”

A judge signs the warrant for Bloom’s arrest the next day. He doesn’t show up to work, and his
house is abandoned when his colleagues arrive with handcuffs.

He ran for it. Thank the baby Jesus and all his fluffy angels, or I wouldn’t have the pleasure of
hunting him down like a dog.

“Someone at the department must have tipped him off,” Dad says in the lair.

“Hornet’s nest,” I mutter.

“I’ve got a location for him,” Mom says, looking up from Mary’s screen. “That was almost
insultingly easy.”

“He’s going to wish he’d let SCPD grab him before I could.”

Dad gives me a long, serious look. “What are you going to do when you find him?”

I give it to him right back. “My job.”

I jump on the bike, and Mom leads me right to the nasty little motel room where Bloom is holed
up.

When I bust down the door, he’s already climbing out the bathroom window. I leap through it two
seconds after him, and I catch him in the alley.

“Javier Bloom.” I draw the bowstring back to my cheek. Aim for his heart. “You have failed this
city.”

He freezes, fingers twitching right next to his sidearm.

Please, God, don’t come quietly. Give me a reason. Just give me a fucking reason.

Slowly, Bloom raises his hands and turns to face me. My fingers tighten around the bow’s grip.

He’s an average-looking guy in his late thirties, dark-haired and in unusually good shape. He
doesn’t look afraid of the arrow pointed at his face. “You win,” he says in the professionally calm
voice cops use to talk down street thugs. “It’s over, son. You can lower the weapon.”

“Shut up. Hands against the wall.”

There’s probably some irony in a repeat felony offender patting down a cop. I pull his service weapon from his side, drop the mag and kick it under the dumpster. The chamber’s already clear.

Bloom sees his chance while my hands are occupied. The knife flashes up out of nowhere, and it slashes open my jacket on a jagged diagonal from hip to collarbone. The strap of my quiver snaps neatly, and the whole thing clatters to the ground at my heels. Only the layer of kevlar saves me from spilling my intestines all over the gravel of the alley.

It trips a wire rigged to a bomb I didn’t know was in me. Rage fires up hot in my chest, and before I know what I’m doing, I’ve pistol-whipped him across the face.

He sags down the wall with a strangled groan, and the knife falls from his hand. I kick it under the dumpster with the magazine. Now he’s done. No threat to anyone anymore. There is nothing left to do but tie him up like a Hefty bag and call Detective Hall.

Instead I bounce Bloom off the brick wall like a crash test dummy.

The sharp smack of impact burns down my nerves like a shot of Fireball. When he crumples to the filthy concrete, I put a steel-toed boot in his back and give his kidneys something to remember me by. He tucks his knees up, protects his head with both arms, and my lip curls in a sneer. I raise my father’s bow, and I bring it down hard and indiscriminate.

Again.

And again.

He can’t slip through the DA’s fingers if he’s dead. Tracy Howard gets justice, and I never have to tell Lance what his force has become.

How would you do it? I hear Dad’s voice in my head. Would you look him in the eyes while he died?

“Son of a bitch.”

I stop.

I stop, and I lean over him, and I pound a fist against the bricks. Again, to the chill darkness, to whoever let the world be like this: “You son of a bitch!”

Bloom huddles close to the wall, breathing fast and ragged.

My lungs burn. My throat burns. I step back, and I drop the bow.

“You’re going to pay for this,” Bloom croaks, because it’s all he has left. “You don’t even know who you’re fucking with.”

“I don’t care.”

It’s a lot of work, hauling a hundred and sixty pounds of bound and gagged murderer to his car, and it’s even more work hauling him up the back stairway of the courthouse without being seen. But it’s all worth it, hearing him scream when I throw him from atop the pediment.

The grappling line catches him by the ankles after twenty feet or so. I let him dangle in front of the
The grappling line catches him by the ankles after twenty feet or so. I let him dangle in front of the words carved into the stone - FIAT JUSTITIA - and then I pay the line out slowly until he hangs ten feet from the ground. All that’s left to do is make a phone call.

“Detective Hall. Come pick up your trash.”

When I come down the steps of the lair, Mom meets me at the bottom, and she reaches for the ragged edges of my slashed jacket. “Come here, let me see you. You’re ok?” Only after I nod does she say, “You got him?”

“Gave him to Hall.”

Dad looks up at me from the workbench at the grindstone, carefully neutral.

I give a one-shouldered shrug. “Got to be seen to be done, right?”

Dad doesn’t say well done or I told you so or I’m proud of you. He doesn’t tell me I did the right thing. Instead he holds up the arrow he’s just put a razor edge on. “You’ll want to put that with the others.”

He could walk the three paces to the rack and put it away himself. But he’s putting it in my hands.

We speak the same language, Dad and I.

Officer Javier Bloom’s arrest for the murder of Tracy Ann Howard hits the newscasts in the early afternoon of an otherwise quiet Thursday.

Starling City flips her shit.

Local news personalities make pompous pronouncements about everybody’s horror at this terrible breach of the public’s trust. We just had no idea our esteemed police force was one of the most corrupt in the country and we just cannot imagine how one of our noble protectors could be capable of such villainy.

Outside the mainstream, the newscasts feature much less polite surprise and much more capslocked rage. They want justice, they want Bloom’s badge, they want damages paid to the victim’s family, they want restitution for the entire St. Stephen neighborhood.

Many of the website and article headers feature the famous, stylized silhouette of the Arrow. A local artist based it on the very first police sketch of the Hood. No mask, no quiver over his shoulder, no braided detail across his chest - none of the iconic gear. Just deeply shadowed eyes under a plain hood. Sometimes it’s just a kitschy symbol of Starling, printed on T-shirts and sold to tourists. Other times it means torches and pitchforks.

The way some of these casters are talking about Chief Broussard and Mayor Lee, they wouldn’t mind seeing heads on pikes. I wonder if Panoptic will be getting some phone calls this week.

Mom buzzes me the video of McKenna Hall perp-walking Bloom to a marked cruiser and accidentally-on-purpose clipping his head with the top edge of the door. I watch it six times. I could probably watch it six more, but Dig comes in to ask me about the communications monitoring on the Cuvier case.

After work, I run a quick errand.

“Can you fix it?” I ask Aunt Thea.
She sighs, laying the jacket out flat on her work table and smoothing down the tear in the leather. “Not so it looks halfway decent.”

“Does it matter what it looks like?”

“Yes, it matters!” she snaps, like I just asked if it matters whether I breathe clean air or carbon monoxide, ‘cause, like, they’ve all got oxygen molecules, right?

I flop down in the chair across from her. “Mostly I work in the scary pitch black darkness. Mostly I sneak up and punch people wicked hard in the face. How many of them really notice what I’m wearing?”

“Jon.” She gives me a deeply pitying look. “Why wear the hood at all?”

Because I’m the shadow that stalks the night, the danger that haunts the dangerous. Jesus, keep up, people.

“It’s a symbol,” she says, rolling a few inches closer to me and giving me a look so earnest she reminds me of Abby. “The Arrow is a symbol. You’re playing a role, just as if you were on a stage. You’d better believe the costume matters.”

“Fine.” I spread my hands and let them fall in my lap. “Glam me up. Do your thing.”

“I will,” she grumbles, turning back to her work table. “You’ll wear it and like it.”

I have to make one more stop before I go home. There’s somewhere I have to go, somewhere I’ve been avoiding. In the gray, blustery dusk, my car seems to steer itself there of its own accord.

“Hey, Captain.”

“Jon. You didn’t - find - what you thought,” he says between sharp, shallow breaths.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You here to - ask me why?”

“No.” I pull up a chair, like usual. “I’m just here.”

He nods. Breathes deep, closes his eyes. “How’s your family?”

I put my feet up on his bed as I have so often before, and I just talk. I give him whatever comes to mind - Abby’s play, Lyla and Dig’s plans for retirement, Uncle Roy taking the reins at Panoptic. He nods along, and his breathing frays to raggedness as the minutes pass.

“Gettin’ tired,” he says after a half hour or so, when the nurse pokes her head in.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” I say, offering a handshake.

His cold, waxen fingers close around mine and squeeze. With an effort, all in one breath, he says, “You turned out real good, kiddo.”

I squeeze back, and I take my leave.
“What are we giving Mom and Dad for Christmukkah?” Abby asks me at Big Belly Burger on Saturday afternoon.

The last day of Hanukkah falls on Christmas Day this year, which Abby seems to regard as the universe’s gift to her personally. I’m surprised we made it seven whole days into the month of December without her bringing up shopping.

“Wine,” I say, stealing a french fry from her plate. “It’s been wine for the past five years. Next year - try not to faint - it’s going to be wine.” Not to make them sound like they have a drinking problem, but you really cannot go wrong giving my parents a good vintage they’ve never tried before.

Abby steals an onion ring in retaliation. “Don’t you want to surprise them?”

“You say that every year.”

“And you get Dig to buy wine anyway.”

“Hey, I buy my own booze now.” I mean, I did before, but I’m at liberty to say so now.

“If you take me to Nuxalk Place next weekend, I can find something really, really good,” she promises.

This is probably true. My father and sister have a genius for gifts. She buys you, not what you would have bought yourself, but what you could have bought yourself had you been as creative and accomplished a shopper as Abigail Queen. Dad’s gifts are invariably personal, in part because he makes jewelry on the same machinery he uses to make arrowheads. Half the women in the family have a small collection of pendants, rings, and hair ornaments made by his own hands. Elaine still wears the necklace he gave her the day she was born.

“But not Lyla,” I once observed. “Or the Lances either.”

“It’s not polite to give someone else’s wife jewelry,” he said. “Besides, their tastes are different.”

That’s why he makes Lyla combat knives, Sara throwing knives, and Laurel pepper spray disguised as lipstick.

“Come on, Jonny,” Abby wheedles. “One afternoon, that’s all I need.”

“You want me to go to a mall?” I’d rather get hit in the head with a lamp by a berserker druggie at the scene of a murder. This is not an exaggeration. “Can’t you order it all online?”

“It is not a mall. It is a geographically convenient collection of boutiques.”

I give her some side eye. “Maybe.”

“Jo-na-than.”

“The answer is maybe.” I slurp down the last inch of her milkshake. “So do you know all your lines for Midsummer yet?”

It’s a surefire distraction. For the next twenty minutes, she talks almost nonstop about the stage
manager, the director, Tish the fairy queen, and the girl who plays Hippolyta, “who is so pretty I hate her a little bit.” I try really hard to keep the names straight, and I mostly succeed.

On the way home, she watches me work the gear shift, twists in her seat to fold her legs under her, and says, “What is a clutch, exactly?”

I stop at a red light, and I look her over. “Your legs are probably long enough.” After all, she shot up like a weed this past year, and now she’s taller than Mom by an inch or two.

“For what?”

“To reach the pedals.”

She beams at me. I take her to the SCU commuter lot, empty on a weekend, and we switch seats. Because she made me sit through drama talk, I make her sit through a detailed explanation of the mechanism by which the clutch engages and disengages the power transmission. Then I let her lurch around and kill the engine a few times, and I take her home smiling.

“That was really illegal,” I say as we come up the front walk, “and I’ve already had my license suspended enough. So no telling.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your next lesson is going to be how to slip a chokehold.”

“No, sir.”

“Come on, you have to at least learn a few basic - ”

“Nop.”

One day I will overcome Abby’s complete disdain for combat sports long enough to drill into her, Hit the creep as hard as you can here, here, or here and then run away, got it?

We just barely make it inside before the gray skies open up with chilly rain.

Mom and Dad meet us in the foyer, and we stop laughing when we see their faces.

“What happened?”

"Captain Lance passed away about an hour ago," Mom says, sniffling.

Next to me, Abby draws in a sharp breath.

"Do you want to ride with us to St. Joseph's? We're going to go be with Laurel."

It takes me a few seconds to answer. "No." I clear my throat. “No, I'll, um. I'll take my own car.”

Twenty minutes alone in my X5 is enough time for a good long cry where no one can see. I thought I might feel better afterward - isn’t that how catharsis is supposed to work? - but I don't. I just feel drained.

Captain Lance lies still and strange in his dimly lit room, and Laurel sits in a hard, straight-backed chair against the opposite wall, staring at her father with an expression more angry than anything else. When we come through the door, she stands, thanks us for coming, and stiffly accepts hugs and condolences.
I can't quite look at the Captain yet.

Both of Laurels' ex-husbands are already here. Married or not, they still care for her enough to show up for moral support. Of the two, I know Ted Grant better. We've talked boxing at Christmas parties now and again.

"Quentin never much cared for me," he says ruefully as he shakes my hand, "but I respected the hell out of him."

"I think we've all been there," Paul Kord says, gesturing between himself, Ted, and Dad.

Dad ignores this. He's got eyes for Laurel alone right now, and he pulls her into a proper hug. She relaxes into it by a fraction.

I stand at the Captain's foot board. His head is tipped forward onto his chest, eyes closed, hands clasped in front of him. It looks peaceful, almost like prayer. I've never known the man to pray. All I can think is, This isn't him. He's not here anymore.

Abby, who is in some ways tougher than I am, goes right up to his side with Mom at her heels. Careful but unafraid, she lays her hand over one of his. Whatever she and Mom murmur to him and to each other, it's too soft for me to hear.

I hope the Captain was wrong about that afterlife. If he's not here, I hope he's somewhere. I hope it really, really hard.

"Sara's flight lands in ten minutes," I hear Laurel say wearily. "I have to go pick her up."

Dad looks at me, one eyebrow raised.

I stand up and jingle my keys. "You stay here, Laurel. I've got it covered."

She nods her thanks, and as if by gravitational pull, her eyes slide back to her father.

When I pull up in the arrivals lane, Sara Lance is already waiting on the curb with a small rollaway bag at her feet. Her trench coat is belted against the chill rain, and a thick beanie is pulled down snugly around her ears. She tugs it off as she climbs into my passenger seat, and her cheek is cold against mine when she leans over to kiss me. "Thank you for picking me up, Jonny."

"Of course. I'm really sorry about your dad. It's good to see you and all, I just wish like hell it were for a different reason."

She smiles, and the crinkles at the corners of her eyes make their bright blue seem even brighter in the dim interior of the car. "Same here."

I don't ask where she flew in from. Nobody bothers trying to ask her that anymore.

If I didn't know better, I'd guess that Sara was the older Lance sister. Maybe it's the deep laugh lines or the blond hair shot through with gray that she has never cared to dye. Maybe it's the sense of certainty about her. The moment she got into my car, I felt the same calm as when Dad walks into a room - like somebody's got everything under control now.

I can't help liking her better than Laurel. For starters, she seems to actually like me.

"It's been some time," she says.

"Almost a year."
“Ollie had just given you the hood. You were so wet behind the ears, all nervous and excited about being in the field.”

"I'm old and mean and cynical now."

"So I see."

"You know. your dad, um. He helped a lot with all that. The first few months especially. Just talking to him - it helped."

She pulls in a sharp, surprised breath. Her smile tightens into something painful. “Thank you,” she murmurs, and she turns her face away from me.

The rest of the way to the hospital, I politely pretend not to notice that her eyes are wet.

Laurel and Sara bury their father on the cold, clear afternoon of December 11 with all the ceremonial honors due a retired officer. Several hundred people come to pay their respects, about half of whom are wearing SCPD dress uniforms. Among them are McKenna Hall, Mayor Harry Lee, and Police Chief Len Broussard.

“Your old man was a tough act to follow,” I overhear Broussard tell Laurel, shaking her hand. “Best cop I ever knew.”

“You could have learned a thing or two,” I mutter under my breath.

Laurel looks so fragile, it’s clear that a eulogy is far beyond her, and Sara will not venture more than a few feet from her side. Dad does the honors. Of the people who will not break down at the podium, he’s the one who knew the Captain best.

The reception afterward is held at our house, where there is space for so many people, and Milena keeps the pitchers full and the tables laden with finger food. Everyone in our family sort of passes Abby around like a handkerchief or a teddy bear. You’re crying? Here, hold this. She must understand why everyone keeps squeezing her shoulder or slipping an arm around her, because she never pulls away first.

The house slowly empties, and Milena goes home, saying, “I give you some time, just family.” At dusk only Queens and Lances remain.

We sit around the dining room table, and Mom, Dad, Laurel, and Sara tell stories about the Captain. Dad has some funny ones about the days when he and Laurel dated. “He took excellent care of his service weapon. He was always cleaning it when I came to pick her up.” Mom tells one about the night Abby was born, when he sent a police escort to rush her to the hospital, “so you came into the world with your own motorcade, my little diva.”

After Abby goes to bed, they talk about the other stuff: using Laurel as bait to catch the hood, disabling a quake machine with Mom coaching him by comm, calling the Arrow while Dad was standing right next to him, shooting an Assassin with his spare sidearm. Some stories I know, but most of it I’ve never heard before.

The longer they talk, the heavier the weight in my stomach.

It’s not grief. Or if it is, it’s grief hardened to anger, condensed into a single, concentrated mass of vengeful purpose. Starling didn’t deserve a man like that. If a murderously corrupt police department and indifferent officials were the end result of his decades of service, it wasn’t because
Lance failed the city. Starling failed him.

You can do everything right, and it still goes to hell.

Laurel and Sara fall asleep in our guest bedroom, and Mom, Dad, and I putter around clearing the few remaining dishes that Milena didn’t get to. Exhaustion makes me clumsy. I reach for a fluted glass, my fingers slip, and it shatters on the floor.

“I’ll get a broom,” Dad says wearily.

Before he can turn his back, I demand, “What the fuck is wrong with this city?”

My parents just look back at me sadly.

“I thought maybe the system needed a little help. Someone to do what the cops couldn’t, go where they couldn’t. But you tried that. You and the Captain tried that, and now look where we are.”

“Corruption and injustice are everywhere. Starling isn’t exactly special on that score,” Mom says, sinking into a chair. “You’d probably end up just as disillusioned on a police beat in Gotham or a newsroom in Coast City.”

“Really? Because McGinnis hasn’t mentioned cops ordering hits in his city, and Garcia hasn’t reported any actual murderers running the police union in her backyard, and even in New Orleans that asshole Holland hasn’t - “

“What are you going to do about it then?” Dad demands.

“I’m going to cut some heads off some snakes, for starters.”

“I think you’ll find they’re more like hydRAs,” Mom mutters.

“Do you really think it’s that simple?” Dad says. “We just kill the right people, and it all sorts itself out?”

I spread my hands, taking a step toward him. “Sounds like a new and exciting approach to me.”

“New,” he scoffs. “What the hell do you think I was doing my first year in the hood? Other than a sixteen percent spike in the recorded homicide rate, thirty-two dead men changed nothing for Starling.”

“I am done handing over murderers and human traffickers to SCPD! If they can’t hold them, they can’t have them.”

“What are you going to do with them instead?”

I shrug. “Give them to ARGUS. Waller’s good at disappearing people, isn’t she?”

Dad has not given me The Look in nearly three years. “You have no idea what you just said,” he says in sudden, icy rage. “What that woman is.”

“So explain! All your cryptic, need-to-know bullshit, and then you accuse everybody of not knowing what they’re talking about? Kind of a dick move, Dad.”

“Jonathan,” Mom snaps, but Dad’s voice is louder.

“You are twenty-two years old,” he says, “and you grew up as safe and well cared for as your mother and I could make you. You get your first good look at the underbelly of this city, and you
think you understand? You think the solution is that obvious, and none of us ever thought of it before?"

I can’t dispute that he has seen more of this city than I have. More than anyone, probably. Dad knows Starling to the skeletal remains of vacant factories and to the decaying arteries of disused subway tunnels beneath our feet. He, Mom, and Dig have a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of the city’s history and geography, because at some point all that crap saved their lives.

But they have been staring at the problem so long, I wonder if they can’t see it for what it is anymore.

“The system is fucking broken. Maybe you duct taped it over for a few years, but it can’t hold.” I look to Mom, because it’s just like she said. It wasn’t supposed to be like this anymore. “It never holds.”

She looks back at me steadily. On her next blink, a tear slips down her cheek.

“Fine,” Dad growls. “Tear it down. You could do it; it wouldn’t even be that difficult. Burn it to the ground. But first, tell me one thing. What are you going to build in its place?”

I have no answer to that.

In the long silence that follows, Dad and I glare at each other, and Mom glares at both of us and crosses her arms impatiently.

So quietly I can barely hear him, Dad says, “In a few weeks, I’m going to announce my candidacy for mayor in the upcoming election.”

For a few seconds, I wonder what collection of English syllables he could have just said that sounded so uncannily similar to, *I’m going to announce my candidacy for mayor.*

When he does not repeat himself, I let out a flat, “What?”

“I didn’t stop serving Starling when I hung up the hood. City Hall is the best place to do that right now.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind? What about our big green secret?”

“It seems to me that an ally running City Hall would be all upside for the Arrow.”

“Yeah, but if you get caught aiding and abetting the vigilante, who in case you’ve forgotten is your son, you are in deep shit.”

His smile is grim, but it also reminds me of every story I ever heard about young Ollie Queen flirting with death on his third motorcycle after totaling the first two. “If I get caught.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Is this a mid-life crisis thing? Like, you already have a flashy car and you’re not interested in a mistress half your age, so you’re going to get yourself a city instead?”

“Starling has lost her way,” he says heavily. “This is what I can do, right now, to put her right.”

“So she is a mistress,” Mom says on a sigh, “but she’s four times his age.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “You’re ok with this?”

She crosses her arms and looks back at me levelly. “It was my suggestion.”
They’re serious about this. They’re really serious. I lean back against the dining room table, hands braced on either side of me. “This is a terrible, terrible idea,” I state for the record. Then I glance back and forth between them, and I give Dad a nod. “When you get sworn in, can you give Chief Broussard the boot?”

“I was thinking I might behead him on the steps of City Hall.”

Mom gets to her feet. “You understand this means our whole family will be under the microscope.”

I grimace. “Game faces on? Best behavior?”

She smiles tiredly. “I was going to say, ‘Let’s give ‘em something to talk about.’”

I turn to Dad. “Are you doing this because of the Captain?”

“I’m doing it now because of the Captain,” he says quietly.

“Okay then.” I stare down at the glittering shards by my feet. “Good luck saving the city.”

Before they can reply, I step over the broken glass and disappear upstairs to my room.

Laurel throws herself into the Bloom case as if he were personally responsible for her father’s death. I’d almost feel sorry for the bastard, if he were any less of a pimple in the asscrack of humanity.

A few nights after the funeral, Mom sends me to drop off food at Laurel’s beautiful uptown apartment. Sara greets me at the door.

“Jonny’s here,” she calls over her shoulder, and then she eyes the deep casserole dish in my hands with interest. “That looks like Ollie’s chili.”

“Right in one.”

Laurel still has a highlighter behind her ear when she comes into the living room. She looks slightly happier to see me than she usually does, which probably has more to do with the chili than my good looks or irresistible charm. “Thank you, Jon.”

“Yeah, of course. Mom said to tell you it freezes well.”

“Come on in,” Laurel says, while Sara puts the food away. I follow her back to her study, which, in contrast to the neat elegance of every other room, has become a mountain range of paper. The tallest peaks rise up on top of her desk, but there are foothills extending all the way to the file cabinets.

I whistle. “Is this all Bloom?”

She moves a pile of manila folders off of a chair, and she goes to sit behind her desk. “Have a seat.”

I sit.

She looks me right in the eyes. “I need you to get me more.”
Oh, great. We’re doing this now? While you are grieving and obsessive? “I’d be happy to put you in touch with the head of Panoptic’s private investigative services, if you think it would help.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Wow, would you really?”

“If that’s not good enough for you, hit up that psycho in green. I hear he beats confessions out of people, and you know how well that stands up in court.”

“Jonathan,” she says wearily, “you know you don’t need to wear a mask under my roof.”

Like or dislike, right or wrong, the Lances are family, and the big green secret is as safe with Laurel as it is with Mom or Dad. But she has only ever worked in the daylight, and she has only ever lived by one name. There are things I can probably never explain to her.

“I’m always wearing a mask.” I try to soften my tone enough that she knows I am not doing this to spite her. “Gotta talk to the right one.”

She regards me thoughtfully, just long enough to make me uncomfortable, and then she nods.

Sara pokes her head in. “Are you staying for chili?”

I get to my feet. “I’ve got to get back to Panoptic and finish up some paperwork.” Hey, it could be true. Progress reports and threat evaluation matrices magically accumulate while I am not looking.

“Mind if I come with?” Sara says. “Dig invited me to use the fitness center while I’m in town.”

That is how I get the chance to spar with the original Canary.

“Use your size and your reach,” she warns me. “Keep me at a distance.”

I bounce on my heels. “All right, Tweety Bird. Let’s go.”

Ten seconds later she gets me on the mats with her elbow in my throat.

“What did I tell you? If you let me in close, you’ve got no position to attack me, and I’ve got everything to work on you.”

Next she sends me reeling with a kick to the gut. “God damn it,” I wheeze.

“Come on, be direct. Straight lines are fastest. I’m smaller and more agile, and your big punches are making you vulnerable.”

Twenty seconds later, I get her in a lock. She starts chuckling when I ease up and let her go. “Nice one, Jonny.”

“Yeah, finally.”

“One out of six ain’t bad,” she says, punching my shoulder. “Ugh, I need a shower. And then I’d better get home and make sure Laurel actually eats something. You’re sure you don’t want in on that chili?”

“Nah, thanks. Besides, I think Laurel would be just as happy not to deal with me again tonight,” I say on a laugh.

Sara gives me a curious look. "Why do you say that?"

I shrug. "She’s, ah, not exactly my biggest fan."
She shakes her head. “You’ve got her all wrong, kiddo. Maybe she gets annoyed sometimes, but she doesn’t dislike you.” She ambles over to the mini fridge and cracks open a water bottle. "You remind her of someone."

"Who, Dad? Back before the island?” It’s the comparison everyone made each time I got arrested, and it would explain a lot. If a reincarnation of the asshole who cheated on me sauntered into my life, I probably wouldn't be rolling out the welcome mat either.

Sara shakes her head. "Tommy Merlyn."

"Huh.” Laurel has practically canonized the man who died saving her life, and we all suspect his ghost was the rival who broke up both her marriages. “Why him?"

"When things are bad, or when somebody's hurting, you always try to make them laugh.” Sara has a particular, affectionate smile that deepens the distinctive dimple in her chin. I don’t see it often, but here it is now. "That was Tommy."

"She told you that?"

"Of course not.” She tosses me a water bottle. "But it's who you remind me of."

That’s all very sweet, but I have spent at least ten years feeling like Laurel Lance just plain does not like my face. When I drive Sara home, I don’t stay for chili.

Sunday dawns grey and dreary, which is the perfect weather for what I have in mind.

“Junebug.” I burst into my sister’s room, swipe her pillow out from under her head, and smack the shapeless lump of Abby under the covers. “We are D minus ten on the Christmas countdown, and it is time to get in the spirit. Now rise and shine!”

Obnoxious good cheer at eight in the morning is vengeance for all the times she has jumped on people’s beds demanding pancakes.

She curls up even tighter. “I’m tired, Jonny.”

I pause with the pillow raised above my head. “You sick?”

“Just tired.”

“Come on, get up. We’re going to your geographically convenient collection of boutiques, and I can’t do the super special surprise present by myself.” I try dragging the covers off her, but she claws them right back up to her chin.

“Just go to Martin Wine Cellar and find them a nice French red.” She casts me a glazed, exhausted look. “Mom’s on a Bordeaux kick again.”

I step back. Cold constricts my insides. I have not seen that glassy look in her eyes for two years, but I recognize it. “Abby, are you ok?”

“Let me sleep,” she grumbles.

Please not this again.

Two weeks after Mom’s abduction, the slam of a door woke me at three in the morning. I jumped
out of bed, which hurt like hell with my still-healing ribs, and I raced down the hall expecting to find the Black Hand back for revenge.

Instead I found the door to my parents’ room hanging open, soft light glowing through it. Dad sat on the rug, leaning against the footboard of their bed, holding Abby firmly with her back to his chest. She braced her hands on his knees, chin straining upward as she gasped for air.

I had never seen anyone hyperventilate before. It scared the crap out of me. For a second I thought my twelve year old sister was having a heart attack.

“Slow down, baby,” Dad said, one hand smoothing back her hair and the other splayed over her heart. Her fingers twisted in the fabric of his sweatpants, right over the bandages from his recent knee surgery, and with every tug, he closed his eyes against the pain. But his voice was steady. “Breathe with me. You’re ok. I promise you’re ok.”

Mom emerged from their en suite bathroom with a wet cloth in her hands. “It’s all right, Jon,” she said evenly, and she sat down next to Dad and Abby with patient calm.

“Easy, easy,” he kept saying. “Breathe deep from your diaphragm, just like in choir. Don’t be scared, junebug. Breathe slow with me.”

I stood in the doorway like an idiot until the panic attack passed. Then I sat cross-legged on the floor and watched Mom smile softly, murmur gentle jokes, and wipe sweat from Abby’s face.

Mom and Dad called in the pros the next morning. Lyla gave them the name of a therapist who often came in for trauma counseling for Panoptic’s clients and employees. After a few weeks, the nightmares faded and my sister was, by and large, herself again.

But for months afterward, we occasionally stumbled into these heavy, time-stopping fogs in her internal climate. Her eyes glazed over, her voice flattened out, and she slept for marathons of twelve and fourteen hours. If you asked her what was wrong, she’d tell you, “I’m just tired.”

“Abby,” I repeat. “Are you ok?”

She does not answer me.

I give her the pillow back, and I tuck her down comforter tighter around her. When I close her door behind me, I take a moment to lean against it and try to decide what to do.

Maybe the funeral has finally caught up to her. She put on a brave face for the people who needed her to be her sunshine self, and she did not really get a chance to grieve. Maybe it is the gray weather and the stress of exams and the pressure of rehearsals. Maybe she will wake up fine tomorrow morning.

I go to Martin Wine Cellar, and I buy a nice French red.

In the long, bitter nights of December, Mom and I work hard to track down our mystery hitman. It’s been two weeks since we recorded the phone call from Bloom, and we still have nothing but his voice. “Middle-aged Caucasian male, probably from the Deep South, savvy enough to keep his phone and his finances hidden even from me,” Mom sums up on a sigh. “That is as much progress as we’ve made ID’ing him.”

“So let me do it my way,” I say, pulling on a second layer of Under Armour.
Mom glances at the half-naked mannequin in its case. “If you’re planning to threaten people with grievous bodily harm, you’ll need to bundle up. It’s cold out there.”

I shrug. My black and gray motorcycle leathers will work just as well for now.

She cocks her head. “Take Dad’s old jacket.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “That’s allowed?”

She unseals one of the airtight glass cases at the far end of the lair, and with much more fond gentleness than she ever treats my gear, she unzips the leather jacket and eases it off the mannequin’s shoulders. Then she holds it out for me to slip my arms into the sleeves.

It fits me better than it did two years ago, when I got fussed at for trying it on. It is scuffed and faded, and after all this time the leather is still soft as butter. Someone must take it out and work some oil into it every now and then.

Mom gets oddly sentimental, seeing me in it. She adjusts the shoulders and murmurs, “Like it was made for you.”

I grin down at her. “Yeah, works out well, doesn’t it?”

“This is going to sound silly, but...” She presses my bow into my hands. “Try not to rip this one to shreds?”

Every night for a week, I point arrows at all the usual suspects, asking politely who a corrupt cop might have hired to beat a woman to death. I get some very genuine terrified denials, some desperate speculation, four leads that don’t pan out, and a whole lot of bullshit.

I listen closely for the name Desilva while I’m at it, but if this new mob captain is real, she’s awful quiet.

Meanwhile, Abby perks up enough to set up both an Advent wreath and a menorah. This means she’s perky enough to get mad at me for missing three of the first five nights of Hanukkah. I figured with both Mom and Dad kindling the lights in the window with her, she wouldn’t miss me much.

“What are you doing that’s so much more important?”

“Look, I said I was sorry.”

“How sorry could you be, if you just keep doing it?”

Yeah, misjudged that one pretty bad.

But on the nights I don’t make it home until the small hours, bruised and bleeding and shivering, I still find little gifts waiting on my pillow. Homemade sufganiyot, the high quality chocolate I love, and salted pretzels dipped in caramel.

I give them presents too - scarves and books and good coffee - but it’s just... stuff. When I find a pair of thermal socks tied up with ribbon, my insides twist with guilt. I don’t know how Mom and Abby knew I’d worn through my old pair. At least guilt means I’m doing Judaism right, doesn’t it?

Milena commandeers all four of us to help her clean and rearrange furniture for the annual Queen holiday extravaganza. It’s black tie, but family friendly. In fact, Santa makes an appearance to pass
out candy. Captain Lance kept up the tradition even as his health declined. Last year Santa stopped often to catch his breath, but he still managed an impressive ho ho ho.

Dad, Dig, Uncle Roy, and I are sparring one evening when it occurs to me: “Who’s dressing up for the kids this this year?”

Uncle Roy puts his index finger to his nose. Dad and I do the same the second we notice.

“What are you doing?” Dig says, looking at the three of us like we’re crazy.

“You should start making a list,” Uncle Roy advises him. “You’ll need to check it twice.”

Milena’s dinners get more festive every night, too.

“Are my mashed potatoes a snowman?” Abby says in delighted wonder on the night of the twenty-first. “Is this really happening on my plate right now?”

Dad looks at his perfectly normal scoop of mashed potatoes and asks Milena something in Russian.

“If you are cute as Miss Abigail, you get a snowman,” Milena replies serenely. “If not, then not.”

Mom switches plates with him like a saint, and he eats the sliver of carrot that was her snowman’s nose.

“So. Caroling in the Square,” Abby says to the table at large. “Who’s in?”

Every December 23 in the cobblestone square in front of the Starling Museum of Art, several hundred people with candles and lyrics sheets gather in the cold to sing with extremely loud and off-key enthusiasm. Starling has what you might call a culture of costumes, and it is not uncommon to see Santa hats, red cheeks, fake beards, or wire-rimmed glasses. People wear bells and reindeer headbands, and there are always at least a couple of weirdos in full elf costume.

It is one of Abby’s favorite things ever. Because of course it is. She and Aunt Thea always make a big show of forcing Dad to go, so that he can sigh and shake his head and pretend to be very put-upon.

“You know he loves it,” Abby scoffs.

When we pick Aunt Thea up at dusk the next night and load her wheelchair into the back, Abby looks expectantly at the front door for one more.

“Uncle Roy weaseled out?” I ask Aunt Thea. “Lucky bastard.”

“We’ll manage without him,” she says. “The man can’t carry a tune in a bucket anyway.”

If we are honest, Aunt Thea cannot carry a tune in a Prada handbag. Abby did not get her musical talent from the Queen side of the family.

In the fine mist of rain, among several hundred people sheltering candles in their gloved hands, I stand next to Aunt Thea as she sings loud and proud a few pitches wide of the note. On my other side, Abby puts on a stage-worthy performance, like she is auditioning for one of those choirs of angels I keep hearing about.

Muttering the words of O Holy Night in more or less a monotone, I glance over at Dad, who does not even bother to lip sync. He just looks around the square with a faint smile, taking in the wind-
pink faces, the small kids laughing and weaving through the forest of legs, and the strange naturalness of so many strangers sharing a beat, a sound, and a syllable in chorus.

Dad breathes in deep, and for a moment, I understand the melancholy in his smile. This right here is the Starling he loves, but beyond the edge of the candlelight, the streets are darker than he thought.

Aunt Thea catches his eye, because she understands even better than I do. Then she narrows her eyes at him. “You’re not singing.”

He smiles. “You’re loud enough for both of us.”

Abby looks tempted to giggle, but she doesn’t falter on the soaring “O night divine.” I have to admit, if I were choir director of the holy host, she’d be a shoo-in.

For right now, we’re standing in the candlelight. It’s gold and glowy, and I’ll take it.

After the last verse of Silent Night, strangers come over to compliment Abby’s voice, which happens every year. They greet us like casual acquaintances when they notice the rest of us - “Oh, hey, Mr. Queen. Merry Christmas, Ms. Queen!” - and they start herding their kids away.

As the crowd disperses, Aunt Thea pulls four candy canes from the bag hooked over the back of her wheelchair, and she spreads them out for us each to choose one. Huddled close against the wind in the darkening square, we race to finish them.

We used to conspire to let Abby win, but since her bat mitzvah, she’s had to run with the big dogs. In a fair fight, Aunt Thea beats us all handily. She sucks the red stains from her fingertips loud and victorious, and she grins up at Dad.

“How does it feel, Oliver? Losing to me for the nineteenth year in a row?”

He crunches down on his remaining candy cane, and with his mouth full, he confesses, “Ish excruciating.”

The mist turns to rain as we drive home, and when Aunt Thea hugs me goodbye, she whispers, “Come by sometime tomorrow to pick up your dinner jacket for the party, ok?”

I go patrolling afterward, but apparently even scumbags have better things to do than screw around in the freezing rain three nights before Christmas. All I accomplish is getting my new thermal socks thoroughly soaked inside my boots.

The twelve-foot high Christmas tree is lit up in the living room when I sneak in. As I pass by, one of the ornaments spins, and its gleam catches my eye. It is a cherubic little archer dressed in green, with big cartoonish blue eyes behind his painted mask. His bow is strung with gold tinsel.

“Cute, Mom,” I whisper.

No one will think anything of it. A stylized bow and arrow are symbols of Starling now, not necessarily the vigilante, and people will slap it on anything - coasters, mugs, wall hangings, ornaments.

It has become part of Starling’s mythology, just like the haunted ruins of Queen Mansion or the five hundred and three dark red roses laid at the base of the Everglade Bridge every fifteenth of May. I did not realize until I was ten that the cupids on Valentine’s Day cards do not wear green in other cities. I assumed that little girls everywhere dressed up in black masks and blond wigs for Halloween, only to get their plastic staffs taken away for hitting the other children.
Tomorrow night, undoubtedly someone will show off their arrowhead cufflinks or canary earrings and say, “Just a little Starling touch,” as if they were in on some grand secret.

But the ornament isn’t for them. It’s for family - for the people who understand.

I smile, and I slip on up to bed.

Panoptic is quiet the next day. Half of our staff is on break, and absolutely no one wants to spar with me in the afternoon. They want to go home to their families. I skip out at four, and I head to Aunt Thea’s studio.

One of the mannequins near her work table is wearing a Santa suit. “That better not be what you meant by ‘dinner jacket,’” I say immediately.

“Calm down, that’s for Dig.” She pushes a soft bundle of red tissue paper into my arms. “This is for you.”

I peel away the silver sticker with her design house’s stylized T, and I unwrap the paper. Green leather lies beneath. I lift my new jacket by the shoulders and hold it out in front of me.

“The kevlar plates are sewn into the underlayer, which I had specially woven with a tripolymer weft and SpyderSylk warp. It’ll give you more protection against edged weapons than kevlar alone, but still leave you a full range of motion. I wouldn’t call it bulletproof - nothing is, really - but any shot from farther than ten meters is going to have a hell of a time punching through.”

Oh, hell yes.

“You like it?” Aunt Thea says, eyes shining hopefully.

I hook the jacket over one index finger, flourish it over my shoulder, and do my best runway sashay. I strike a pose in front of her.

“Jonathan, you little snot.” Practically giddy, she reaches for me, takes the jacket, and holds it up for me to slip my arms in. “Come on, come on, try it on for real.”

She tugs and pinches and fusses at seams, which is totally unnecessary. The thing fits me like a glove. I’m all pumped to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, because I’m the nastiest bastard in the valley and ain’t nobody going to fuck with my leather jacket. I lean down and kiss her loudly on the cheek. “Thank you so much, Aunt Thea.”

“My pleasure,” she says warmly.

“I’m serious. This is amazing. You’re amazing. I’m going to look so much cooler than that asshole with the bat ears.”

Aunt Thea laughs long and loud. “I hope it serves you well. Now come get your dinner jacket for the party tonight. Do you remember how to tie the bow tie, or do you need me to show you?”

I have long experience with black tie, and at home I manage to dress myself just fine, thank you. Showered, shaved, combed, and minty, I step out into the hallway with the Bond theme echoing in my head.
Down the hall, Mom leans in Abby’s doorway. The back of her head is a swirl of elegant curls, but she is still wearing jeans and a button-down.

“Let me bring you some Pepto Bismol or Tylenol or something. We might have you on your feet by the time people get here.”

“I just want to sleep it off,” I hear my sister say.

“You have guests, sweetheart,” Mom reminds her.

“They don’t need me to babysit them, and I already texted Kaylee to explain.”

Mom closes the door behind her.

“Abigail Queen is skipping a party?” I ask her.

“It’s like a cat turning down fresh salmon, isn’t it?” She brushes a stray curl out of her face, careful not to smudge her professionally applied makeup. “They love that stuff even when they’re sick. When Jpeg was on his last leg, that was the only thing he would eat.”

I jerk my head at Abby’s door. “I hope we don’t have to put her to sleep.”

She pats my cheek. “And I hope we don’t have to re-home anybody either.”

As she heads down the hall to the master bedroom to get dressed, the thought crosses my mind that Abby might be fibbing a little bit. All she wants to do is sleep, and I’m tempted to go take a good look at her eyes.

But no. If Mom is taking her word for it, so will I.

Over the next hour, the house fills with music and people and laughter. It’s one of the most eclectic collections of humanity you’ll ever see in Starling - from Mayor Lee, the smug son of a bitch, to Abby’s goth theater friend who shows up in fingerless black gloves and an actual Victorian-style corset.

Sara Lance arrives with a woman whose name I must have heard wrong, because no one goes by Sin, do they? “Laurel sends her apologies,” Sara says, “but she just wasn’t feeling up to it.”

Dad nods and lays his hand on her arm. “I’m glad you made it.”

Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea show up separately, which is odd, and then Uncle Roy proceeds to down three glasses of Scotch and scowl in the corner most of the night. Mom drags a smile out of him, but nobody else manages it.

“What is Ollie up to?” Aunt Thea asks me off to the side. “I’m seeing a lot more city councilmen and judges and political types than usual.”

I shrug, because I’m still kind of hoping he’ll give up on the mayor idea. “Dunno. Maybe it’s Mom who’s up to something.”

She is probably the one who rearranged the guest list, come to think of it.

At ten o’clock, Santa comes through the French doors with a giant bag of candy. None of the kids are even a little bit fazed that he put on twenty pounds of muscle and got a really dark tan since the last time they saw him. That’s probably because his deep, booming ho ho ho is the most convincing they have ever heard.
Lyla laughs harder than anyone when the littlest girl nearly succeeds in pulling his beard off.

“Look how much fun Dad’s having,” Elaine says next to me. “Don’t you want to take a turn next year?”

The familiar warmth of having Elaine nearby washes over me. I give her a sideways hug and say, “Love to, but my dad has seniority.”

My fraternity brothers arrive in ones and twos, including McGinnis' big brother - my grandbig. We hit the bar, and damn, it’s good to catch up. Most took their business degrees to Coast City or their finance degrees to Gotham, and we haven’t seen each other since graduation.

It’s weird, though. Seven months apart, and the longer we talk, the clearer it is how little we have in common anymore.

After an hour with them, I’ve got plenty of liquid courage in me. Maybe that’s why the next time I see Elaine, smiling by the light of the tree, her black curls spilling down her neck, I offer her my arm.

“Come out on the veranda with me?”

Our breath frosts, and she shivers in the long, sheer sleeves of her gold dress. My dinner jacket is thick wool, and it is plenty big enough to wrap her up warm.

“What are we doing out here in the freezing cold?” she says, laughing.

“You look beautiful tonight.”

I have told her that dozens of times before, but there must be something different in my tone, because it catches her totally off guard. “Thank you.”

I take a deep breath. All right. Let’s do this. “You’re always beautiful.”

Her eyes soften. “Jonny…”

“I’ve been joking about being in love with you for years.”

She just looks at me.

Go for it. Now. “It’s not a joke.” Well, there were those times I proposed, which was probably excessive. “It’s like eighty percent not a joke.”

She does not break into a smile. She does not throw her arms around me. She definitely does not plant one on me and drag me off to the garden to make out.

Instead she bows her head, sets her wine glass down on the railing, and takes a deep breath.

“You know I love you,” she starts.

I raise a hand to stop what must be coming next: It’s not that kind of love. I used to babysit you, remember? I just don’t see you that way. I don’t need to hear the rest. “It’s okay. Just forget I said anything.”

She looks so miserable that I believe her when she says, “I am so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” It feels like I just took a mule kick to the ribs, but I’m sure that will go away soon. “It’s okay, really.”
Struggling for something to say, she settles on, “You were really brave for telling me.”

I give her a look. “Now that’s just condescending.”

She winces. “Sorry. I guess it was.”

“Yeah, I don’t need your lip, woman.”

Finally, I have wiped the guilty expression off her face. “Your life is full of mouthy women. How do you put up with us all?”

“A drink would help. You want a drink?”

The sharp throb fades when she takes the arm I offer her. By the time I have downed another scotch and soda, it is a tolerable ache.

After that, I probably have a little too much. Then my pledge brothers find a bottle of Fireball, which we all agree tastes like Christmas, or at least like Christmas ought to taste. I have a lot too much.

“Jon, there you are,” Mom says when she catches me on my way back from the bar. “Could you be a good host and entertain Abby’s guests for a little while, please?”

I wave my drink at her. “’M havin’ an adult beverage. Not gonna hang out with a buncha fourteen year olds.”

She looks me over, sighs in disappointment, and looks away. “I meant the SCU girls,” she mutters, “and I was going to suggest you dance with her friend Tish, because - ”

“Not really in the mood for theater kids.”

Not long after that, my crowd of Phi Psis gets loud enough that Dad comes and tells us, “Take it out on the veranda.”

“Come on, guys.” I start herding them out the French doors, and on our way out, I accidentally back right into someone. “Whoa, hey, sorry.”

I have stepped on a girl in red satin with a mane of auburn hair. She can’t be much more than five feet tall, and she is built soft, with full hips and tiny hands, one of which is held out to steady herself on my arm.

I am smiling before I realize it. “Party’s moving out here. You want to join us?”

She raises an eyebrow, withdrawing her hand delicately. “Not really in the mood for frat boys.”

Oh. Shit. “You’re Tish.”

She nods. “And you’re Abby’s brother.”

I gesture out the door. “Invitation stands.”

She laughs at my nerve - ten points to me - but shakes her head. “Nice to meet you, Jonathan Queen. Merry Christmas.”

She turns her back, melts into a gaggle of flamboyantly dressed people, and slips her hand through the arm of the goth girl in the corset.
I don’t remember much of what happens after that.

Christmas morning, Abby feels fine, and I am too hungover to care what is under the tree. So of course she busts into my room in reindeer-print pajamas and smacks me in the head with a pillow.

“Rise and shine!”

Elaine stands in my doorway, and though she has pulled on leggings and a sweater dress, she has not yet bothered with makeup or taming her wild black hair. She looks warm and sleepy and gorgeous, which should be fine provided I don’t look directly at her.

“Come on, there’s coffee,” she says.

I shuffle downstairs to the pajama party. The whole family slept here last night, so Mom and Aunt Thea are already having coffee at the dining room table in robes and flannel. Dig and Uncle Roy doze on opposite ends of the sofa until Lyla sneaks up on her husband and tugs the Santa hat down over his ears. At breakfast, Dad passes Milena’s standard hangover dishes directly to me. When I pass the hash browns to Elaine, she is careful not to touch me. I hope I did not ruin things with my… whatever she is to me. Not my Elaine, obviously.

Presents are a leisurely affair, now that even the baby of the family is in high school. Once upon a time, it was serious business. There is video of Dad and Dig on the floor assembling a Fisher Price tool bench for me, with Uncle Roy’s voice behind the cell camera saying, “How many highly trained combat veterans does it take to assemble a child’s toy?”

Dad covered my eyes and gave him the finger.

Now we mostly just sip coffee and throw crumpled gift wrap at each other. Elaine unties the ribbon on a box of pearl earrings from my parents, and she leans over the back of the sofa to thank Dad with a kiss on the cheek. Then she loops the ribbon around his head and ties a neat bow at the back. Not only does he let her, he does not take it off for twenty minutes.

I swear, Elaine gets away with nearly as much as Abby - probably for the same reasons that, when he wants a one-word descriptor for what she is to him, Dad simply calls her his niece. “I wonder sometimes,” Mom once told me, half-asleep on the sofa in the lair, “whether he would ever have been brave enough for you two if he hadn’t loved her first.”

The gift MVP this year is probably Aunt Thea. She gives Abby a midnight blue dress custom made for her, and my sister reacts with such convincing surprise that Uncle Roy and I exchange appreciative nods. Give the girl an Emmy, after all.

Christmas night is just for the four of us Queens.

Mom leads us in kindling all nine of the lights, her voice taking on an uncharacteristic seriousness as she does it.

Then we sprawl on the rug in front of the fireplace with hot chocolate, ginger snaps, and spiced wine. The first winter after my parents got married and moved into this house, the living room was nearly empty but for a menorah and a Christmas tree. They did exactly this on Christmas night - blankets by the fire and sappy music playing on Mom’s laptop speakers.

Well, maybe not exactly this. They were newlyweds, so there was probably a bunch of additional stuff I do not want to think about.
Abby’s eyes are clear tonight, none of Dad’s old injuries seem to be hurting him, and Mom looks well-rested and unworried about any of the crazier, stupider members of her family. The windows frost over, and Frank Sinatra wishes us a merry little Christmas.

Through the years, we all will be together, if the fates allow. I hang a shining star of sticky-backed tinsel in Mom’s hair.

She throws a blanket over me, all three of them sit on the corners, and it takes me ten minutes to fight my way out.
Chapter 5

Shortly after I recover from my New Year’s hangover, Dad takes a whole week of shifts on Watchtower. His last night in the lair, he fletches an arrow as I suit up.

“You know I’m announcing my candidacy tomorrow night.”

“I’ll stand nearby and try to look dignified.”

“I appreciate that.” He sets his work aside on the table where I’ve got my boot braced. “You know if I get elected, I’ll be an ally, not a teammate. Even as a candidate, I’m going to have to take a step back.”

I tug my bootlaces tighter. “Yeah, I figured you’d be busy. And I know you’ll have to publicly disapprove of me.”

“If you’re hurt or in danger or you need help, I want to know. But if you’re illegally wiretapping, stealing evidence, breaking and entering, or kidnapping and interrogating suspects,” he passes me the bow, “don’t tell me more than you absolutely have to. I trust your judgment about how much that is.”

“What difference does it make?” I straighten and take the bow from him. “God knows you can keep a secret.”

“I’m trying to work in the daylight this time.”

I tap the comm into my ear and tug the hood up. “You’re getting really hung up on legality in your old age. Next you’re going to start doing the speed limit and claiming vigilante expenses on your taxes.”

“I do.” He takes up the arrow and fletching jig again. “It’s all laundered through Panoptic as a private security expenditure.”

I climb the stairs laughing.

Half an hour later in the dark and nearly-deserted precinct, McKenna Hall hunches over late-night paperwork. My shadow falls across her desk, and she looks up sharply. When she realizes who is silhouetted in her doorway, backlit by the streetlight through the window, her eyes widen.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Pleasure to see you too, Detective.”

She shakes her head at me. “After what you did to Bloom, if they catch you here they will shoot first and decide why it was a justifiable use of force later.”

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Honestly, I thought hanging him off the front of the courthouse was a little on the nose.”

I gesture at my outfit. “Do I look like I do subtle?”

She very nearly smiles. “Tell me why you’re here.”
Eugene Bridges and his scruffy friends are officially going down as George Miranda’s murderers - well done, Laurel - but I’m after bigger game. “Desilva, the new captain of the Starling Hand. Anything you have on her, send it by way of this secure drive.” I toss her a transmitter, which she catches deftly.

“Please?” she prompts.

I chuckle, spread my hands, and give her a half-bow. “Pretty please.”

She jerks her head at the door. “Get out of here.”

Just to be a snot, I take the window instead.

The next night is showtime.

“Last chance to back out,” Dad whispers to us in the wings.

Mom reaches up and frames his face in her hands. “Knock ‘em dead, Mr. Queen.”

He smiles. “Yes, Mrs. Queen.”

A quick peck on the mouth, and then he strides out in front of the flashing bulbs and blinky red lights.

“You guys are gross,” I mutter to Mom. “Any idea when you might knock it off?”

“When we die, Jonathan. Straighten your collar.”

We follow Dad onstage and stand around being photogenic, at which we excel. He makes what is probably a pretty good speech about our family’s history with Starling, tradition of service, and dedication to the city - I don’t know, I stopped paying attention after the first three sentences. There might be some stuff about reform and restoring shaken faith and making Starling the city he knows it can be. I’m sure it’s inspiring.

After, Mom carefully keeps the reporters’ attention off me. She has a way of babbling and going off on tangents that seems completely artless and honest. The overall effect is adorably genuine without being the least bit informative.

For her part, Abby is on tonight. She charms the socks off everyone in the room. She is all big blue eyes and dimpled smiles, joking with reporters as if they are good friends of hers instead of professional busybodies who would gleefully and publicly humiliate her for a few hundred extra page views.

“Mayor, Ollie?” Aunt Thea says at the dinner table that night. Uncle Roy is working late, so she is eating with us. “You want to be mayor?”

I don’t understand the unease on her face - the hurt, almost - until Dad says, “I think she would have been pleased.”

Moira Queen would have been smug as the snake right after closing the deal on that apple. Mom says that my grandmother was a Brazilian rainbow boa in another life. Absolutely riveting because wow, pretty colors, but also because, oh God, you don’t dare take your eyes off her. Among Starlingers, she is controversial as Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton.
But I have never heard my father or aunt speak of her with anything but affection.

Aunt Thea musters up a smile. “Where do I sign up for your campaign spam?”

Dad gets his first death threat before the end of the next day.

“Damn it, Oliver,” Dig mutters as he flips through postcards and letters addressed to us. “I’m five minutes away from retirement, and you decide to do this? Come on, man.”

Since before I was born, Panoptic has filtered the Queen family’s mail for the run-of-the-mill crazies proposing marriage or accusing us of helping the Illuminati take over the world. They flag the borderline cases, and they bring the true threats to our attention.

For the same reasons they don’t let surgeons cut up family members, company policy forbids me from even perusing the contents of the file marked Queen in our library. “Isn’t this kind of personal for you too?” I ask Dig when he catches me trying to sneak a peek. “I don’t see you taking a step back because of vested interests or objectivity or whatever.”

If I said it in front of any other employee, he would have my head on a platter. In the privacy of the archive room, he just crosses his arms and says, “Have you turned in that write-up on the Cuvier case to Lyla yet?”

Dig and Lyla have been careful to keep me and Abel Cuvier from meeting face to face again, but they are happy to let me sort through all of his hate mail. It has done nothing for my mood. “No one has even breathed wrong at his daughter,” I complain, “but he wants somebody stalking her all over a college campus? It’s creepy.”

“When Elaine left for college, nobody was emailing me thousand-word rants about how my family should die in a fire, and I was still tempted.”

“But none of his crazies even mention her name - which, by the way, is ridiculous. Laetitia? Sounds like the pope’s mistress.” It feels awesome to vent, even about something completely unrelated to my actual issues, and I’m on a roll now. “If I have to hear the guys make the same goddamn crack for the fiftieth time about how they’ll watch that girl any day and all night, I will punch somebody’s stupid, unoriginal f - “

“Who’s been saying that?” Dig cut in.

Ah, crap. Nobody likes a snitch. “It’s just a joke.”

“Mm-hmm.” Dig glances toward the door. I can see him opening the file drawer in his head, thumbing through to the folder labeled Lectures, and pulling out the sheet titled Perv on Clients and I Will Fire Your Ass.

“Just let me have a look at my family’s case file,” I say. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“You will. We’ll brief you like we would any other client,” Dig says firmly. “Go get that write-up finished for Lyla.”

On the drive home from work, I must be some kind of masochist to turn on talk radio. On the air, callers can’t reach a consensus about whether Dad is a model philanthropist, a champagne socialist, a racist arch-conservative, or an out-of-touch one-percenter. For reasons I can’t pin down, they are also concerned about whether Mom is a gold digger or a working class girl made good. There is even some speculation about whether I’m a reformed delinquent, or whether the incumbent mayor can rely on me to embarrass the Queen family for him during the campaign
season. Only Abby is spared, which I guess is the fairest shake we could expect.

She is also the only person who takes this mayor business completely in stride. She is remarkably nonchalant about the idea of Dad running the city, possibly because she was under the impression that he already did.

The following week, we are not all that surprised when Aunt Thea shows up on our doorstep with a Gucci suitcase hanging over the back of her wheelchair.

“I just need a little space to think,” she says when Dad opens the door. Any other woman might have looked embarrassed, but she gives us a steely look and says, “Away from home, you know?”

Some time away from Uncle Roy, more like. Well-known side effect of experimental treatments.

Mom comes into the foyer just as Dad steps aside to let Aunt Thea in. “Milena’s roasting a chicken,” she says. “You hungry?”

And who should be working mission control the next time I suit up but Uncle Roy. He is not at all interested in talking about why his wife is sleeping at my house instead of his. He is very much interested in our intel from McKenna Hall.

“How did you convince her to send you a full dossier? he says, pulling it up on the glassboard.

“I asked nicely.”

“Ana Desilva,” Uncle Roy says. “Also known as Annie Woods, Annette Dubois, and Anna Bosco. Hell of a resume she’s got. Extortion, racketeering, sale of prohibited biotech, prescription fraud, living on the avails. She’s got at least a master’s in scumbaggery.”

“She can’t be a crime boss,” I say, looking over his shoulder. “She’s adorable.”

She has a sweet, round face and a scattering of freckles across her nose. I think there might be dimples. Her height is listed as five-two. If we get to the point where I have to ask her some stern questions, I just don’t think I can dangle this woman from a bridge.

At least she’s not hard to find. A sumptuous townhouse on Nuxalk Street all to herself isn’t exactly keeping a low profile. A little recon, a couple of strategic shots to take out her security tech, and I shoot a smoke grenade through her living room window.

Alarms blare, footsteps thunder down her stairs, and she helpfully vacates the premises for me. I slip in the broken window, and under cover of the smoke, I plant a half dozen bugs throughout her first floor. Partly for intel and partly to throw her off my true purpose here, I lift her wallet from her purse on my way out.

I do not expect her to be waiting for me when I hop out the window again. I especially do not expect the nine millimeter in her tiny little hands. I see the black eye of the gun’s muzzle staring me down, and I dive sideways off the windowsill.

There’s a deafening crack. My left calf is suddenly nothing but fiery pain.

I land in a roll, and two more shots bury themselves in the side of the house as I dart around the corner. I’m over the fence and jumping on my bike before the adrenaline can wear off.

“Arrow,” Uncle Roy says over the comm. “What happened?”
“She shot me,” I pant, taking brief, cautious glances at my leg. If I look too close, I don’t know if I’ll make it home. “What the fuck?”

“How bad?”

“Lower leg. Otherwise, I don’t know. She fucking shot me.”

“Hey, it’s not time to freak yet. Elaine’s going to be waiting for you when you get here.”

“She hardly comes up to my armpit. What if she’d killed me? I’d be so embarrassed.”

He’s in my ear all the way home, saying comforting things like, “Look, if you haven’t bled out already, it’s probably not that bad. Calm the hell down.”

Down on the med table, Elaine helps ease off my pants. It’s the first time she’s touched me since Christmas Eve, but I’ve got too much gunshot wound going on to feel even a little bit awkward about it.

“It’s more of a graze,” she says as she lidocaines me up. “The bullet kind of took a chunk out of you.”

“So I’m going to live?”

Her professional calm cracks, and I see the worry in her eyes. “At the rate you’re going?”

I have no reply to that.

As she works, I notice three long scratches on her cheek, fresh and bright red. The one closest to her eye was deep enough to draw blood. “What happened?”

“Joys of emergency medicine. One of our wildcats got me this afternoon.”

“Wildcats?”

“We’ve had a dozen of them in the past month. Mostly late teens and early twenties in club dress. Elevated heart rates, out of control aggression - the cops are guessing it’s some designer drug. We’ll know when the tox screens start coming back.”

That sounds a lot like the scruffballs who beat George Miranda to death and ripped out my arrows like casual annoyances.

I narrow my eyes at Elaine. “They’re attacking you?”

“It’s my job, Jon. I’ve got this.” She smiles at me like I’m cute, which is highly inappropriate.

I am the shadow that stalks the night, damn it. I am the danger that haunts the dangerous.

She pins my ankle to the table and gives me a stern look. “Now quit twisting around on me, would you?”

The next day at Panoptic, I’m restricted to desk duty. I shoot off an email to McGinnis with a roundup of recent events, which totally counts as work. Ten minutes later, my phone rings.

“Nice work on the Bloom case,” McGinnis greets me. Before I can even say, Thank you, I was kind of hot shit, wasn’t I? he’s rolling right into, “You’ve got crazy berserkers too?”

I hold the phone away from my ear and scowl at his picture on the screen. “Good afternoon,
McGinnis,” I say to an imaginary, polite version of him seated across the table from me. “Great to hear from you too. Congratulations on your recent life successes. How’s your family? As your friend, I am deeply concerned for your welfare.”

“Queen, you whiny bitch,” I hear faintly from my phone. “Queen!”

I put it back to my ear. “What?”

“As your friend,” he says in a voice that sounds far too much like Wayne for my comfort, “I am deeply concerned about the crazy people hitting you over the head with lamps. I’ve been seeing something similar here in Gotham, but every time one ends up in the hospital, the tox screen comes back clean.”

I punt it to Mom, who checks some hospital records and calls me back. Eugene Bridges and his two friends’ bloodwork showed no sign of intoxicants.

“It could be something new or rare that they didn’t screen for,” Mom says, “which is not comforting at all. But I have to say, the only thing creepier than people skiffing out on drugs is people skiffing out for no reason whatsoever.”

I bite down on a laugh. “Mom, no one has ‘skiffed out’ since, like, 2032.”

“The one time I try to talk like the cool kids, my son makes fun of me for being old. I was going to give you an update on Desilva, but since you’re being a brat - “

“No, tell me the Desilva thing.”

“She found three of the seven bugs you planted, so we did better than I expected. The other four have been picking up a whole lot of Top 40 radio and cooking shows, which I guess is the problem with eavesdropping on someone who lives alone.”

“So the Desilva thing is nothing. I got shot for nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she says with forced brightness. “We have her driver’s license, her credit cards, eighty dollars in cash, and her Mojo Coffee punch card.”

I cover the receiver so I can adequately express how fucking frustrating this job is sometimes. Then I pick up the phone again. “How many punches?”

“All ten,” Mom says. “I might use it to get my fix this afternoon.”

“Like hell you will. It’s mine. I earned it.”

Her voice softens to something rueful and fond. “You did, Jonny.”

There’s a salted caramel mocha waiting for me on the counter when I get home.

The next night is Abby’s play - Midsummer in January, says the flyer - and I’m pulling dress socks over my bandaged calf when I pop a stitch.

Mom leans her head in my door. “You ready?” She glances down at the blood soaking my sock. “Oh, God. You don’t look ready.”

“Go, go.” I wave her off. “Let me take care of this, and I’ll catch up.”
Between jury rigging a bandage, cleaning up the blood, navigating traffic, and finding parking, I am a full hour late to the play. But I catch enough to remind me why I hate theater. A beautiful auburn-haired woman with wings appears to be in love with a donkey, and no one speaks English. God, the things I do for family.

I pop a painkiller when I sit down so my leg will shut up throbbing. Then I thumb through the program while the lovesick idiots work through their wacky misunderstandings. Abby’s photo and bio appear near the top of the cast list, I note smugly. Not far below is a picture of Tish, a sophomore at Starling City University in her first leading role with the Lyric.

Her full name is Laetitia Cuvier.

“No shit,” I mutter.

Mom glares at me. So does the elderly woman on my other side. I guess the painkiller fritzed out my brain to mouth filter.

Abby is admittedly adorable dressed up like Peter Pan, and she steals the show with the last lines. Mom, Dad, and I applaud louder than anybody when she takes a bow.

When she escapes the dressing room, still in costume, Dad presents her with a bouquet of pink roses. Then Tish comes over to hug her, and Abby starts babbling, “Oh, God, I messed up so many times, did you see how I dropped the flower on Demetrius and then I completely skipped the line about the - “

“Hey, you never broke character, so everybody assumed it was on purpose,” Tish says. “And did you hear the laugh you got?”

Abby practically glows.

“Laetitia Cuvier.” I reach for her hand. “Good to see you again.”

When she smiles ruefully, glitter sparkles on her cheeks. “I asked them not to print my full name in the program.”

Right, because Tish is so much better.

Her eyes widen, and an incredulous smile tugs at the corners of her mouth.

“Shit, I said that out loud,” I mutter, rubbing my forehead.

“You did.” Far from offended, she looks like she might laugh at me any second now.

“Sorry. Ignore me. I didn’t mean to be a dick.”

And there’s the laughter. That’s when Mom cuts in to say, “Tish, I hear you’re a vocal music major, and you give lessons.”

Mom and Dad make arrangements with Tish, and then they pay compliments to the rest of the cast. Abby makes a point of introducing me to a blond girl wearing a breastplate, and then she insists on riding home with me. The pain in my leg is back with enough vengeance that I figure I’m safe to drive.

In the quiet of the car, Abby twists in her seat and smirks at me. “So Hippolyta was pretty, right?”

“Sure, I guess.” I narrow my eyes at her. “What’s your point?”
“You should get to know her. She’s the only person I’ve ever heard of who likes your stupid music.”

“Abigail,” I say wearily, “why are you playing matchmaker?”

“Because,” she says, and her tone goes gentle, “I think it might help you get over Elaine.”

Ok, that actually stings.

“I’m sorry,” Abby says quickly. “It’s just, I know how it feels, liking someone who’s never going to see you that way. It sucks. It sucks extravagantly.”

Ever since Mom’s fiftieth birthday party, I’ve thought it was kind of funny how Abby turns bashful when Terry McGinnis is around. Now that I think about it, three years is a big chunk of your life when you’re only fourteen. What looked to me like an innocent crush on a safely unavailable family friend must have felt like tragic unrequited love to her.

Who am I to laugh at that?

“You can’t just pine,” Abby advises me, with all the conviction of a morning talk show therapist. “It’s not healthy.”

“I am not pining.” I haven’t gotten so much as a girl’s phone number since Thanksgiving, but I am not pining.

“Quit making sad puppy eyes whenever her name comes up, and I’ll believe you.”

“I don’t do that!”

“But seriously.” A grin tugs at the corners of her mouth. “What did you think of the play?

“I think you were great,” I say honestly. “I was very impressed, and I liked how you got the last lines at the end.”

“Really? How bad was the stuff with the magic fall-in-love flower? I nearly said crap out loud when I dropped it.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

She cocks her head, and then it clicks. “How much did you miss?”

“I came as soon as I could.”

“When was that?”

I tear my eyes off the road as long as I can. “I caught the second half.”

She looks crestfallen.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t make it there sooner.”

“I don’t get a lame excuse this time?” she says dully.

“No excuse.” I try to lie to her as little as possible. “I’m just sorry.”

“I know Dig and Lyla freed you up from work tonight,” she says, sinking down into the seat. “So what were you doing?”
I stay silent.

She looks at me. Just looks. She gives me a big, wide open, ten second window to tell her the truth. And then she sighs and looks away. “Whatever, Jon.”

She never calls me that. It’s always Jonny, or sometimes Jonathan when she’s whining. I don’t know why a perfectly acceptable form of my name - the one I prefer from everyone else - hits my ear exactly as if it were, Whatever, asshole.

She starts tearing fake leaves off her costume, and she doesn’t say another word to me. Not even when she disappears upstairs to her room.

My parents get home shortly after, and I meet them in the foyer. “When do we tell her the truth?”

“When you’re ready. You know that.”

“Remind me why I haven’t yet?”

Mom and Dad exchange glances, and he says, “She can’t let slip information she doesn’t have.”

“She doesn’t have to be afraid every night you’re out in the hood,” Mom says.

Dad and I both frown at her. Ordinarily she tries not to let on that I’m taking years off her life, running around jumping off buildings and getting shot like I do.

Dad lets it pass. “Right now, if anyone starts asking questions, she doesn’t have to lie.”

Abby is almost fifteen, which isn’t nearly as old as she thinks it is. But it’s not as young as I think it is, either. In my head my kid sister is still about eleven, gangly and bursting with manic energy.

Soon, I’ll have to catch up with reality.

But not just yet.

The following week, Javier Bloom goes to trial, and it is beautiful.

I don’t know who at the DA’s office leaked our star evidence to the press, and it’s probably misconduct, but Bloom has had so much rigged in his favor that I can’t care. All over the newscasts, the damning words are poisoning public opinion against him: “The bitch is dead, and our accounts are settled.”

News coverage of the trial is endless. No one can shut up about it, including Panoptic employees. A couple of former cops think he’s being framed.

“You think it’s coincidence this story breaks right when the election kicks off?”

“They have him on tape with a hitman,” Lyla points out. “It’s hard to argue with.”

Hard, but not impossible. "Somebody wants to discredit Chief Broussard. Trying to dirty up Mayor Lee’s whole administration.”

It’s true that the whole scandal has been a major blow to Harry Lee, who surfed into office on the crime wave of the ‘30s. Eighty percent of his platform was buddy-buddy photo ops with our Thin Blue Line. Now the Bloom case has become his opponents’ favorite stick to beat him over the head with. Dad doesn’t even bother running attack ads accusing Lee of enabling corruption,
abuse, and murder. The entire blogosphere is enthusiastically doing it for him.

“I hear the DA wants the death penalty for Bloom,” someone tells a GNN reporter in a word-on-the-street interview. “I’m thinking we should bring back the chair.”

Even if the case were dismissed tomorrow, Bloom would be lucky to make it out of Starling in one piece.

Of course, Bloom is only half of the equation. Uncle Roy and I keep working on finding the hitman, but the trail has been cold for weeks. Dead end after dead end, and though it grinds us both down, it really does a number on him. All that stoic fortitude starts to crack, and he gets snappish and snarky on whoever’s nearby - mostly me.

“What’s the time-stamp on this one?” I ask absently in his office upstairs at Panoptic, flipping through the printed transcript of a client’s phone records.

“Why don’t you turn the page and fucking look at it?”

I sit up straighter. “Why don’t you go to hell, you grumpy bastard?”

The only reason we haven’t punched each other yet is that every night before we leave, he asks me in a murmur, “How’s Thea?”

I am the exact wrong person to play marriage counselor, and I should probably keep my nose out. But I have had enough of their bullshit.

“You know,” I tell my aunt in the living room one night, sipping a pale ale while she swirls a glass of wine. “Uncle Roy has been kind of a raging dick the whole time you’ve been staying here, which I think means he misses you.”

She sighs, stares down into her glass, and takes a long sip before she answers me. “Don’t worry about us, honey.”

“I’m worried about me. Next time we spar, I think he might take my head off.”

“We’ll work it out eventually,” she says, meeting my eyes. “He’ll be kind of an asshole, and I’ll be kind of a bitch, and then we’ll remember that’s why we’re perfect for each other. It’ll be fine.”

“What kind of timeframe are we looking at here?”

She smiles. “Can you survive another week? For me?”

“For you, I guess I can.” We pay lazy attention to the dumb action flick on TV, until I can’t keep my mouth shut anymore. “What is it about experimental treatments that sends things all sideways like this?”

Aunt Thea tilts her head. “You know I didn’t try one for eight years.”

“I figured you had one too many disappointments.”

“No. Roy did.”

I wait for her to explain.

"I kept my expectations…” she searches for the right word, “realistic. But he was holding out for a miracle. And every time, he’d start thinking this was going to be the one that finally fixed me, and every time, he’d get his heart broken all over again. So I told him it had to stop.”
"That would have been around the time..."

"We were separated, yes."

"Because of that?"

"Because he was trying so hard to fix me that he'd... he'd stopped seeing me. He saw somebody he'd failed. He saw an obligation. He saw the wheelchair."

Aunt Thea has been using various wheelchairs - lightweight sport-style to upright electric - since I was five years old. To me, it was part of her, so much so that it never occurred to me that Dad and Uncle Roy spent decades with another version of her. They must miss that Thea as much as she does herself.

On TV, GNN is playing the recording of the Bloom phone call for the thousandth time. The bitch is dead, and our accounts are settled.

Aunt Thea pours herself another glass of wine. “It took a long time, but these days? I don’t feel broken.”

That night, a scream wakes the whole house.

Dad and I burst out into the hall, and with one glance and a head jerk, we have a plan. He takes off like a shot for Abby’s room, and I jump the stair railing, land in a crouch, and run for Aunt Thea.

Her light flicks on just as I come through the door. She looks a little shaken, but mostly embarrassed. “It’s okay, I’m fine, everything’s fine.”

“You’re not hurt?”

She looks away. “It was just a nightmare. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Dad appears in the doorway just behind me. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Oliver. That recording.” She looks him right in the eyes. “I know whose voice it was.”

“Joseph Risdon,” Mom says down in the lair, pulling up a profile she compiled from several different databases. “One-time freelance killer, long-time resident of Iron Heights prison.”

His mugshot, dated September of 2025, ripples up onto the glassboard. His sandy hair is buzzed short, and he has a reddish scruff of beard. The height markers put him at 5’8”, and he wears the easygoing smile of a guy you could have a beer with.

“It can’t be him,” Uncle Roy says. “He’s dead. Stabbed in the face six months ago.”

“Then how is he answering phone calls?” Aunt Thea says archly. “Ollie, you must recognize his voice.”

“It’s been sixteen years,” Dad says. “I couldn’t be sure.”

I cross my arms at him. “What are you even doing down here? Weren’t you going to take a step back?”
All four of them exchange some very loaded looks, and I realize this case must be personal. Intensely personal.

I gesture at the screen. “Who is he?”

Mom, Dad, and Uncle Roy all look at the floor. Dad’s arms cross, and Uncle Roy’s knuckles whiten on the table he’s leaning against.

Aunt Thea looks straight at Risdon’s friendly smile. “He’s the man who shoved me out of a third story window and broke my back.”

My mouth falls open a little bit. “That guy?”

In public and on the record, that guy had zero connection to famous heiress Thea Queen’s tragic accident. Even he had no idea; near as Team Arrow could tell, he went to prison believing he’d killed the Canary that night. I spent fourteen years believing the official story, and when my father finally told me the truth, the subject was so obviously painful that I didn’t ask too many questions. I didn’t know the man’s name, and I’d certainly never seen his mugshot.

Up on the glassboard, he looks like a decent guy. Captain Lance would scoff at me, thinking you could tell by looking.

“Felicity,” Dad says quietly, “are there any inconsistencies in the prison’s documentation of the stabbing, the autopsy, the release of his body - anything that could explain this?”

“Nothing at first glance, but I’ll dig deeper.”

“In the meantime, how do we find him?” I say. “We’ve got nothing but a voice on a disconnected phone.”

“Figuring out how he pulled that trick is how we find him,” Mom says, turning back to her Meridian X10. “No way did he do it alone, and if he’s got partners on the outside, they left footprints somewhere.”

“Before he went away, he did most of his work for the Black Hand,” Uncle Roy says. “We could start there.”

“He was never a full member,” Dad points out. “They were only as loyal as he was useful. What would they fake his death and bust him out of prison for?”

“Black Hand or not, whoever did it may have needed him for something specific,” Mom says. “Maybe for his old specialty - you know, the jobs so dirty no one else would do them.”

I frown at her. “What do you mean?”

“A lot of hired killers draw the line at children,” Dad explains softly.

“Son of a bitch.”

“He was a sick puppy,” Mom says. “And I mean a horribly diseased puppy. I still remember watching the video feed from the interrogation room after we gave him to SCPD. Captain Lance asked him why he killed everyone in the house the night of the Williams murders, and he just smiled and said, ‘Because they were home.’” Mom shudders. “Gave me nightmares for a week.”

“We haven’t seen any cases like that since he’s been out,” Aunt Thea says.
“It might not even be him,” Uncle Roy says gently. He’s not trying to pick a fight; he’s holding out hope. “Risdon might be a little pile of ashes exactly where he’s supposed to be, and this guy might just sound like him.”

She looks back at him, and I think maybe she’s tempted to believe that too.

“I’ll work it from my end, if you’ll work it from yours,” Mom says to me and Uncle Roy.

We nod and get to our feet, reaching for our gear. When we’re suited up and on our way to the stairs, Aunt Thea reaches out and lays a hand on Uncle Roy’s arm. “You didn’t change the alarm code on me again, did you?”

He shakes his head.

“Ok.” She swallows and raises her eyebrows hopefully. “I’ll see you at home?”

He lays his hand over hers. “See you at home.”

Two steps from the door, Aunt Thea calls after us, “Don’t screw up, Harper.”

He smiles to himself, a smile I haven’t seen since before Christmas. Then he says over his shoulder, “Don’t snap a heel, Queen.”

We spend three hours chasing rumors in the freezing cold and come up with absolutely nothing. He’s still smiling faintly when we hang it up for the night.

The beginning of February is traditionally when the mayoral race starts getting nasty. I don’t know if we’re special or if it’s like this for every candidate’s family, but as it turns out, it’s even nastier close up.

The entire police force seems to be waving their pom poms for Harry Lee. The Police Association of Starling City runs dire-sounding ads against Dad, who apparently has nefarious plans to hobble law enforcement, embolden criminals, and probably knock over a few liquor stores himself for good measure.

That by itself wouldn’t worry us, but in the space of two weeks, Dad gets pulled over six times and racks up several thousand dollars in tickets. I’m in the car with him when an officer hands back his license and registration and says, so friendly it verges on sarcastic, “Be careful now, Mr. Queen.”

“You get his badge number?” I ask Dad when we pull back into traffic. “4265… your head got in the way of the rest.”

“679,” he finishes. He takes a quick breath, opens his mouth to say something, and thinks better of it. Then he thinks better of the thinking better. “If I find out the Arrow retaliated against - “

“What even is the point of being a vigilante if I can’t hunt down dirty cops and feed them their teeth?”

“It’s just a few speeding tickets, Jon. Technically speaking, I was actually breaking the law.”

But it only escalates after that.
One afternoon, Dad calls me and says without preamble, “Jonathan, would you please bring four tires sized for the 6 Series to the rear parking lot of the Municipal Court House?”

Turns out his tires were slashed while he met with a victims’ advocacy group.

“You want me to tell Dig?” I say as the pneumatic wrench tightens a lug nut.

“No,” Dad says, hefting a ruined tire over the tailgate of my X5. “It’ll blow over.”

Not long after, a package arrives at his office at his pet nonprofit, which when opened spills fake blood all over his desk and ruins several piles of paperwork.

“Gonna tell Lyla?”

“No. It’s a stupid prank, that’s all.”

He doesn’t tell Mom either, which is probably a mistake given that she has become his unofficial campaign manager. I honestly don’t know why. It’s not as if Dad failed to hire an official one. Deshawn Taylor is a reputable professional whose work I admire and for whom I feel truly sorry.

For one thing, every time I get caught on camera after a long night on rooftops, looking like I’ve just finished puking up last night’s fifth of cheap bourbon, Taylor is the one who has to play whack-a-mole with the gossip rags.

“This reflects on you, Oliver,” Taylor keeps telling Dad. Just once, he added: “If you’d let me balance it out, run an ad featuring Abigail, it might go a long way toward - ”

Dad gave him The Look. Taylor never mentioned using Abby again.

For another thing, Taylor seems intimidated by Mom’s hypercompetence. She ends up constructing the website, editing the final drafts of press releases, orchestrating the wardrobe choices, and giving the pep talks. The most cloying part is that she seems a hundred percent sincere about how “your passion and dedication to this city are going to shine through, Oliver. People have been hungry for this kind of change for years, and they’ll respond to that. You’ll see.” She’s like Supportive Barbie. It’s disgusting.

The only other person as optimistically enthusiastic is Laurel. “I look forward to working together again,” she tells him one night at our dinner table.

“I haven’t won yet.”

She gives him the easy smile that only ever comes out around him and Sara, and she swirls her tumbler of ginger ale as though it were a cocktail. “Get a head start on new furniture for that office,” she advises him. “What they’ve got in there now is hideous.”

For me, the only redeeming feature of this campaign is the fundraising parties.

I know for a fact that being visibly awesome at big brothering is the fastest way to make all the girls go, “Oh, look, the bad boy has a gooey center!” and boom, there’s not a dry seat in the house.

So I hold out a hand to Abby. “May I have this dance?”

I may. About halfway across the floor, I mutter to her, “The girl in the blue dress, with the criss-crossy things on the back. Is she looking? Does she see us?”
Abby blinks once in surprise, then rolls her eyes. “The one with the curly black hair?”

I grin big. “You are my favorite wingman ever.”

“Yeah, yeah. She can’t see us from here. Steer us closer to the buffet table.”

I do as she says. It’s possible Abby is the world’s only superspy who still wears braces; she casts glances past my shoulder and scopes out the far corner of the room without ever seeming to look that way. “Now she’s looking.”

I put my adorable sister through an adorable spin.

“You are disgusting,” she says affectionately.

At the banquet table, the chair next to me reserved for a Mr. Charles Simpson stands empty. Dad takes advantage of it to interrupt my dinner with: “I know what you’re doing. And it is cheap and low.”

“If I have to be here, I am going to make the - “

“Try dipping her. They go all melty over that.”

The next morning, I get photographed in a hotel hallway in last night’s clothes. Deshawn Taylor gets a headache. Sorry, man.

At the next fundraiser, Abby points out that the only girls who ever catch my attention are the willowy ones with curly black hair, “which is doing nothing at all to convince me that you are totally over Elaine, yep, just fine, no worries.”

All the fun evaporates in a little puff of heartbreak. There goes the one thing I liked about this mayor crap.

Just to pour some gravy on my mashed potatoes of suck, the next day Dad calls me at work and uses his Serious Voice.

“I need you to come pick me up.”

“Um. Ok. Where?”

He gives me an address in the Warehouse District, and when I arrive, he’s waiting patiently on the corner with his hands in his pockets. I roll down the window as I pull up.

“How the hell did you get here?” I ask as he reaches for the passenger door handle.

He looks everywhere but at me, scuffs one shoe against the ground, and a muscle jumps in his jaw. “I was black-bagged in the parking lot of QC and driven around by two white men in ski masks in a late model Toyota 4Runner with no plates. They advised me to concede the mayoral race, and they dropped me here.”

I stare at him.

“Will you unlock the door, please?”

I let him into the car, and he slams the door closed somewhat harder than necessary.

“Are you ok?”
He turns to me, eyebrows raised. “Any time you want to bring me back to my car.”

Fine, grumpy. I pull away from the curb, shaking my head. “Ok, now you have to tell Panoptic.”

“I know.”

“You should tell SCPD too, just to get it on the record.”

“I think they were SCPD,” he mutters.

“What makes you say that?”

“Their restraint technique, their boots, and the one who used the phrase ‘Stop resisting’ reflexively when I made a sudden movement.”

I imagine the restraint it must have taken for Dad not to beat the hell out of them and leave them crying on the pavement. Then I make a bold statement on the nature of their inappropriate relationships with their mothers.

“I’m getting really tired of this,” Dad admits.

“Changed your mind about letting me - “

“Stop right there,” he says sharply.

“The Arrow protects every citizen of Starling, and that does in fact include you, you stubborn old fart.”

“Jonathan - “

“Yeah, yeah. By the book, clean hands, government of laws not of men, separation of City Hall and Arrow, et cetera. But if you’re not going to be involved, you’re definitely not going to call the shots. Corrupt cops are practically what the Arrow is for.”

“So you should be fine without my permission,” he cuts in. Loudly. “What part of ‘I don’t want to know’ was unclear to you?”

“...Oh. Right.”

At home that evening, we explain the situation to Mom, who is supremely annoyed that this is the first she’s heard about it. We give her badge numbers and Dad’s scareily detailed descriptions of everything he saw and heard. “Great, thank you. Now go be stoic and secretive and stereotypically male somewhere else,” she says, waving us out of her home office. “If you get lost on the way out the door, be sure not to ask for directions.”

Downstairs, I find Abby in the kitchen with Milena, making heart-shaped sugar cookies to give out at school for Valentine’s Day tomorrow. “Don’t touch,” Abby warns me. “I made exactly enough for my class, and there are no extras for big brothers.”

“Miss Abigail tells a fib,” Milena says. “There are two at the side for you.”

“You’re sure they’re not for some nasty boy at school?” I say.

“I am sure they are for nasty boy at home.”

I muss Milena’s carefully curled hair, and she whips me with a dish towel. Abby blows a handful of flour in my face, and I pour sugar down the back of her shirt. So the brat upends a bottle of
vanilla in my hair.

I smash an egg on top of her head.

“You jerk! I can’t go to a voice lesson like this.”

I shrug. “You started it.”

She runs upstairs indignantly to wash her hair. I should wash mine too, but Mom calls me upstairs to her office right then. She has names for me. By lucky coincidence, all six of Mayor Lee’s most ardent supporters in blue are out on patrol tonight in the Nuxalk area.

Since amateur theatrics were their weapons against Dad, I decide to put my costume to good use and confront them on their own terms. I step out of the shadows, stand in front of their cruisers with the bow raised, and force them to screech to a halt. Then I shoot out their windshields.

“Attempt to intimidate a candidate in an ongoing election again, and the next shot will not be aimed at the safety glass.”

I shoot up six cop cars all told, which is going to be difficult to explain if I ever get caught at this, but the looks on their faces are really goddamn satisfying.

I’m on my way home for the night when Mom says over the comm, “Arrow, I’m getting something from the bugs at Desilva’s.”

“Finally. Something worth getting shot over, I hope,” I mutter under my breath.

“She’s calling someone… ‘Tonight. 1227 Gardenia,’ she said.”

That’s familiar. Why is that familiar?

“ ‘Go get it.’ Well, that’s vague. ‘It’ could be anything. It could be pizza.”

Finally it clicks for me. God knows I’ve looked at the file often enough. “That’s Abel Cuvier’s home address.”

There’s a brief silence. Then, in a very different voice, Mom says, “Abby’s there. She had a voice lesson with Tish, because they have a grand piano at their house, and…. Abby’s there.”

My heart rate does a slow drum roll.

“Arrow?” Mom says faintly. “Desilva just called the person on the other end of the line Risdon.”

I briefly forget it’s my mother I’m talking to. “Oh, fuck.”

“Go,” Mom says in a very low, very definite voice I’ve never heard before. “Go now.”

I lean hard on the throttle. “Warn Panoptic. I’m on my way.”

Mom patches me into her call to Dig, just to keep everybody in the loop. “There in five,” he says. “Ramirez is the guard on duty tonight, and she’s been alerted.”

“I’m a block away,” I say, because I’ve broken every traffic law between here and Seventh Street to make that happen. “Watchtower, have you called SCPD?”

“All the officers in your area are having issues with their vehicles at the moment. It’ll be eight to ten minutes before anyone can respond.”
I skid to a stop in the alley, gravel flying, just in time to watch a half dozen masked men approach the doctor’s elegant house from all sides - one to each door, four breaking into windows. Gunshots sound off when Ramirez opens fire, then a heavier caliber echoes through the house, and she screams. Her gun falls silent.

I run in the back door, bow raised, and on the kitchen floor I find two dead men in ski masks, still bleeding from neat headshots. In the hall a masked man holds a gun on Ramirez, who curls on the floor with her arms held protectively over her right leg. I grab the guy from behind, arm across his windpipe and gloved hand over his mouth.

After half a minute, he stops struggling. Another twenty seconds, and he goes limp. I lower him quietly to the floor.

“Dig, backup just arrived,” Ramirez murmurs into her comm, as if she was expecting the Starling vigilante to show up. She accepts the thug’s gun when I hand it to her. “Front parlor. Three men left, all armed.”

“Thank you.”

A mirror in the hallway shows me the inside of the elegant parlor with the grand piano. A man holds the two girls in the corner at the point of a sawed-off shotgun. Tish is a few inches shorter than Abby, but she stands in front with her hands braced against the walls, making herself as much of a shield as she can.

Oh, I could kiss that girl right now.

On the other side of the room, two men in black hold handguns on Dr. Cuvier, who kneels with his back to me, hands on his head.

“You’re going to tell me where, Doc,” a pleasant Southern drawl says. The man’s back is turned, but I’ve listened to the recording a hundred times. I know that voice. “That’s how this ends.”

“You’re making a terrible mistake,” the doctor says, with more steel than I would have expected.

“Grab the daughter,” Risdon tells Mr. Ski Mask at his elbow. Mr. Sawed-Off lowers his weapon to let his partner grab Tish by the throat. Face streaked with tears, Abby clings to her arm - “No! What are you doing?” - and Mr. Ski Mask cuffs her across the face.

Him. I’m putting an arrow in him.

He drags Tish over and throws her on the floor next to her father.

“I can think of all manner of interesting ways to pose this question to you, my friend,” Risdon says. “How creative I got to get?”

There are three weapons loaded and ready in there. The second I come around the corner and move on one man, the other two will open fire.

“Thirty seconds,” Dig says in my ear.

“What do you say, Abel?” Risdon says affably.

“You don’t need to do this,” the doctor replies.

Risdon glances at Mr. Ski Mask, and there is an unpleasant glimmer in his eye when he says, “Break the girl’s arm.”
The thug holsters his gun and reaches for Tish, and I know I can’t wait for Dig. I’m not going to get a better chance than this.

I swing around the doorframe and put an arrow in Mr. Ski Mask’s ass.

All hell breaks loose.

Risdon spins and takes a shot at me, which misses and shatters the mirror behind me. My next arrow catches him in the left hand, sending the gun clattering across the floor and blood splashing all over the Cuviers. Mr. Sawed-Off hasn’t even swung his shotgun all the way around when my next shot pins his forearm to the wall. The gun goes off when it hits the floor and blows a hole in the grand piano. Over the screams filling the room, chords sound and piano wires snap with a whine.

“All out of here now!” I bellow at the civilians.

Cuvier hauls Tish past me to the door, and Abby runs after them. Risdon skids across the floor, retrieves his gun, and comes up aiming left-handed. His eyes land on Abby, and spite - not rage, just ugly, petty spite - twists his features.

I don’t decide to jump on her. There is no higher brain function involved. The muzzle swings her way, and all of Panoptic’s training combines with every instinct I have to throw me between them. I grab Abby in a flying leap and wrap as much of me around her as I can.

The gun fires. A sledgehammer slams into my back. We hit the floor.

But now I’m paralyzed with pain, and there is nothing to stop Risdon’s next shot turning my head to goo and bone chips.

Nothing except Dig, stepping over us and squeezing off shots with superhuman calm. It sounds like at least one finds its mark, and a window shatters somewhere behind me. Without looking down at us, Dig says, “You good?”

The shot knocked the wind out of me, and I barely manage to choke out, “We’re good.”

He takes off after Risdon.

“Motherfucker,” I hiss right in Abby’s ear as soon as I can breathe again. Body armor isn’t a magical shield. All it does is disperse hundreds of foot-pounds of force across a wider area. Getting shot hurts like a bitch no matter what.

Half-squished under my weight, Abby sniffs and shakes. “Are you ok?”

“Fuck fuck fucking fuck.”

Tish comes hesitantly around the corner, clinging to the doorframe. She glances around, then kneels next to us. Gently, she takes my wrist, peels me away from Abby, and coaxes me to my feet. “The cops will be here soon. You hear the sirens?”

SCPD and I are not friendly these days, and I just shot up six of their patrol cars. I need to be far away when they come through that door.

I stagger upright, and Abby scrambles out from beneath me and grabs Tish’s hands. I sway for a moment, trying to remember how breathing works. Pressed against the doorjamb, fingers twined together, the girls look up at me.
“They’ll catch you,” Tish says. “You have to go.”

I stumble out the back door and somehow make it to the bike.

"Dig?" I demand over the comm.

He knows what I'm asking, and I can practically hear the bitter shake of his head. "Risdon's body armor worked as well as yours did. He's in the wind."

"Okay, so that's less than ideal," Mom cuts in. "But is anybody hurt?"

“No worse than bruises," I pant. “I'm all right. Abby too.”

I hear her take one very shaky inhale, hold it for a moment, and let it out slowly. “Okay,” she whispers. “Okay.”

Half an hour later, Mom, Dad, and I show up at the Cuviers’, where blue lights flash and uniforms tape off the crime scene. We pass Ramirez being loaded into an ambulance, and she grins at me and says, “Aw, Prince Pretty Boy came to check on me.”

I grab the hand she holds out and give it a firm shake. “I see they broke your leg, not your attitude.”

Dig and Lyla are conferring with Dr. Cuvier on his front porch, and the girls are sitting hip to hip at the top of the porch steps, wrapped in blankets, hair frizzing out of their ponytails. They get to their feet when they see us, and Abigail comes down the walk to meet us halfway. Dad hurries to get to her first, and with neither dramatics nor self-consciousness, she walks straight into his arms. Mom gets in on the other side of the hug, turning it into an Abby sandwich with parent bread.

I go to Tish, who comes down to the last step and forces a smile. “So that was bracing.”

She's soft and short and shaking, and she just stood between my sister and a loaded gun. There's really only one thing to do.

"Oh," she says when I lift her off her feet. "Well, hi there."

"Thank you," I murmur into her hair.

“For what?”

“You stood in front of her.” Then I remember that Jonathan Queen did not personally witness her doing any such thing, and I add, “Dig told me.”

"I didn't do it for you, frat boy," she says, patting my back with a shaky laugh.

"I don't care why." I'm not putting her down until she gets this through her head. "Just thank you."

The patting stops. Her hands lay flat on my back, and she gives me an answering squeeze. It hurts the enormous bruise that is my lower back, but I can’t care.

When I set her on her feet, Abby appears at my side. “Jonny?”

It’s hugs for everybody tonight. She lets me squeeze her - “I’m okay, I swear, Dig took good care
of me, and you can ask the EMTs if you don’t believe me”- then she takes a deep breath through her nose, leans back, and gives me a long, thoughtful look.

“What is it, Abby?”

She bites her lip and shakes her head. “Nothing. I just want to go home.”

That night, Mom smooths a medicated sticky onto the purple mess of my back to numb the ache. “We could have lost you both,” she says softly. “Abby told us what you did for her.”

I shrug out from under the undisguised emotion in her voice. “I just… reacted.”

“You took a bullet for her, sweetheart. That makes you kind of a hero, doesn’t it?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I mutter, pulling on a T-shirt. “There just wasn’t any other choice.”

Mom sinks down on the edge of my bed, and a sudden, unutterable sadness washes over her. “You are so much like Oliver you scare me sometimes.”

“Hey, you picked him, not me.”

Eyes shining with tears, she smiles. “I did, didn’t I?”

I don’t have nightmares that night. I have… dreams of questionable thematic content. So the next morning the first thing I do is crack open Abby’s door, just to be sure which version of events took place in my head and which in reality.

In the armchair at her bedside where he used to keep watch for monsters, Dad jerks awake.

“Just me,” I say softly.

He nods and pushes himself heavily to his feet. Smoothing down his hopelessly creased dress shirt, he leans over Abby. She’s sprawled out messily, taking up as much of her bed as possible, and her hair is caught in her mouth. Dad combs it free, kisses her forehead, and follows me out into the hall.

He turns to me, and by the look on his face I’m sure he’s about to echo what Mom said last night. But when he opens his mouth, it is only to say, “You want coffee?”

“Oh God, yes, please.”

We go downstairs, and we don’t have to talk about it.
It’s amazing how much paperwork an attack by masked gunmen can generate.

“We’ve got copies of everyone’s statements to the police,” Lyla says, gesturing to Dig, who plays a data key across his knuckles like a coin trick. “Dig’s report is done, and Ramirez will have hers in by this afternoon. Jon, I need the Arrow’s too - off the record, of course - and I need you to put together a timeline for the evening with absolutely everything we know.”

“Starting with what the hell Risdon wanted from the doctor?” I say.

“Something from his lab,” Dig said. “Don’t ask me what it was, it’s written down somewhere. It had about fourteen syllables, and Cuvier says the compounds involved would sell pretty well on the street.”

“That’s a lot of trouble Desilva and Risdon took to play chemistry set. Speaking of, did Watchtower get enough to tie Desilva to the attack?”

“SCPD brought her in this morning,” Lyla says with some satisfaction. “Detective Hall is probably offering her refreshments as we speak.”

“And Risdon?”

“You know as much as we do at this point,” Dig says, fist clenching around the data key in his hand.

“But this means Aunt Thea was right. Our hitman really is Joseph Risdon, and he’s working for the Hand like old times.”

Dig and Lyla look at each other. “Like old times,” he says heavily.

I gesture between them. “What does that look mean? You people are always exchanging looks. And you’re always saying cryptic things about old times and back in the day, and it’s not my fault I was born after all the cool stuff happened.”

“This is going to be hard on Roy and Thea,” Dig says. “For different reasons, but it’s going to be hard on both of them.”

“Try to be sensitive,” Lyla says, in the same tone she might use for, Try to grow fluffy blue fairy wings.
Dig gets to his feet and hands me the data key. “We’ll be moving the Cuviers to a secure location for the time being, and we’ll have at least four eyes on them at all times.”

“You think Risdon will try again? He was there last night on Desilva’s orders, and she’s in custody now.”

But she isn’t. Ana Desilva walks out of SCPD that same afternoon, a dimpled smile on her face.

“I gave you Desilva on tape ordering a hitman to Abel Cuvier’s house!” the Arrow says to McKenna Hall on the rooftop that night. “What the hell happened?”

“You think you can summon me here and lecture me, after the way you shot up my officers’ cruisers last night?”

I can’t help but chuckle, remembering their faces.

Hall glares at me. “If you had hurt any of my people, I would have had a SWAT team waiting on this rooftop for you tonight.”

I raise a hand. “I did not. I very specifically did not.”

She shakes her head and tucks a stray lock of glossy black hair behind her ear. With all the fight gone from her voice, she says, “They were the ones harassing Oliver Queen, weren’t they?”

I say nothing. Let her draw her own conclusions.

Hall takes a deep breath. “Ana Desilva is a confidential informant for the FBI, feeding them information on every rival gang in Starling. My department was advised to stand down.”

Well, shit. “So you can’t hold her.”

She blows air through her teeth. “If I had her on video assassinating the president, I could hold her.”

“What if we blew her cover? The Feds wouldn’t let her run wild if she were no use to them anymore.”

“Oh, A, the FBI would make my life very difficult if they suspected I’d ratted out their CI. And B, the Hand would kill her before we could so much as touch her.”

Maybe that’s not a classic happy ending, but it has a certain rough justice to it.

“She dies, someone else takes her place,” Hall points out. “Bad guys die all the time, and nothing really changes except the recorded homicide rate.”

I know where I’ve heard that line before, and I know who the common denominator has to be. “Did your captain tell you that?”

Hall smiles, looking past me at the glitter of Starling by night. “A long time ago.”

I toss her a data key, on which Mom has loaded damn near everything we have on Joseph Risdon, with the exception of his connection to Aunt Thea’s accident. Hall catches it deftly, and I step up on the edge of the pediment. “There’s another head of the hydra for you.”

I make my flashiest exit.
I get home to find that Abby has stayed home from school, and Mom - who often works from her home office anyway - has also worn pajamas all day out of solidarity. They’re watching a romcom and eating the Valentine’s Day sugar cookies that never made it to the classroom. Mom scrapes off the pink and red icing and dips them carefully in coffee as she goes.

“Playing hooky?” I say, ruffling Abby’s hair.

“Just taking a day.”

Not long after, the doorbell rings. I answer it to find a teenage boy standing on the porch, a textbook and a sheaf of handwritten notes under his arm. “Oh, hey,” he says, giving me a friendly smile. “I’m Jason. I was looking for Abby? I’m kind of her unofficial geometry tutor.”

Isn’t that nice. “I’m her brother Jonathan.” I offer him my hand. “I’m a mixed martial arts instructor.”

His smile turns a little fixed as he accepts the handshake.

Abby comes to the door with a Ziploc full of sugar cookies, and she dismisses me firmly. “Thank you, Jonny.”

I find Mom and Dad in the kitchen, fooling around with the espresso machine. “Do you know who Jason is, and why Abby’s giving him heart cookies?”

Eyes on whatever fluffy, fancy thing she’s brewing, Mom says, “Obviously he’s the son of our arch-enemies the Montagues. He and Abby were married in secret last week, and tomorrow night they’re planning a tragic double suicide.”

I stare at her. Then I look to Dad for help, but he’s just as confused as I am.

She turns to frown at us. “Romeo and Juliet? Not ringing any of the bells?”

I shift my weight over my feet. “Mom, I double-majored in business and beer.”

“Money well spent,” Dad says, wiping down the steam wand.

In defiance of all the worried, significant glances that my parents and I exchanged, Abby sleeps like a log over the next few weeks. She does better than ever in her voice lessons, and she jumps right back into school with all the boundless energy of the kindergartener who used to put on one-woman dance recitals in our living room.

The only time her determined cheerfulness falters is when I suggest that, “Hey, maybe it’s time to revisit the self defense idea. Just let me teach you a few simple things.”

Her nostrils flare, and her lips press together tightly. “What was I supposed to do? Karate chop the gun out of his hand?”

For a few seconds, it sounds like a complete non sequitur. Then I work it out. “Come on, you know I didn’t mean it like that. You did everything right: kept your head and took cover the first chance you got. I don’t want to teach you to take out armed hitmen, I want to teach you to break some creep’s nose if he - ”

“Jonny.” She rubs her temple, and I realize that her hand is trembling faintly. “I don’t want to talk
“Ok,” I say, quietly baffled. “We won’t talk about it.”

Since otherwise she seems to be bouncing back like a champ, I leave it alone.

Uncle Roy is another matter.

However unpleasant he was when Aunt Thea was staying with us, I expected him to be twice as prickly and unbearable knowing that Joseph Risdon is out there breathing the free air. But he’s not. At Panoptic, he’s quiet, unnervingly steady and stable, and disturbingly polite. Clients find him endlessly reassuring and specifically request him. He passes up the juiciest snarkbait like he’s gone off his feed. Once I manage to utter the sentence, “So instead of enlarging our radius of observation, we, um, you know… en-smaller it,” in a meeting, and he completely fails to give me so much as an eyebrow. The staff starts asking Dig and Lyla, “Is Roy ok? He seems distracted.”

Distracted is an understatement. As quiet as Uncle Roy has gone, Arsenal has gotten vicious.

Mom hunts down the medical examiner who misidentified a dead body as Joseph Risdon, and Arsenal practically does a circus act with the guy. He stands him up against a wall and takes shots at him until there’s an outline of arrows around the guy’s head and torso. All the ME can tell us, blubbering and snotfaced, is that after a fight broke out in the prison yard, he was paid to make a little mistake. Somebody got cremated, and somebody else, with a face so badly bruised and swollen he was hardly recognizable, walked out on parole two days later and promptly disappeared.

“I don’t know names. I don’t know any more than what I was paid for.”

Arsenal breaks his nose out of pure frustration.

“Is there something we need to discuss?” I ask on the way home.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“We’re giving the ME to Hall. He’s losing his license at the very least, probably doing time. What’d you break his face for?”

He answers with silence.

I tell Dig about it over cartons of take-out the next time we’re working late.

His elbows are propped on the table, and he drops his head down between his forearms. When he picks it up again, he looks tired. “I was worried about that.”

“I know this case is personal. Risdon is personal. I get that. But there’s got to be more to it.” I take a stab with something that just occurred to me last night: “I’ve never heard another word about that therapy Aunt Thea started. Maybe it’s turned out to be another dead end, and that’s making it all worse.”

Dig leans back in his chair, crossing his arms. “It’s guilt, Jon.”

“Over the accident?” Even those of us who know the truth still call it the accident, even though it manifestly was not. That’s what we’ve always called it. “There’s no way any part of that night could have been Uncle Roy’s fault. He wasn’t even there when it happened.”

“Risdon’s target at the time was the Arrow.”
Oh. Aunt Thea was protecting Uncle Roy when she fell from that window.

And he wasn’t even there when it happened.

“Right afterward, in the hospital, she got a little paranoid if he wasn’t in the room with her, like she’d lose him if she took her eyes off him. He couldn’t leave her. So for the first time since you were born, Oliver hooded up to bring him in.”

Uncle Roy didn’t even have the satisfaction of catching the guy who did it. I’d have some twisty, guilty rage issues myself. “If he gets to Risdon before I do, is he going to kill him?”

“Oh of course not.” Dig quirks an eyebrow. “Ninety-five percent sure.”

I think of Tracy Howard and her horrible defensive wounds and twenty-three broken bones. I think of the spite on Risdon’s face when he took aim at Abby. “Maybe it would be justice. Or as close as we get.”

“You might be surprised how satisfying revenge isn’t,” Dig says, and a faraway look comes over his face.

He caught his brother’s killer after years of hunting, Dad once told me. “What did he do to him?” I asked.

“Someday, maybe he’ll tell you,” was all Dad replied.

Dig and I go back to work.

The sugar cookies were a bad omen.

The next time I knock on Abby’s door, she doesn’t answer right away. “Hey,” I yell through the door, “do you have my - ”

It swings open, and she raises an annoyed eyebrow at me. Behind her, sitting on the floor surrounded by piles of conspicuously open textbooks and folders, is Jason the geometry tutor.

“You wanted something?” Abby says.

“My wireless earbuds.”

She retrieves them from her desk and drops them in my open palm. Then she very pointedly walks me to her door. “I’ll see you at dinner in a little bit.”

She closes the door behind me.

Downstairs, I find my parents in Dad’s study. He’s scrolling through something with the Starling Restoration Society’s logo in the margins, and she is lounging on the leather sofa with a novel. Ink and paper hardback books are the one form of luxury in which Mom doesn’t prefer the newest, shiniest thing the tech world has to offer.

“Dad.” It feels a lot like tattling when I say, “You know that Jason kid is in Abby’s room with the door closed?”

“I’m aware.”
“I don’t like it.”

“No one asked you to.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You don’t like it either.”

“Better under my roof than off someplace where I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Fair point.” I hope no one ever finds out about some of the cheesy lines I tried off someplace where nobody’s parents knew what was going on. Please take those to the grave, ladies.

Mom lets the book fall open-faced into her lap, and by her frown she clearly suspects us of patriarchal, controlling overprotectiveness. “What is it you’re afraid is going to happen, exactly?”

“Um, the obvious?” I say. “He’ll pressure her into something she’s not ready for.” Her frown deepens, so I add, “Like holding hands.”

“He’ll lie to her,” Dad offers. “Lead her on.”

“He’ll brag to his friends.”

“He’ll break up with her two days before prom and take somebody else.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I say to Dad. “Laurel still gives you shit for that, doesn’t she?”

“For being men yourselves,” Mom says, looking at us over the tops of her glasses, “you certainly don’t think much of them.”

Dad and I exchange startled looks. Does she think that’s some kind of contradiction?

Mom sighs, picking up the book again. “Oliver, you were never this worried about Jon having girls in his room.”

“False,” Dad and I say at the exact same time.

In high school I must have rolled my eyes through a half dozen lectures about responsibility and safety and good decisions and the estimated cost of child support for someone in our income bracket. In retrospect, Dad was right to worry about my dumbass impulse control issues. Luck made sure nobody turned up pregnant, and antibiotics took care of the rest.

“Jason is a good kid, and your sister is not a helpless naif,” Mom insists. “Can we trust her judgment just a little?”

“My sister.” I raise a skeptical eyebrow. “The sister who forgets to haggle at flea markets? Who tells her secrets to that Kaylee Watson girl, and who’s surprised every time the little snot goes and spreads them around the whole school?”

“We tried to teach her about stranger danger as a child,” Dad says. “Miserable failure, if you remember. She’d follow anyone who claimed to have a puppy she could pet.”

Abby believes that people are fundamentally good at heart, which is adorable and all, but it’s why she needs a couple of suspicious bastards like me and Dad watching her back.

Mom glances at the stairs, biting her lip. Then she shakes a lock of hair out of her face and goes back to her book with dignity. “Oliver’s in the house. The boy wouldn’t dare.”

Eyes still on his work, Dad smiles.
The doorbell rings, and it’s Elaine, ostensibly here to borrow some jewelry from Mom. When I take her upstairs, she passes along the information she didn’t want to risk sending remotely.

“You asked me to keep you updated on the wildcats.”

“You’ve got something?”

“God, I’m committing so many HIPAA and ethical violations,” she mutters.

“Yeah, but you’re using your powers for good. Keep talking.”

“All of the tox screens came back clean. Something really strange is going on.”

“Strange, like how?”

She bites her lip, which is really distracting, and I wish she wouldn’t. “What do you know about the gene therapy your aunt is undergoing right now?”

“I know it gives you PMS.”

Elaine gives a long-suffering sigh, and then she explains viral somatic gene transfer to me in what I’m pretty sure is sixty-five percent Latin. I nod along and make impressed faces at her brilliance. Then I ask for it in dumb jock.

I’m shaky on the science - I failed bio once in high school and again in college - but I think what Elaine just told me was this: Aunt Thea’s therapy is intended to edit cells’ genetic material. Diabetic? Just write your dumbass pancreas an instruction booklet, and it’ll start making insulin like a champ.

“But it’s the ability to custom design viruses that’s central here,” Elaine says. “That’s the key.”

“Ok, great. How is that related to our wildcats?”

“I don’t think this is a drug in the classic sense. I think it’s viral.”

“Like rabies?”

“Similar. A neurotropic virus custom-designed to alter behavior.”

Apparently, theoretically there is a way to trick your body into saying, Hey, let’s make a shit-ton of adrenaline and testosterone and dopamine! Let’s get our pain receptors drunk on norepinephrine! Let’s do a keg stand of serotonin and wake up covered in glitter in a trashed hotel room with five fresh tattoos, two strippers, and a tiger we stole from the zoo!

After a day or two, the immune response flushes the virus from your system, and none of it shows up on standard tox screens.

“Are you sure?” I ask Elaine.

“No,” she admits, “but it’s my best guess right now.”

“Thanks.” Very deliberately, because it is past time we stopped avoiding all physical touch except for her stitching me up, I lay my hand on her shoulder. “Stay for dinner?”

She glances toward the door, opening her mouth to tell me no. We haven’t done any casual hanging out since I sorta-kind-a-eighty-percent confessed my love, have we? But she smiles, nods
decisively, and says, “I’d like that.”

Just before we sit down to eat, Abby ushers Jason out of the house, and I catch her composing herself after she closes the door behind him, smoothing away a goofy, girlish smile.

“Who was that?” Elaine says.

“My geometry tutor,” Abby says with perfect equanimity.

We tease her about it over the butternut squash soup until Dad comes to her rescue and declares the subject closed. Then Abby starts talking Elaine’s ear off about the Youth Lyric Theater’s spring musical, and Mom gets all excited when she finds out it’s Les Misérables.

“You would make an adorable Gavroche,” she tells Abby, who looks offended.

“Um, I was thinking Cosette?” she says.

That’s when the dining room window shatters.

Something heavy whips past Elaine’s head, thunk-thunk-thunks across the table, and hits me in the chest.

A brick.

Across the table, Elaine touches her finger to her temple, and it comes away bloody. She sways in her chair.

“Elaine!” Dad barks.

He catches her halfway to the floor.

My chair crashes behind me. I bolt around the table, throw the French doors open so hard the rest of the shattered glass tinkles out of the frame, and launch myself across the lawn. I hear the crackle of dry leaves under the oaks, and then the rustle of ivy on the fence.

I scale the fence and leap it without slowing, and when I land in the alley, I follow the crunch of gravel. Purple hoodie, hauling ass for the darkened street. Jokerz.

The whole point of the Jokerz is senseless destruction. According to the rambling, ungrammatical manifesto written by their founder in Gotham ten years back, the sawn-off billboards and pipe bombs and stolen traffic signs and smashed city property all constitute some kind of existentialist meditation on the meaningless of our fragile sense of order.

I’m going to do a fucking number on this asshole’s sense of order. I tackle the guy, flip him onto his back, and rip off the stupid clown mask.

Underneath, the kid is about sixteen.

“All right, all right,” he says, hands raised defensively. “You caught me! Chill, dude.”

One left hook to his head, and my class ring opens a gash at his temple.

“That is not my department.”

I grab the drawstrings of his hood and pull hard, tightening the hole until it covers everything but his nose and mouth. I double-knot it. Then I yank his sleeves down past his hands, roll him onto his belly, and tie them together behind his back. “On your feet.”
“No, you psycho!”

I force him upright. Then I prod him, cursing and bitching, all the way back down the alley to the house.

“Is Elaine okay?” I call out as we come through the still-open French doors to the empty dining room, where glass litters the table and crunches under our feet.

“She’ll be fine,” Dad calls back from the living room.

I frog-march the kid down the hall, lock him in the pitch-black coat closet, and take a moment to savor the thud of him throwing himself fruitlessly against the door.

“You can’t do this to me!” he yells.

“I’m doing you a favor, you little shit. You do not want to be in the same room as my father right now.”

In the living room, Mom paces in front of the mantel with her cell to her ear, giving crisp instructions to law enforcement. Elaine lies on the sofa, Dad stands behind it with his hands braced on the back, and Abby sits on the floor pressing a dish towel full of ice to Elaine’s head.

Dad looks up sharply. “Got him?”

“Punk kid. Locked him in the coat closet. How you feel, Lanie?”

“’M fine,” she slurs. “Everybo’y’s ov’reacting.”

Mom hangs up and heads for the hall. “I’m going to ask him some questions.”

Twenty minutes later, when SCPD shows up to take our statement, Mom gives them the kid’s name, age, most recent address (from which he is a runaway), most recent high school (from which he is extremely truant), “and he says a white man in his forties wearing a suit and tie paid him to do it.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the officer says, after a few surprised blinks. “And you said you have him - “

“In the coat closet.”

“And were you aware that this was taped to your door?”

On brown packaging paper, a game of hangman is drawn in Sharpie. Half of the stick figure is filled in, and beneath him the blanks read:

_ _ E E __ O R_ A _ O R

“Queen for Mayor,” Mom whispers.

Dad closes his eyes. When he opens them again, the other officer is marching the kid down the hall toward us, hood down around his neck. As they pass by, the boy’s shoulders wilt under the force of The Look.

When the door closes behind them, Dad sits down heavily on the sofa next to Elaine’s head, and he lifts the ice pack to check on the cut. “Honey, I am so sorry.”
“Oliver,” Elaine says, “’f you decide this’s your fault, I’ma throw bricks at you myself.”

He gives her one of the sappy smiles reserved for her, Mom, and Abby, and he doesn’t apologize again.

“Why don’t you sleep here tonight?” Mom suggests, and Elaine sighs her agreement.

Dad carries her upstairs to Abby’s room - which is probably unnecessary, but seems to make him feel better - and Mom gets her settled in with a butterfly bandage and borrowed pajamas. Abby sets an alarm and sits up with a book, ready to wake Elaine and check on her periodically.

Downstairs, Dad shows me and Mom a collection of notes on brown paper. The first is an empty hangman’s scaffold and a series of blanks. As we flip through, body parts and letters appear a few at a time.

“One was left on my windshield when the tires were slashed. The next was slipped under a traffic ticket. I got another when they black-bagged me.”

“You show us this now?” Mom demands. “You wait until a brick comes through the window to share?”

“They were only targeting me, and they wanted to scare me, not hurt me.” Dad leans an arm against the mantel and says, “But if they’re willing to do this, maybe we should rethink the whole -”

“Oliver, don’t you dare give them what they want,” Mom says, looking at him sternly over the tops of her glasses. “Jon, could you get a broom? Let’s get this cleaned up.”

She sends Dad on some other errand, which gives us time to talk shop while we sweep up the glass and tape garbage bags over the shattered window.

“I warned those guys that next time I wouldn’t be aiming for their cars,” I say.

“Either you weren’t scary enough - which seems unlikely, because I for one was impressed with your whole grr, cower, brief mortals - or you were too scary,” she says thoughtfully. “Shooting at them doesn’t seem to be the answer.”

“Can we ask whatever question shooting at them is the answer to?”

She rips a length of masking tape off the roll, and she smiles at me with a brightness that those cops would find extremely foreboding if they could see it right now. “You think you can run an errand for me tomorrow night?”

The next morning, Dad is at Panoptic first thing.

“You waited until a brick came through the window?” Uncle Roy says.

“I don’t know why you’re surprised,” Dig mutters. He looks at me and Dad, and he raises an eyebrow. “You could have kept the kid in the coat closet a few extra hours. I could have talked to him about his life choices so far. You know, man to man.”

“Oh, I remember,” I say.
“John,” Dad says, as serious as I’ve ever seen him. “I’m sorry Elaine got caught in the middle of this.”

“Not your fault,” Dig says. “Anyone sitting at that table could’ve gotten hit, and it could’ve been a lot worse. She’s okay, and that’s what matters.”

Dad nods. “We’ll need the house covered, the vehicles swept, and someone - ”

“Oliver,” Uncle Roy says gently. “It’s done.”

Dad looks back and forth between them, and he breathes out long and slow. “Okay.”

Once again, I am not allowed to work my own family’s case. Someone will be on duty at the house at all times, and each of us will be shadowed by a discreet protector when we leave the fortified keep.

In the weeks after Mom’s abduction, Dig covered Abby himself. He and Lyla were clearing weeds after they dug up a mole in their backyard, and they wouldn’t risk trusting her safety to anyone else. Lyla insisted on fast-acting tissue builders, which are excruciating, but which had her up and walking off that gutshot in a matter of weeks. “Less painful than the Braxton-Hicks before you finally agreed to get born,” she told Elaine. Once she was up, she started driving Abby to school.

This time we’ve got plenty of people we trust - Ramirez especially, now that she’s back on duty - and they fully intend to stick me with a bodyguard. I try to wiggle out of it on the grounds that I’m surrounded by bodyguards at work all day and I am the fucking Arrow.

“Not in the daylight you aren’t,” Dig says. “Then you’re Prince Pretty Boy, who’s never been in a real fight in his life.”

I might be pouting right now, but frankly I think I deserve to. “Who told you about that?”

“Not important. Look, is it really so awful carpooling to work with Roy?”

“Obviously you haven’t spent much time with him lately.”

In the end, I am overruled, which is what happens when your godfather is also your boss. I should have taken my business degree to Coast City and done something with a lot more three-martini lunches and a lot fewer snarky relatives.

When the arrangements are made and I get a few minutes to myself, I contact my colleague with a sitrep as a professional courtesy:

mcginnis. my gorgeous minion figured out the wildcat drug before you. suck on that my little fruit bat

He texts me back within five minutes. you mean the custom virus targeting hormones and neurotransmitters affecting risk-reward calculations and thrill-seeking behavior? yeah wayne worked up a full profile this morning with his coffee

i hate you

he says it’s cutting edge stuff. guy who pioneered designer viruses is hot shit now.

are you going to tell me his name you smug bastard?
abel cuvier

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I should have put it together myself. Desilva wanted something from Cuvier’s lab, didn’t she? He told us it was hard-to-come-by compounds, but what if it was this viral thingy? But then, why would he lie to us about what she was after? If she’s the dealer behind the wildcat drug - which looks really goddamn likely - then she had to have gotten it from somewhere. Ultimately, from him.

I bring everything I’ve got to Dig and Lyla that afternoon. “I think Cuvier might be shadier than we thought.”

“I think that sounds extremely plausible,” Lyla says. “What do you want to do about it?”

I shrug. “I was thinking I’d have a friendly chat with him.”

Lyla smiles even as she puts two fingers to the bridge of her nose. “Jonathan, you may not assault one of our protectees with a deadly weapon.”

“That’s kind of the opposite of what we do here,” Dig says. “Do you want to make us look incompetent and lose us a client?”

I sink into a chair. “I never liked him anyway.”

Lyla laughs. “I know how excited you get about pointing arrows at people, but why don’t we do this the easy way?”

“What way is that?”

“I fill in for Cuvier’s protector tomorrow, bug the doctor’s phone, and let Felicity work her magic. Cuvier will never even know I’ve done it.”

I wilt a little bit. I guess she was right; I was kind of in the mood to point arrows at someone. “Yeah, ok.”

Lucky for me, I get to have my fun later that night when Mom explains that errand she mentioned.

“Guess who traffic cameras spotted talking to our punk kid yesterday afternoon and handing him a wad of cash?” A photo ripples up on Mary’s screen. “This guy.”

It’s one of our dirty cops. Trent Parsons.

Mom smiles. “Bet you can’t get him to the abandoned warehouse on Philpott and Race, blindfolded and restrained, by eleven o’clock.”

I have him there at ten forty-five.

Mom is waiting for us in the old, tumbledown warehouse, perched on a clean stool she obviously brought herself. Mary lies in her lap. She has hidden her hair carefully beneath one of Watchman’s gray suede hoods and covered most of her face with a black mask, but she’s wearing it all over a black T-shirt and yoga pants. The effect is… odd.

Parsons comes to tied to a rusty folding chair we dug out of a corner. It’s a good look for him.

A morphvox lowers the pitch of Mom’s voice a few steps, which startles me when she opens her mouth and says, “Good evening, Officer Parsons. I’m so glad you could be here tonight to discuss your civic virtue. Or lack thereof.”
“What the hell is this?” Parsons says.

“Attempting to intimidate a mayoral candidate into dropping out of the race is a very serious affront to democratic values,” Mom continues, as if he hadn’t said anything. “I think you’ll agree.”

Parsons’ lips part in surprise. He blinks a few times. All he comes up with is, “You look ridiculous.”

“But throwing bricks at his family is just low.”

His eyebrows knit. “How did you know?”

“You know what might redeem you somewhat?” Mom leans forward on her stool. “If you liquidated those three hundred shares of Genentech and gave the proceeds to the ACLU.” She helpfully holds up Mary’s screen.

Parsons’ eyes widen. “Did you just… you bitch!”

It’s wrong to hit a man when he’s tied to a chair, but no one talks to my mother like that.

“Arrow,” Mom cautions, “he just put ten thousand dollars in the swear jar. Calm down.”

“You’d better hope I never find you,” Parsons seethes. “I am gonna fucking bury you.”

“You have another twenty thousand in liquid assets I haven’t even touched yet,” Mom points out. “I’d be polite, if I were you.”

“We also suggest you keep your dirty fingers out of the election from now on,” I advise him. “In fact, you probably shouldn’t even cast a ballot.”

“You can’t do this,” Parsons fumes.

Mom looks at me. “Why do they always say that, as if I haven’t just done it?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

She shrugs, flips Mary’s case closed, and gets to her feet in a very businesslike way. “Good night, Officer. Someone will be along to get you in the morning.”

I fold up her stool, tuck it under my arm, and follow her out of the warehouse.

When we climb into my X5 a few blocks away and pull the masks off, we take one look at each other and crack up laughing.

Lyla is good as her word. The next day, she gives Mom unhindered access to Abel Cuvier’s entire digital life, and it takes a week to sort through it all.

“It’s really suspicious how not-suspicious this all is,” Mom says. “There should at least be embarrassing pornography. There’s always embarrassing pornography. But no, there is almost nothing interesting here at all.”

Almost.

There’s a single email in a highly secure account that he failed to scrub. It’s addressed to George
Miranda. Mom can’t get into it no matter which way she tries, but it links Cuvier to a murdered member of the Black Hand.

Dig and Lyla take a dim view of this.

“We told you when you first came to us that we wouldn’t be able to protect you and your daughter if you weren’t honest with us,” Dig tells Dr. Cuvier in the conference room a few days later. “The fact that you have some kind of connection to George Miranda and the Black Hand?”

“Pretty big omission,” Lyla says.

Silence from Cuvier.

“One of our people almost died in the attack on your home, and we won’t continue to endanger them by sending them into the field blind.”

“Can you explain your connection to George Miranda, Doctor?” Dig says.

“I have nothing to say on the subject,” Cuvier says stiffly.

“Then I’m afraid we’re no longer able to offer you protective services,” Lyla says smoothly.

“Your confidential information will be returned to you or destroyed,” Dig adds.

“You have no idea,” Cuvier says in a low voice, “no idea of the value of my work, of what I must do to continue it.”

“We wish you well,” Lyla says, offering her hand.

We watch the glass doors close behind him.

“Now can I point arrows at him?” I ask Dig and Lyla.

“Now you can point arrows at him.”

A grandfather clock in Dr. Cuvier’s beautiful rented house chimes one o’clock. The security company he hired to replace us was not particularly impressive, and all three of their protectors are taking a little nap outside.

I nock an arrow and ghost down the darkened hall to the study. Through the cracked door, I hear the click of a keyboard.

I burst in, aim for his face, and announce, “Abel Cuvier. We need to talk.”

But he’s not alone. Someone jumps up from the armchair in the corner, and the book in her lap clunks on the floor. Pure reflex makes me draw on her.

It’s Tish.

I point the arrow at the carpet.

Shit, shit, shit on a shingle. She is not supposed to be in this house tonight. She’s supposed to be in her dorm room on the other side of town. But here she is, raising her palms and approaching me very slowly. “Please. You don’t need to do this.”

She takes another step, and she does her best to look past the mask and hood, to meet my eyes. “You remember me, don’t you?”

“Stay where you are,” I tell her.

“You protected us. I saw you take a bullet for my friend.” She swallows, and I can see her hands shaking. “I don’t think you’ll hurt me.”

“No,” I admit. “But I will stop you.”

She freezes in her tracks.

“Why are you here?” Cuvier says.

“The night Desilva sent her thugs here, what did she want?”

“That information is available in my statement to the police. A rare and expensive isotope of - “

I raise the bow, and both of them flinch. “What. Did. She. Want?”

He gives me the steely glare he gave Risdon that night. But if he thinks he’s going to win a staring contest with an arrowhead, he’s too dumb for all those letters after his name.

“Lower the bow,” he says softly. “I will explain. Just lower the bow.”

I angle it slightly away from him.

He takes a shaky breath, and he says, “From the moment Senator Kobel proposed a ban, it has become harder and harder to fund my research. I had to find another way. I thought Desilva was a drug rep, that it was corporate malfeasance and not… what it was. I would never have sold samples of the drug to her if I had known. When I learned the truth, I put an end to it. That is when she sent her thugs.”

Tish stares at him.

“She wanted more of the drug?” I say.

“She wants the raw research so she can manufacture it herself. That is what she was after.”

I look at Tish, whom Risdon threatened that night. If I hadn’t started shooting up the place, I wonder if he would have let them break her arm.

“Desilva still can’t make it for herself?”

“No.”

“Tell me how to find Joseph Risdon.”

“I cannot tell you that. They contact me - a different ghosted number every time.”

“And you’ve stopped selling to them?”

He shakes his head in disbelief, as if I’m the idiot here. “They will kill me if I refuse.”

I look at Tish, who is still staring at her father like she’s never seen him before, and at full draw I
aim my arrow at a point just left of his face. Near enough that it will look like pointy death to him.
“Imagine what I’ll do to you if you don’t.”

“And then what happened?” Uncle Roy says, leaning against the med table in the lair.

“And then I left,” I say, replacing my bow and quiver in their case. “I wasn’t going to shoot the man in front of his daughter.”

“He could be halfway to Canada by now!”

“No, he couldn’t,” Mom says from her workstation. “Jon tagged him for me.”

“I’m not an idiot,” I grumble.

“Why is he still breathing free air at all?” Uncle Roy says. “The guy’s been selling illegal, experimental biotech to drug dealers. Throw him to the Feds.”

Mom shakes her head. “He’s selling to Ana Desilva, who is probably the FBI’s most adorable confidential informant. If they wanted him, they’d have him by now.”

I pull up a chair, twirl it backwards, and sit with my elbows resting on the back. “So what bigger game are they hunting?”

Mom’s expression turns grim. “Galen.”

“Taking it to the top,” Uncle Roy says with approval.

“How can you be so sure?” I ask Mom.

“It’s their best chance in years. The Black Hand here in Starling still hasn’t recovered from what we did to them at the Port Authority - go, team! - and Galen’s been hemorrhaging resources just trying to hold his ground ever since. Now the FBI has an informant high in his ranks? It’s the only thing that makes sense.” Then she makes a moue and admits, “Also I’ve been reading the organized crime unit’s emails.”

“We can’t just sit back, let Cuvier do his thing, and hope he listens to me.”

“If he does listen, there’s a good chance Desilva will send Risdon to shake him down again,” Uncle Roy says, pushing off the med table to pace. “That could be our chance to grab him. Grab both of them.”

“There’s an angle you’re not considering,” Mom says, shifting in her chair. “When this gets out, everything connected to Cuvier will look dirty by association. I mean, the man is the keynote speaker at the Bioethics Conference in April. A week after that, the Senate votes on the splice ban.” She flinches, catching herself using the media nickname. “Or the genetic modification ban, or the Frankenfauna ban or whatever the kids are calling it now.”

“And this matters because…” I prompt.

Uncle Roy’s mouth sets in a grimace. “The Kobel Act would also apply to genetic therapies.”

Like the one Aunt Thea started back in November. Since she has not mentioned any progress whatsoever in the four months since, I assumed it was another dead end. Maybe I assumed wrong.
Mom claps her hands. “We keep a close eye on him and let him go about his business. Next time the Hand contacts him, there’s our chance. If he sells to them again, we take him out and maybe some of them along with him. If he refuses, Risdon shows up to break his face, and we get our first clear shot at that psycho.”

I think of Tish, who wasn’t supposed to be there tonight. “What if that second one happens, and we can’t get there in time?”

“I cry for Cuvier to the sound of the world’s smallest violin,” Uncle Roy says, and I look up in surprise. It’s the most like himself he’s sounded in weeks.

“We’ll get there in time,” Mom says confidently. “I still have an all-access pass to his phone, remember? I’ll know what’s going on almost before he does. Now who wants two a.m. egg rolls on the way home?”

March blows through Starling, scattering rain and pollen all over everything.

Panoptic spends a couple of weeks quietly and unobtrusively foiling attempts to key our cars, cherry bomb our mailbox, and TP the house, but otherwise the harassment drops off. Nobody draws us hangman games or throws bricks through our windows, and even the death threats get less colorful. Dad even pulls ahead in the polls.

“Fantastic,” I grumble to Uncle Roy on the way to work one morning, listening to morning news radio. My neck aches from a pulled muscle, I’m tired, and I want to shoot something. Instead I press my forehead to the window and mutter, “Yay. Winning.”

Uncle Roy turns down the volume on the radio. “What’s your problem, Jon? I know you’re not rooting for Harry Lee, so…” He glances over. “Are you pissed that Oliver’s barely been in the lair since January?”

I have to turn my shoulders to look at him. “Yeah, I’ve really missed him looking over my shoulder, being judgy and moody and self-righteous.” I see one eyebrow twitch in amused recognition. Uncle Roy knows exactly what I’m talking about. “No, it’s just that this is the worst idea he’s had since…” There are many candidates for the end of this sentence, but I go with, “since banging his girlfriend’s sister.”

Uncle Roy rolls his eyes. “You convinced me. I’ll vote for the other guy.”

“Our family has more secrets than the CIA, and this is like an invitation for people to go digging. If anyone outs me, he’s screwed too. And he’s got all these rules about keeping the vigilantism separate from the mayor stuff, which I guess is noble or whatever, but it’s going to make both of us less effective, so I don’t see the point. All of this crap, and what does he think he’s going to accomplish?” I slump lower in my seat. “Is he going to save the city? Pfft. Fucked that up once already.”

“Stop talking,” the Arrow’s voice snaps. “Now.”

I freeze in my seat. In nearly three years, my uncle has never used that voice on me. “I was just - ”

“I don’t care what you were just.” Uncle Roy glares at the Audi ahead of us. “If it weren’t for your dad, I would be in the Heights or in the ground.” The glare swings my way. “You want to disrespect everything he’s done for this city, say it to his face. Not in front of me, you understand?”
“I understand.”

He turns the radio back up, and not until the DJ starts pontificating about the Starling Archers do we ease into a conversation again.

Dad’s not the only one seeing results. Laurel makes real progress against the corruption in SCPD. Two dozen problem officers finally get their asses disciplined, six with criminal charges.

Then her co-counsel Benjamin Wade goes missing.

“Ben was caught on traffic cams leaving Parlay’s Pub, but his car disappeared somewhere after Duwamish,” Laurel tells us at dinner, glaring at the flowers Milena arranged as the centerpiece. “They’re dragging the canal for him now.”

“Suspects?” Mom says. “I know he had a lot of enemies, given his job.”

Laurel shakes her head. “SCPD’s working theory is that he drove off the road while intoxicated.”

Dad worries in her general direction. “You should consider talking to Panoptic about - ”

“I’ve got it handled, Ollie.”

The day closing arguments begin on the Bloom trial, Laurel strolls into court in front of Judge Holden and proceeds to bend the defense over, lube them up, and -

“Jonathan,” Mom snaps when I nearly finish that metaphor in front of Abby.

“Oh my God, Mom.” Abby rolls her eyes. “I have a TV, an Internet connection, and ears. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

Dad looks just thrilled with that revelation, but all he says is, “Pass the wine bottle, please.”

Late that night on the roof of the precinct, McKenna Hall waits for me in a light mist of rain, collar popped up and droplets glistening in her hair. I’ve hardly touched down when she pulls a glass file from an inside pocket of her jacket. “Missing persons.”

I take the file and swipe through pictures. Thirteen of them, all ages and backgrounds. The last I recognize. “Benjamin Wade.”

Hall nods. “I warned you about kicking the hornet’s nest.”

I assumed she meant it would come back on me. It never occurred to me that I was putting other people in the line of fire. I swallow hard.

“The other twelve have been ruled dead ends. The only commonalities are that they went missing in the past six months, and that they had no family or close friends. Three were homeless. Most were reported missing after a couple of weeks by unpaid landlords or shelter workers or church groups.”

“Were these the kind of dead ends where the division head just didn’t see the point, because it’s not like anyone was going to miss them anyway?”

Hall looks back at me levelly. “Will you look into them or not?”

I slide the file into my jacket. “Always a pleasure, Detective.”
The next day is the Queen family’s first without a protector shadowing our every move, which also means it’s Abby’s first without a dedicated driver. I get stuck picking her up from a voice lesson that evening. As well as I know SCU’s campus, it takes me a little while to find her in the maze of McAlister Hall.

“Abby! You ready?”

In the soundproof practice room, Abby shoves papers into her bookbag, and Tish sits at the upright piano. It’s the first time I’ve seen her since I pointed an arrow at her, and it’s also the first time she gives me a smile one hundred percent free of mockery. Secret identities are weird, man.

“Hey, theater kid,” I say.

“Hi there, frat boy.”

Abby looks up, puzzled. “When did you two get on a cutesy nickname basis?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Tish says smoothly. She’s still looking at Abby as she reaches for the keylid, which is probably why she misjudges the distance and fumbles it.

The lid slams closed with a crack like a gunshot.

Both girls jump, and Tish says a quiet, "Damn it.”

But Abby goes chalk white. Her nostrils flare, and her breath comes sharp and shaky.

I know what these look like now, so when Tish gets to her feet and says, “Oh, God, Abby, are you ok?” I shake my head at her and gesture her back onto the piano bench. Sit down. Be calm, be slow. Your freakout will only amplify hers.

“Jonny?” Abby’s hands tremble as she reaches for my arm.

“Come on, let’s sit down.” She follows me to the tile floor and sits cross-legged, breathing fast and shallow. I do what I’ve seen Dad do: I put her hand on my chest. “Hey, right here. Breathe with me.”

She gets a hold of herself pretty quickly, all told. When it’s over she looks like she wants to die of embarrassment, and Tish can’t stop apologizing for scaring her.

“No, it’s not your fault. I’m the one being ridiculous,” Abby says. “God, I’m sorry for flipping out on you.”

“It’s not ridiculous, and do not apologize.”

I jingle my keys. “You ready to go home, junebug?”

Tish looks up at me curiously, and I realize I’ve let the nickname slip in front of someone not family. If she weren’t so rattled, Abby would probably be pissed.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” she murmurs.

By dinnertime, she seems fine. Aunt Thea and Uncle Roy are eating with us, and Abby sits between them, talking and laughing like nothing ever happened. For once we all have a leisurely night, with nowhere to be and nothing to do except lounge on the sofa digesting Milena’s carrot souffle.

“So, ah, I’ve been meaning to show you something,” Aunt Thea says. “This feels like the right
So, ah, I’ve been meaning to show you something,” Aunt Thea says. “This feels like the right time.”

Dad frowns at her. “Show us what?”

Aunt Thea gestures to Uncle Roy, who comes to stand right in front of her chair. With nervous pride and fierce flashing eyes, she says, “Watch this.”

Uncle Roy holds out his hands, and she grabs his forearms, his palms under her elbows. She pulls herself up out of the chair. I’ve seen them do this before, moving her into a car or a different chair. She usually hangs, knees swaying, her whole weight supported by her scary Amazon arms.

But tonight her legs stay under her.

Nobody dares to breathe.

Upright, leaning hard on Uncle Roy but upright, Aunt Thea takes a wobbly step. His foot moves back in perfect sync with hers. Then another.

I cast a startled glance at the rest of the family, and my parents are wearing the same expression as Uncle Roy. Wild, teary-eyed hope. Hero-worship too, like these are the first steps of the lunar landing.


She falters and collapses against Uncle Roy’s chest, both of them laughing in pure joy.

“Thea,” Dad says hoarsely. He probably meant to say more, but it just won’t come. All he can do is stare at her with that look on his face.

Aunt Thea supports half her own weight, hanging from Uncle Roy’s neck. “That was the result of two months of physical therapy,” she says, and her smile takes ten years off her. “Plus four months of very cold exam tables, so I hope it made for a good show.”

Dad walks over and steals her from Uncle Roy. Her feet leave the ground.

“Ollie,” she says, laughing into his shoulder, practically giddy. “Put me down, you big goof. The whole point is that my legs are actually halfway useful again.”

He sets her on her feet and helps her back to her chair, grinning at her like she just won the Starling Marathon. Mom and Abby are too impatient to take turns hugging her, so the three of them end up in this messy, giggle, tearful group cuddle that looks like it could be the climax of a chick flick.

When my uncle comes to stand next to me, I elbow his arm. “That was pretty fucking cool.”

He smiles. “I know.”

“The full course of doses is spread out over a year, so we’re only a third of the way in,” Aunt Thea is saying in response to Mom and Abby’s babbled questions. “It won’t be some miracle, hundred percent recovery, but I can expect to get a little more function back. Enough to walk with forearm crutches, maybe.”

“You are amazing, do you know that?” Mom says. “ Seriously, Thea, mazel tov.”

When my mom and sister quit crowding her, I lean over and kiss Aunt Thea’s cheek. “How long have you been holding out on us?”
“Not long. You know I can’t keep a secret.” She winks at me.

We break out mint chocolate chip ice cream to celebrate.

Seven hours later, when Uncle Roy drops me home after a patrol, I slip in the front door tired and grumpy. Light flickers in the living room, and I find Abby curled up on the sofa, staring fixedly at a trashy reality show with remote earbuds in.

“What are you doing still awake?” I check my watch and lean over the back of the sofa. “You have school in four hours.”

She doesn’t huff or roll her eyes or say, Thanks, Mom. She just nods and makes a soft noise of agreement, like, Yes, four hours, that is an accurate statement.

“Abby. Please go up to bed.”

“I will,” she says vaguely, and her eyes are glassy by the bluish light of the TV.

Oh, God. This is way above my pay grade. I go get Dad.

He does not appreciate being woken up, but he throws the down comforter aside and grouches to his feet. I trail behind him down the stairs and hover with one hand on the banister. When he stands over Abby, she finally tears her eyes away from the TV.

“It’s four o’clock in the morning,” he says, voice gravelly. “What are you doing?”

Her shoulders curve inward, and she doesn’t move. “Nothing.”

“Then you can nothing in bed,” he says, holding out his hand.

“I just want to be left alone.”

Now he’s wide awake, and his face falls. “Abigail.”

“Please just leave me alone.”

There is a long silence. With the gravel smoothed out of his voice, he says, “No, baby, I won’t do that.” Instead he sits down on the end of the sofa, leaving plenty of space between them. “Come on, what’s wrong?” When that gets no reply, he tries: “Did something happen today? Are you having nightmares again?”

She curls deeper into herself.

“Talk to me, please.” Polite as it may be, it is not a request.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, okay?"

I don’t know if I have the right, but he should probably know: “She had a panic attack this afternoon. Piano lid slammed down, startled her.”

Her shoulders hunch in humiliation, and tears spring to her eyes.

Instinctively Dad’s hand comes up to reach for her, but he stops himself. “Jon,” he says softly, “why don’t you get some sleep?”

He’s got this. I do as he says.
The next morning, the Bloom verdict comes down. In the break room at Panoptic, Jones actually makes popcorn, which he graciously shares with me, Ramirez, and Dig.

“Here it comes,” Ramirez says, leaning forward and brushing salt from her hands.

Guilty. Life in prison.

Jones jumps up and does an end zone dance that would get him fined for excessive celebration.

We watch live footage of Bloom, flanked by guards, escorted through the halls of the courthouse, ignoring reporters’ questions. Then one reporter raises a hand mike - and that is not a microphone.

Dig jumps to his feet on reflex.

The gun fires.

Javier Bloom looks at his murderer in mild bemusement. Shawn Friend stares back with a nearly identical expression, as if he hadn’t known the nine mil would do that until he pulled the trigger. Bloom crumples to the marble floor.

Friend disappears underneath a dogpile of blue uniforms.

“Holy shit,” Jones summarizes.

Laurel is pissed.

“I got him a perfectly good life sentence,” she fumes at our dinner table that night.

“You were pushing for the needle,” I point out. “You wanted him dead, well now he’s dead.”

“No one wanted him assassinated in the courthouse hallway,” Mom says. “Especially not the janitors.”

“Let’s just abolish the courts and go back to blood feuds,” Laurel says, waving her iced tea. Then she leans her forehead on the heel of her hand. “You know they found Ben Wade’s car today. Bottom of the New Bedford Canal. He wasn’t in it.”

“So he could still be alive?” Mom says gently.

Laurel gives her a look.


Laurel shakes her head. “It was willful, deliberate, and premeditated. There is no ‘he had it coming’ defense to first degree murder.”

Dad rubs his forehead. “Shawn Friend undermined the most high-profile case in recent memory where the system worked the way it’s supposed to.”

Mom nods primly. “Sure is a shame when some jerk decides the justice system isn’t good enough and takes matters into his own hands.”

The look Dad gives her should probably qualify as my early birthday present.
It’s certainly more festive than the one Hall gave me.

“None of these cases look like they’re going to have happy endings,” Mom says quietly when I show her the file. “Are you sure you want to go looking, knowing that we’re probably going to find bodies?”

Odds are, she’s right, but since when do odds apply to our family? Besides: “SCPD gave up on them. If we don’t look, nobody will.”

Over the next few weeks, Mom, Uncle Roy, and I track down seven of the thirteen missing persons in the file. By the time we find a kid of seventeen named Terence Washington dead in a landfill, I’m already wishing I’d thrown the damn thing back in Hall’s face.

Not a single one is still alive when I get to them. None of them died pretty.

One owed money to the Black Hand, another to the Salvatrucha. The third was a drug mule for the Three-Sixteen who overdosed on the black market ‘scrip meds he was carrying. The fourth was a homeless man killed for witnessing a robbery. The next three I don’t even like to think about.

I bring in their killers - gang members and drug runners and assholes with multiple domestic violence convictions - but it’s just cleaning up after damage already done.

Seven in a row that I can’t save.

“The Three-Sixteen you brought in are enjoying Iron Heights,” Hall assures me the next time we meet.

“Yeah, and Terence Washington is enjoying the morgue.”

“This is the job, kid,” she says quietly. “We can’t always make it right. Sometimes this is as close as we get.”

Yeah, so everybody keeps telling me. “We’ve still got less than nothing on Ben Wade.”

She sighs. “That’s more or less what I expected.”

I come through my front door at three in the morning. In the living room I find Abby zombified on the sofa again, staring at a book that I don’t think she’s really reading.

The anger flares up hot and fast. I know it isn’t fair, and I know I’m about to take three weeks of frustration and heartache out on her. But she cannot be fucking serious with this.

“Go to bed, Abigail.”

She looks up at me glassy-eyed.

“Get. Up.”

She shrinks away when I grab at her wrist, and her eyes flash with something I don’t recognize at first. Fear. I don’t think my little sister has ever been afraid of me before.

Too damn bad. “I said get up!” I pull her upright and frog march her to the stairwell. She doesn’t fight me. That’s the worst part: I hear not a word of snark when I drag her upstairs by the elbow.

I yank open the door to her bedroom, prod her inside, and sit her down on the fluffy, unmade bed.
“Lay down, close your eyes, and sleep.”

Tear tracks shine on her face. Oh, God, she’s crying. Oh, shit, junebug, please don’t.

“Just… please,” I say softly. “Please get some sleep.”

She nods, too ashamed to look at me and too exhausted to protest, and she curls up small against her pillows.

The next evening, we get our first lead on the splice case. It’s not at all what I was expecting.

“So this is a shot in the dark and probably ridiculous,” the shaky voice on the recording says, “but I’m a little desperate.” She takes a deep breath. “I need to talk to the Arrow. It’s important.”

At her workstation in the lair, Mom swivels in her chair, and I sink into the chair across from her.

“What the hell?” I say. “Tish Cuvier wants to talk to the Arrow?”

Mom gestures helplessly at Mary’s screen. “Apparently it’s important.”

“What the hell?”

“Is it so strange?” Mom says. “You’ve met twice already. It’s about time she got your number.”

I roll my eyes. “How did she find Watchtower to contact us?”

“She didn’t,” Mom assures me. “At least not directly. She called her own phone from her father’s to leave us that message. I’m panning his calls for keywords, and the second she said ‘Arrow’ on his line, it popped right up.”

“Why the hell would she do that?”

“You threatened her father, and you sounded pretty serious about it. She must have realized you’d be keeping an eye on him somehow.”

“Huh.”

“There is the possibility that this is a trap,” Mom says.

I shrug and reach for my phone.

Tish answers with a cautious, “Hello?”

“You wanted to speak to me.”

I hear a sharp indrawn breath. “Yes, I did.”

“Midnight, roof of McAlister Hall.”

“Ok.”

Then I hang up.

“Oh, very smooth,” Mom says.
“I am the shadow that stalks the night,” I remind her, heading for the glass case full of my gear. “The danger that haunts the whatever from deep within the thing. I don’t have to be smooth.”

“I’m sure she’ll spend the next hour agonizing over what to wear.”

I grin at her as I pull the hood down. “I’ve got my outfit all picked out.”

Tish is waiting when I swing onto the roof. I wouldn’t have noticed if Mom hadn’t said anything, but she is wearing ruby red lipstick. Now that I’m looking, it seems kind of strange.

“Good evening,” she says, so formally I half-expect her to curtsy.

I nod acknowledgment. “Miss Cuvier.”

“I discovered something about my father, and I think you’re the right person to tell.” She looks down at her hands, fingers tangling together anxiously. “At first I thought I should go to the police, but…” Her eyes flicker up to meet mine. “I think you’re the right person.”

You’re damn straight. “What did you find?”

She rolls her bright red lips together. “I don’t think Ana Desilva was paying my father cash for his drug.”

“How do you know?”

With shaking hands, she pulls a glassfile from her purse. “Just look.”

I swipe it open with a gloved finger, and pictures materialize on its surface.

Pictures upon pictures. Horribly misshapen bodies, muscles seized up taut, limbs twisted. Blood running from places it shouldn’t. I recognize some of the faces from the missing persons file Hall gave me.

I want to look away. I want to be sick.

Tears running down her face, Tish says, “I think Desilva was paying him in research subjects.”

Chapter End Notes

"The danger that haunts the whatever from deep within the thing" is directly inspired by The West Wing’s "You want to tempt the wrath of the whatever from high atop the thing?" in the episode Election Night.

I speak no more French than Jon does, so if a proficient speaker notices mistakes, I’d appreciate a heads up.
That night, I call together Team Arrow past and present, minus Dad. I’m late to my own party, and when I come down the steps of the lair, all five of them - Mom, Dig, Uncle Roy, Aunt Thea, and Elaine - are goofing off like it’s a family holiday. Mom and Dig are laughing about something on Mary’s screen, Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea are teasing each other mercilessly, and Elaine is enjoying the show.

I hate to ruin everybody’s evening, but I might as well jump right in. “Hey, everybody. Abel Cuvier has been doing crazy illegal, sadistic medical experiments on human beings supplied to him by the Black Hand.”

Everyone turns and stares at me. Elaine sinks into a chair.

Aunt Thea says, “What?”

I dock the data key in Mary’s drive, and the glassboard ripples to life. While I lay it all out for them, I try not to look at the images flashing on screen. All I see is the shifting light illuminating five horrified faces. Uncle Roy closes his eyes a minute in, looking green.

“Do we know if he’s holding anyone right now?” Mom says when I’ve finished.

“We don’t,” I admit. “Priority number one is busting into his private lab to find out.”

“Do we know where?” Aunt Thea says.

Mom spins her chair around to Mary. “We will. Real estate is hard to hide. Give me an hour, tops.”

Dig steps up to the image frozen on the glassboard of a dead woman whose eyes are crimson with burst blood vessels. Her name was Nadia, and her picture is in Hall’s file as well - a mugshot taken after her arrest for prostitution, in which she looks regally ethereal. She was not beautiful, except for her striking eyes. In Cuvier’s picture, her green irises stand out wild and alien against so much red.

“Just when I think I’ve seen the worst human beings can do to each other,” Dig says quietly. “Desilva gave him these people?”

I nod. “The Hand has never been squeamish about human trafficking.”

“Will it do that to everyone?” Uncle Roy says, laying an uncertain hand on the back of Aunt Thea’s wheelchair. “The somatic gene transfer - is that what it does, in the end?”

“No,” Elaine says, looking up sharply. “Each dose’s virus carries a genetic payload with very specific instructions. Thea’s treatment is aimed at regenerating nerve cells, restoring lost function.
This…” She glances up at the image with dispassionate, clinical eyes. “The doctor is experimenting with genetic augmentation to make human bodies do things they never could before.”

“Why the hell would anyone want to do that?” Dig says.

“Evolution isn’t a very good designer, Dad. Our bodies are haphazard, jury-rigged contraptions with lots of ways to break and very few ways to function properly.” She shakes her head. “Imagine if you could make us… better.”

Dig shakes his head in disgust. “I’ve seen that idea lead to some dark places.”

Uncle Roy shoves away from the table to pace. Aunt Thea’s hand follows him briefly, then falls into her lap. He looks straight at me when he says, “If the whole world finds out about this tomorrow, the Kobel Act passes. No contest.”

“Maybe it should,” Aunt Thea murmurs, looking sick with herself, and he looks over at her sharply.

Mom swivels away from Mary. “We take Cuvier into our custody and hold him until after the vote. Then we give him to the feds. They won’t be able to ignore this.”

“You want to kidnap and imprison a world-famous scientist for a month?” Elaine says. “Someone is going to notice.”

“Not where we’ll put him.” Mom crosses her arms. “Besides, turnabout is fair play.”

“People have a right to know about this,” Dig says. “If it sways the Senate, that just means they’re voting with all the facts.”

“This is the most promising field of research in medicine right now,” Elaine protests. “A scandal like this will set it back decades.”

I nod along. “A month wherever Mom wants to put him instead of wherever the feds would put him isn’t going to matter, in the grand scheme.”

“We don’t do this at our convenience,” Dig says. “We don’t pass sentences, we don’t imprison people, and we for damn sure don’t write the law.”

“We could kill him,” Aunt Thea says wistfully. “No muss, no fuss.”

It has its appeal. A venal obsessive who’d gotten in with the wrong people? Just beat a warning into him, let him walk free, and hope things like Aunt Thea’s treatment stand as his legacy. But a complete monster torturing human beings to satisfy his curiosity? Him I want to aerate with broadheads.

Then again, Tish is trusting me with this, which probably means she’s trusting me not to straight-up execute her father.

“Arrow in the head,” Aunt Thea sighs, almost to herself. “Everybody wins.”

“You don’t even mean that,” Dig says. “This is personal for you.”

“Of course it’s personal!” Uncle Roy snaps, which kicks off four people trying to talk over each other.
“None of this is helpful - “

“Oh, Jesus, here we go - “

“Roy, don’t yell at him - “

“Enough!” Mom says.

We fall silent.

“I have a location for the lab,” she continues, as if she didn’t just interrupt the kids fighting again. “If he’s holding people, get them out. If he shows his face, bring him in. We’ll figure out what to do with him once we’ve made sure he can’t hurt people anymore.”

We nod, and we beat to quarters.

Cuvier’s mad scientist bunker is the basement level of a skeletal clinic whose developers went bankrupt halfway through construction. Arsenal and I do careful recon, looking for a way in, but the most exciting thing we find behind all of the scary, secretive steel doors is a broom that falls forward and startles me.

Arsenal pats my shoulder as I lower the bow. “Easy there, killer.”

“Shut up.”

I tap my comm. “Watchtower, are you sure this is it?”

“Very,” Mom says.

Headlights flash through the dusty, taped-up windows. “It’s the doctor’s car,” Arsenal says. “This just got a lot easier.”

“Time to disappear.”

He nods, and we melt into the shadows.

Dr. Cuvier is not alone. He stalks into the building dragging Tish by the wrist, and though I don’t understand a word of the rapid French he’s firing at her, it sounds pretty angry.

“Watchtower, any way to translate that?”

“Two seconds,” Mom says. Then: “Speech recognition and translation software is still stuck in the twenties, so this is pretty rough, but… ‘Do you have any idea what you do? These people are dangerous. They are not lightly. We have to gather my research and from tonight.’ Well, then. Adorable robot translation aside, it sounds like the Hand is onto them and they’re skipping town.”

“Or he found out she contacted us,” Arsenal says. “We are not lightly either.”

“I’d rather she weren’t here,” I mutter.

We stalk the Cuviers all the way to the back of the building, where the doctor leans against a perfectly ordinary-looking section of wall, and it slides back and then sideways.

Tish balks. “Je ne vais pas là-dedans.”
“Calme-toi.” He shoves her ahead of him, takes one last look around the stagnant shadows of the warehouse, and slips in after her.

I jam a steel-toed boot into the aperture before it can close all the way behind them. Arsenal and I wait a few moments for their footsteps to fade, and then he draws an arrow.

“The girl’s an ally,” I remind him.

“This isn’t for her.”

I haul the door open, and he goes in broadhead first.

Nothing. Wavering bluish light glows at the end of a narrow concrete-walled corridor.

“Gonna be honest,” I whisper to Arsenal. “This does not look like the kind of place where anyone makes valuable contributions to the sum total of human knowledge.”

“Nock an arrow and follow me.”

As we get deeper in, the comms fuzz out with the interference of the thick concrete walls. The corridor opens up onto the doctor’s brightly lit lab, which resembles nothing so strongly as Mom’s workstation in the lair. There are some science-y looking doohickeys with tubes and glass vials whose purpose I couldn’t begin to guess at, but mostly there are computers upon computers. Glassbooks hooked up to libraries hooked up to desktop drives.

Cuvier stands at the largest drive, typing furiously. Tish sits close, watching him work in anxious confusion.

“Abel Cuvier,” Arsenal says, loud and clear, “you have failed this city.”

They both turn.

“Where are your research subjects, Doctor?” I say.

He crosses his arms and leans back against his desk.

“Fine,” I mutter. “Place isn’t that big.”

Arsenal holds his draw on the doctor while I poke around the lab. The only doors I find lead onto storage closets, cleaning supplies, and a bathroom.

Until I find the gleaming, hermetically sealed door at the far end of the room. A display at eye level shows -23 degrees Celsius, plus a bunch of readings on humidity and whatever else that don’t mean much to me.

“Doctor, what am I going to find in your walk-in freezer?” I call across the room.

He doesn’t answer.

I replace the arrow in my quiver, unseal the heavy door, and step inside.

I find his research subjects.

All sixteen of them.

I stand there with my breath frosting in front of me, looking at human beings stacked in transparent bins, morgue-style. Through the plastic, I can make out a face. Benjamin Wade,
Laurel’s co-counsel. The rest are frosted over, which might be for the best. My fingers tighten around the bow, and I take three deep breaths of bitingly cold air. If I go back out there now, I’m going to jab a flechette in Abel Cuvier’s neck.

Breathe. In slow, out slow.

“Arrow?” Arsenal calls.

I walk back out, carefully sealing the freezer behind me. “I found them.”

He draws tighter on Cuvier. “Son of a bitch.”

A metallic pounding on the door startles all four of us.

“Desilva,” Cuvier says. Immediately he reaches into his pocket, and he draws out a gold cross on a delicate chain. “Viens ici.”

“Papa.” Tish takes a step away from him. “Qu’est-ce que tu fais?”

He tugs her closer and fastens the tiny clasp around her neck. “Ne perds pas ça, peu importe ce qui se passe. Sois forte, Laetitia.”

“Oh, hell, no,” I say to Arsenal. “He’s our mad scientist, and we are not sharing.”

“Is there another way out of the lab?” Arsenal demands of Cuvier.

The doctor looks from us to the the door - bang, bang - and back again, and he must decide that the masked guys with pointy things are the lesser of two evils. “This way,” he says, and he leads us to one of the storage closets. Inside he upends a mop bucket, steps on top, and reaches up to shift a ceiling tile aside. “Up through there.”

I swing up first into the blackness of the interstitial space between floors, and as soon as I straighten up, I bump my head on the ceiling. I reach down for Tish, pull her up behind me, and help her find her feet. Next comes the doctor, and Arsenal brings up the rear with a flashlight.

Below us, we can hear the screech of metal as Desilva and company trash the door. Then voices. They’re coming in.

“There’s a utility door that will take us out into the second floor hallway, and from there we can use the fire escape without being seen,” Cuvier says.

Arsenal hands the flashlight to me and draws on him again. “Lead the way.”

Tish keeps both me and Arsenal between her and her father as we weave through the maze where the HVAC, breakers, and water pumps would have been installed. I dampen the flashlight so that Arsenal can crack the utility door and peek out into the hall.

He gestures us out after him.

But as soon as all four of us are out in the hall, the doors on either end burst open. Three men on each side, all armed.

“Whoa, back it up!” Arsenal says, hip-checking Tish right back through the door. Then he opens fire down the hall. I shove the doctor after her, slam the door, and cover the other end of the hall.

Normal people’s bodies respond to acute stress in predictable ways, as Elaine explained to me one weekend when she decided to play science experiment. The electrical activity in the brain spikes,
the heart rate goes through the roof, and you light up a GSR monitor like a Christmas tree.

The night we went to get Mom at the Port Authority, that’s exactly what I felt. But sometime around my millionth meditative breathing exercise and my fourth stab wound, my body stopped responding to danger like a normal human’s.

“Look at this,” Elaine said, frowning at her laptop after hooking me up to monitors and flashing images of graphic violence in front of me. “I expected a muted response, but instead… Hey, Dad! Oliver!”

After some heavy duty puppy eyes, they submitted to being lab rats too.

“Would you look at that,” she breathed, looking at their EEGs. “It’s not the sensor malfunctioning, because I tested it on myself first. Under threat, your heart rates and other indicators actually slow down.” Then she looked up at all three of us quizzically. “You are very strange people.”

There are at least three guns pointed at me right now.

My heart slows. My vision clears and narrows.

I am a very strange person.

Risdon’s men don’t have a clear shot. If they miss or overpenetrate, they’ll be punching holes in their buddies at the other end of the hall. If they want us, they’re going to have to do this the dirty way.

All six of them rush in, and we go to work.

Arsenal fights like he rehearsed the whole thing with a choreographer beforehand. It’s showy and dramatic and almost pretty, right up until the moment when all that grace hits you in the face like a hammer. They tell me that watching him and the Canary fight side by side was like watching the principal dancers of the Moscow Ballet.

I’m not going to do Swan Lake with him, but I can fall into step too. Back to back, we move in sync. He shifts position, and I don’t even need to look to realign with him. I yell, “Down!” and he ducks without question.

I stab an arrow through one thug’s upper arm, then yank it back, nock it, and let it fly into the next guy’s side. Arsenal drags another one to the floor and puts a boot in his neck.

We’re actually not doing that badly, until Black Ski Mask #4 slams into Arsenal at exactly the wrong angle. The two of them stumble back into the bay of plastic-sheeted windows. Rip, and they disappear through the shredded material. I hear a thud of impact on the concrete below.

“Arsenal!” I yell.

“Son of a bitch,” he pants over the comm.

“Are you all right?”

“Twenty foot fall, but the nice man broke it for me. Grab the girl and the doctor and get out of there.”

“On it.”

Then I hear screams from the other side of the utility door.
It slams open, and Tish emerges from the darkness. Joseph Risdon keeps pace right behind her, his pistol nuzzled up behind her ear.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“Shhh,” I say, because a sibilant with no vocalization behind it is the only sound the morphvox won’t turn into a menacing growl.

“Drop the bow,” Risdon orders.

“Arrow,” Mom says in my ear. “Run if you can. Run, you hear me?”

The window Arsenal went through stands wide open behind me. Twenty feet is not that far, if I land the right way. “What do you want, Risdon?”

“You, son.”

Ah, shit. This is going to end so, so badly.

“I said drop it.”

I lower it carefully to the floor, because you don’t drop a custom Carbon Spyder. “Those people down there in that freezer,” I say as it touches down, “you brought them here, didn’t you?”

Risdon taps a comm on his watch. “Desilva?”

“Is that what was supposed to happen to Tracy Howard?” When his eyes flick up at me, I know I’ve guessed right. “But she fought so hard you ended up killing her.”

“The Hand don’t break anybody out of maximum security prison for free,” he says. “I owe a debt. Just working it off.” He taps the comm again. “Desilva, I have them.”

Desilva’s voice comes through, crackly and muffled. “Show us.”

Black Ski Mask #5 points a phone camera at us. I assume he’s livestreaming it downstairs.

“You see that, Doctor?” Desilva says. She must have dragged Cuvier back down into his lab somehow. “He’s got your girl.”

“Got a gun to her head,” Risdon adds helpfully.

“You are going to tell me how to access your library, or my friend Joe is going to pull the trigger.”

He racks the slide, which must be pure theater, because it ejects a perfectly good cartridge.

“I’m not going to ask again,” Desilva says. “You have five seconds.”

“You don’t understand what you’re doing,” Cuvier says. “My work, it is - ”

“Four.”

“I will sell to you again, just as before,” Cuvier says.

“The entire library, doctor. Three.”

“I cannot give you what you ask!”
“Two,” Risdon says, and there is an unsavory gleam in his eye.

Tish sucks in a panicky breath. “Papa?”

There is a long pause. “Je suis tellement désolé, Laetitia.”

All the color drains from her face.

The only word I caught was her name, but I understood the tone. This cannot be happening. The man did not just do that to his own daughter.

Risdon’s finger moves from trigger guard to trigger. “One.”

Only a moron would rush him without a weapon or a plan. The best I can hope for is to get dogpiled by six thugs before Risdon murders this girl right in front of me. I know I won’t even get near him.

And I don’t.

Face mashed against the floor, several hundred pounds of mercenary squashing me, I can just barely hear Tish murmur, “Please don’t. Please.”

Risdon squeezes the trigger. The hammer falls. Tish flinches hard.

Empty. The gun clicks empty.

He laughs at her.

“This is how much he loves you, ma chérie,” Desilva’s voice comes over the comm. “Any secrets of his you might be keeping - now you know what they’re worth.”

The shakes take over from head to foot, and a strange kind of hunger flashes in Risdon’s eyes as he watches her quietly shatter. Then it’s gone, and he taps off the comm and turns to his men. “Now we’ve got that over with.” He jerks his head at me. “Take him.”

I hear Arsenal cursing over the comm - “I’m coming, man, just hold on, I’m coming.”

But it’s too late. Someone pulls a black bag over my head. The fabric has a strong, chemical stink, and after three breaths I lose consciousness.

I come to on a filthy concrete floor. Looks like an abandoned factory, favorite haunt of murderous lowlifes everywhere. My hands are bound behind me, but my mask and hood are still on. I struggle to my knees, and in my quick glance around, I see three things that strike me as important: a rickety end table with a tray of sharp things gleaming wickedly in the half-light, an enameled wash tub full of water, and Tish Cuvier, blindfolded and tied to a rusted water pipe, leaning back against the plywood of a makeshift wall.

“Watchtower?” I murmur.

“Oh, God, there you are,” Mom says on a rush of relieved exhale. “Tell me what you see, Arrow.”

“Abandoned factory. Tied up. Tish Cuvier is here too. Arsenal ok?”

“Hurt, but he’ll be fine. Risdon destroyed your GPS tracker while you were out, so it’ll be a little
longer than usual, but we’re coming. Just hang in there.”

“Ten-four.”

“You’re awake?” Tish says. “Please tell me you can see more than I can. Do you know where we are?”

“I’ll ask the questions, thank you, honey,” Risdon says. Legs come into my field of vision. "Let's have a look at you."

He tears back the hood and yanks the mask off. Some of my hair goes with it. He cuts the morphvox off me too.

I keep my head down, though I know it will do no good. And yeah, he forces it up with a knife under my chin.

After a nonplussed pause, he says, "Well, fuck me."

I used to have a problem with nervous giggling in Ms Callahan's class. I got in more trouble for laughing when she was trying to punish me than for whatever dumbass thing I did to begin with.

I can't help it. I laugh at Risdon's stupid, surprised face.

His expression darkens. Calmly and deliberately, he punches me in the gut.

I've been punched in pretty much every possible location. The head is bad, for sure, but a good solid gut punch is worse. I hit my knees, and in the never-ending seconds while I fight for air, I kind of want to die. Then I remember that Risdon will probably oblige me, and it takes even longer to catch your breath when you're trying not to laugh at your own gallows humor.

While he’s got me doubled over and useless, Risdon regards me thoughtfully. He’s probably working through the implications of my identity.

If Jonathan Queen, heir to a fortune, mysteriously disappears tonight, people will notice. I will be especially deeply missed on CelebCast. But he can’t out me without outing himself, and he can’t just put me back where he found me. Killing me and dumping my body in the bay is probably his most attractive option.

He must come to some kind of decision, because he nods and crouches down in front of me.

"You started training with at least one of them after your mother was taken, didn't you? You've seen their faces. You know who they are."

Huh. This was not the direction I was expecting this interrogation to take.

I think of the Williams murders - everybody in the house, because they were home. If he realizes this is a family business I'm in, it won't just be Dad and Uncle Roy in his sights. I steel myself for the next blow and say, “Nope. Not a clue.”

"Son," he says, right in my face. "You know their names."

I'm unlikely to get another chance, so I take this shining opportunity to hock one back and spit in his face. A nice chunk of greenish slime lands in his left eye. “I really don’t.”

This time it’s a backhand, not a gut punch. He straightens and wipes my snot off his face with his sleeve.
“Hang in there,” Mom whispers in my ear. I forgot she could hear all of this. Her voice is steady, but I can picture her face, and it only quickens my already racing heart. “We’re coming for you as fast as we can.”

"You are going to tell me what I want to know,” Risdon says, and he nudges the wash tub with his foot. Water sloshes over the chipped enamel of its edge. "This right here? This is just a matter of time."

If I live through this, it would be nice to able to say that I stared back at him with stone-faced defiance, or that I smart-assed him, or that I managed to look impressively and imperturbably bored.

But I once capsized a boat with my foot caught in the main sheet, and my life jacket buoyed me so well it pinned me up inside the cockpit. I was probably trapped for the better part of a minute before Dad pulled me to the surface. To this day I remember with perfect clarity the feeling that my chest was about to explode, the wild terror, and the strange horror of being unable to scream.

I know what's coming.

I probably just look kind of nauseated.

“We’re going to find you, I promise,” Mom whispers. “We’re coming, baby. Just hang in there.”

"I'm going to ask you one more time, politely,” Risdon says. "And then I'm going to ask impolitely. So, last chance: who are they?"

I close my eyes and breathe. Just breathe, in slow, out slow. Feel the calm fill your chest along with the air. Just breathe.

Risdon waits patiently.

In the few moments afforded me, I lock my mother’s voice away somewhere I won’t hear it. I put away Dad and Abby and Elaine and everyone else who’d be frantic for me right now. I can’t have them in my head for this. Got to be just me. Just me and what’s coming.

Risdon shoves my head underwater. The comm shorts out, jars loose, and clunks to the bottom of the wash tub.

Over the next hour, my world gets very small.

It narrows to the next few seconds and the agony in my chest and the burn of dirty water in my sinuses. The helpless terror screeching in my head and the preciousness of air. Tish’s voice, begging him to stop. And Risdon’s face right next to mine, asking the same questions over and over.

"You think they need your protection, son? Big, tough vigilantes like them? Let them take their chances with me."

I survive the next few seconds, and the next few, and no one comes.

"Your father bankrolled them all those years, didn’t he? You know exactly who they are."

No one comes. All I have is Tish’s voice - “Stop it, stop it, let him breathe, please, just leave him be” - reminding me that I’m not alone.

"You're going to tell me eventually,” Risdon says. “Why make it harder on yourself?"
I stop believing anyone will come.

"Their names, boy."


His next punch bloodies my mouth and stains the water pink.

"The Archer. The Bowman. The Arrow." I bare my teeth and laugh at him. "You dumb son of a bitch. Don’t you know it never mattered who was under the hood?"

Now I'm losing consciousness every time he shoves me under. The wild panic dulls to a pounding dread, and my desperate thrashing weakens to nearly nothing.

"You’ll kill him!" Tish yells. "Stop it, you’re killing him!"

Long past the point where I couldn't talk if I wanted to, Risdon shoves me aside. He lets me cough and retch and writhe on the floor, and I don't care what he does to me next so long as it's not the water again. He could put a bullet in my brain, and I'd die happy so long as I could breathe right up until the last second.

"Keep in mind I have all night," he says irritably.

I hear yelling from the goons outside. Sharp cracks and pops in rapid succession. Yeah, pretty sure that is gunfire, and I am not even curious. I lay on my side and suck down air, and I give approximately zero shits about anything else that might be going on.

"Well, get it locked down," Risdon says into his comm, one finger to his ear. Whatever the reply, it makes him roll his eyes, and he turns his back on me and Tish to stalk the ten yards to the steel door, ease it open, and growl unintelligible orders to the men outside.

"Arrow?" Tish says, head following the sound of my ragged breathing. "Are you ok? Are you with me?"

I look at her, hands swollen and wrists bloody from struggling against the nylon bindings, and I know what’s going to happen next. It seems so obvious now, I’m surprised Risdon didn’t try it first.

"I’m right here," I tell her, voice wrecked and raspy. "Right here."

Through the pounding in my head and the fuzziness of oxygen deprivation, I remember that there is a tray of sharp metal things about ten feet away from me. And Risdon’s attention is occupied.

I struggle upright, and I stagger over to the table. A little scalpel-looking thing gleams wickedly in the middle of the tray. I pick it up in my teeth, and I collapse in the same spot on the floor. Luckily I don’t slice my face open.

I drop the scalpel on the floor, then do an extremely heroic wiggle and roll to get my hands near it. I’ve just snatched it up with one finger when Risdon turns back to us.

He stalks over to Tish, and he yanks at the knot at the back of her head. The blindfold comes down, and Risdon looks straight at me while Tish gets her bearings.

She stares at me. "Jonathan?"

Risdon lets a lock of her hair run through his fingers. "What do you think I’ll do to her, if you
don’t tell me what I want to know?”

That would have been an excellent opening move, and honestly it might have worked. I know with sudden certainty why he didn’t try it. Joseph Risdon killed everyone in the Williams house because he enjoyed it, and he doesn’t intend to cheat himself of life’s little pleasures tonight either. My clumsy, numb fingers work slowly, too damn slowly, to slice through the nylon.

Risdon unsheathes a knife from his belt. “I could carve on her,” he says, eyes raking down her bare throat and back up again. “But that seems a waste.”

Tish doesn’t cry or beg for herself, the way she’s done for me over the past hour. She stays very, very still, and she doesn’t make a sound.

He slides the knifepoint beneath her top button. The thread pops, and the button skitters onto the floor. Her shirt gapes open.

Tiny, desperate fumbles behind my back. Don’t drop it, don’t drop it, don’t don’t don’t.

“There’s things I can do,” Risdon says, nose in her hair, “won’t even leave a mark.”

She schools her face to perfect blankness, as though she’s somewhere far away.

“If you don’t give a damn for the doc’s girl,” Risdon says, turning to me, “I can fetch your pretty sister instead. 4120 Providence Street. Won’t take but a minute.”

My hands falter.

“What is she, fifteen?” Risdon tangles his hand in Tish’s hair. “Sixteen? I wonder if she’s so much as been kissed.”

My brain shorts out. He cannot talk about Abby like that. He cannot. If he touches my little sister, I will -

I don’t know what I’ll do. I assume the universe will end, normal rules of physics will no longer apply, and by sheer force of will I can unmake him and scatter him into his component atoms.

“Must make you feel powerful,” Tish says in a dull, flat voice.


She cranes her neck and looks Risdon right in the eyes. “What happened in prison, that you need to feel like that?”

When he backhands her, I throw the scalpel at him.

It’s not properly balanced, and my stiff, sore shoulders scream obscenities at me and refuse to cooperate. My aim goes wide. The little blade tumbles once and sticks in the plywood a foot away from him.

Annoyed as if I’d thrown a spitball, Risdon reaches for the handgun at his belt.

I rush him, because there is fuck-all else to do.

In slow motion, I watch Risdon take a stance that not even Dig or Lyla could find fault with. The shot sears through my upper arm like lightning, too hot and fast to register as pain.

It doesn’t stop me. Unless you hit the brain or spinal cord or you shatter a femur, bullets don’t put
a man down instantaneously. I barrel into Risdon and force his hands up. His second shot sparks off the rafters.

I’m bigger than he is, and my sheer weight gives him some trouble. I put up a good one-armed fight, wrestling the gun away from him and sending it clanging across the floor. But he is going to kick my clumsy, shaking, bleeding, half-drowned ass. He’ll throw me to the ground, and he’ll cave my skull in with those steel-toed boots. Maybe he’ll pick up the .45 and put a hole in my face. However it happens, in a few seconds, I am going to die.

I’m oddly unable to feel much of anything about it.

Then Tish shrieks like a banshee and throws herself on Risdon’s back. She gets an arm across his windpipe and squeezes. Girl must have cut herself loose with the scalpel. If we survive, I’ll pretend later that I buried it in the plywood next to her on purpose.

Since she’s given me this beautiful window of not-dying, I scramble for the gun. Risdon body slams her to the floor, but by the time he’s on his feet, I’ve got the muzzle on him.

He’s not an idiot. He runs for the door. I fire - one, two, three shots - but I’m shooting one-handed, and the world is spinning too fast for me to lead him properly. He disappears, and the steel door screeches shut behind him.

“Jon?” Tish struggles to her feet and takes two stumbling steps toward me. “Oh my God. Jon.” When I lower the SIG, she comes close. Her hands hover over the red mess of my upper arm. “That… is a lot of blood.”

“Yeah, guess so,” I say, because I’m too fuzzy to say anything else. “They’re, ah, they’re going to be coming through that door.”

Her hands wrap around mine, and she starts to pry my fingers loose from the gun. “Let me.”

I frown at her. “You know how?”

“Sort of.” She swallows. “No, not really. But at least I’m not swaying on my feet.”

The door bursts open. Tish raises the gun.

“It’s all right, it’s me!” my father shouts from beneath Watchman’s dark gray hood. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

I push Tish’s hands down, because everything is going to be fine now. Everything is under control. Dad is here, so it’s all right if black dots gather and thicken at the edges of my vision. It’s all right if I sag against Tish. “About fucking time.”

As if from far away, I hear her say to my dad, “Help? He’s really heavy.”

I’m unconscious before I hit the floor.

Next thing I know, light and color shifts through the darkness around me. “Everything’s going to be fine,” a woman’s voice says, and a small hand slides into mine and squeezes.

“Didn’t say anything. Tell him… I didn’t say shit.” But the carpeted surface beneath me tilts and rocks, and my brain wanders off to process this new strangeness.

Car. We’re in a car. My car. I’m laid out in the back of my X5, and I’m pretty sure the blur in the driver’s seat is Dig. Two more blurs sit on either side of me, one pale with a mane of autumn-
colored hair. The other is nothing but the dark outline of a hood.

“Hey,” Dad says, and the morphvox is on now. “You’re going to be all right. You got a little drowned and a little shot, that’s all. We’ll get you patched up.”

It seems crucial to get this on the record: “I didn’t say anything.”

Dad shakes his head. ”I’m not worried about that.”

Ok, then. If he’s here, and he’s not worried, I can go back to sleep. I let the blackness wash over me again.

I kick for the sunlight, where the green murk of the bay is shot through with gold. My hands are pale in front of me, reaching up, reaching for air that never comes closer. My chest aches. My arms will give out soon. I can’t breathe, can’t breathe, can’t -

“It’s all right,” Mom’s voice says. “You’re safe, Jonny. It’s all right.”

I’m in my own bed, under my own sheets. My mother smiles down at me, sitting up against the headboard right next to my pillow and running her fingers through my hair. Except for her red-rimmed eyes and the pink tip of her nose, she is chalk white.

“Hey there,” she says. “So glad to have you back.”

I frown at the square of gauze taped to the inside of her elbow, which does not quite cover the big purplish bruise underneath. “You got hurt?”

“No, honey. Just you.” She lays the back of her hand on my forehead, as if I’m home from school with the flu. “You lost a lot of blood, but we took care of it. How do you feel?”

I give it serious thought. “Shitty.”

“Can you be more specific?” Elaine says, coming into my field of view. She doesn’t look worried. That doesn’t mean much; she’d probably look equally serene if I were spurtling arterial blood all over her cable knit sweater. All the same, calm washes over me when she lays her hand on my uninjured arm.

“Everything hurts,” I tell her. “Especially my… everything.”

“I’m going to give you something for that, ok?”

“Where’s Tish? Risdon was gonna… Where is she?”

“Just a few rooms over. Asleep, like you should be. Now hush and get some rest, Jonny.”

I sleep fitfully, and I’m not sure if I dream. Every time I open my eyes, I find myself in different company. Once it’s Abby curled like a cat at my feet and Dig dozing in the armchair nearby. Once it’s Dad sitting on the edge of the mattress with his back to me, bent over with his head in his hands. I see Captain Lance leaning against the wall, arms crossed, saying, “I told you to take care of yourself, kiddo.” Lyla and Elaine sit close and murmur to each other.

Next I wake to the sound of deeper voices. Dad. Dig. I relax into the mattress and I don’t bother to open my eyes. I don’t even hurt. In fact, I hardly feel connected to my body at all.

Dad and Dig sound kind of pissed at each other though.
“I know that,” Dig says, low and gruff, “because my back and my knees hurt me too. I know your right shoulder is one more injury away from useless. Your ribs and your hands and every single break that healed wrong - I know they all ache when a cold front comes in.” He exhales, and I can picture him shaking his head. “Let him keep going like he is, and that will be Jon in thirty years. If he lives that long.”

“Dig,” Dad says in the same tone. “He’s Felicity’s son. I haven’t ‘let’ him do anything since he got to be my height.”

“Maybe you can’t stop him playing with fire,” Dig says, “but you didn’t have to give him a flamethrower.”

“That’s funny, because the guy who trained him in martial arts from the age of eight? That guy looked a lot like you.” Then Dad’s tone softens. “You believed in what we did. More strongly than I did, sometimes.”

“I believed we were making a better world for our kids. One they wouldn’t need to bleed for.”

I hear a creak of leather not far from my left knee. Dad must have pulled the armchair up next to my bed. “Some world we made.”

“Come on, man, don’t twist it around like that. You know what I’m saying. If this is about protecting some legacy so you don’t feel like all those years and all that sacrifice were for nothing -”

“You think I wanted this for him?”

There’s a long, frosty silence which I wouldn’t open my eyes and interrupt for the entire Swedish bikini team and a brand new Ducati.

Dad sounds exhausted when he says, “I wanted to tell him no.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Dad doesn’t answer.

I sink down into a gentle pool of what is probably a shit-ton of opioids, and in time I dream. Brackish lake water closes over my head, and my arms won’t move when I tell them to. I drift, paralyzed, a foot below the surface. Then someone grabs my ankle and yanks.

I jerk awake.

Abby sits cross-legged with her fingers still around my ankle, looking spooked. She must have shaken me out of the dream. She relaxes, pets my shin a couple of times, and sits back, pulling her hands into her lap.

I sound like a sixty year old pack a day smoker when I say, “You lookin’ at?”

“I’m supposed to listen to your breathing.”

She’s on watch for that pulmonary edema thing, I realize dimly. If the water I inhaled freaks my body out badly enough, fluid could pour into my lungs and drown me on dry land. See, I totally paid attention in Dig and Lyla’s protection skills course.

Abby musters up a lopsided smile. “It doesn’t sound any more like a death rattle than it did when I
got here.”

I get a few good coughs up and out of me, which feels satisfying but sounds horrific. “Thanks.”

Abby watches me closely while I catch my breath. Then she says, “I’m going to be really insulted if you expect me to believe this was alcohol poisoning again.”

So that’s the official story. It doesn’t account for the GSW - nothing ever does - but it will explain both the absolute shit I must look like and the family’s reluctance to talk about it in public. Once again my reputation for extremely questionable judgment will work to my advantage.

But this is different. This is Abigail. I’ve been keeping secrets from her going on three years now, mostly because she’s been letting me.

“Dad practically teleported out of his campaign headquarters, and no one could tell me where he’d gone,” she says. “All they would say was you were in trouble and he had to go get you. Then I had four hours to imagine what kind of trouble would be bad enough for him to skip out the night before the election. Do you know what that felt like?”

Remember that time Mom got kidnapped? You were right there with me, Abigail. “You know that I do.”

Her eyes shine, but there is no hitch in her voice when she says, “When Dad brought you home, you looked so bad that for a second I thought you were dead.”

For a second, I thought so too. “Still breathing.”

“Jonathan.” She closes her eyes, and when she opens them again, for the first time I understand why people say she has her father’s eyes. “When Panoptic was arranging Mom’s ransom, Dad said he needed your help, and then you guys came home with broken ribs and a busted knee. I don’t know what happened, but I can take some wild guesses, ok? I thought if none of you explained, it was because you couldn’t. It was…” She takes a deep breath, and she lies to me: “It was fine. But ever since then, you’ve been hiding something from me.”

I want to tell her what Aunt Thea once told me: it’s not about whether you’re strong enough to handle it, ok? It’s really not about you at all. But I know exactly how unsatisfying that is. Dad and Dig only let me in the treehouse three years ago, and that was because they had no choice.

I want to explain that secrets might have weight, but so does the truth. I never felt I owed Starling a damn thing until I found out there were people on this earth who kept other people in shipping containers. I want to explain that maintaining a cover story is easy when you believe it yourself. I want Abby to know what she’s walking into, but I can’t think of a warning she would understand.

“Jonny. What did I do to make you think you couldn’t trust me with this?”

I have not felt this kind of abject guilt since I flipped a Beemer and made Mom cry. I’m on the verge of spilling my guts, but one thing holds me back.

“Can’t do this now, junebug. Not gonna lie, they gave me the good painkillers, and I am high.”

She crosses her arms.

"Need to talk to Mom and Dad.”

“To get your story straight?” Before I can respond, she bites her lip and says, “I’m sorry. That was mean.” She unfolds her legs and slips off the edge of the bed. “I’ll get them.”
I drift off again while she’s gone, and I wake to the dip of the mattress as Dad sits down next to me. Mom stands behind him and drapes her arm across his shoulders. “Hey, kiddo,” Dad says.

First things first. I manage to croak: “Sitrep?”

I don’t understand the disappointment that passes across their faces, as if they were expecting me to say something else. Mom rolls her lips together and says, “The wound to your shoulder was a through and through, and it didn’t hit bone. It will heal up fine, but it might be a while before you can use a bow again.”

Yeah, we’ll see. “Uncle Roy?”

“The fall did something kind of nasty to his old rotator cuff injury. When you were separated, he fought like crazy to get to you, but with one working arm he was lucky to get away himself.”

“He ok?”

“If he reinjures himself one more time his shoulder will need surgical repairs, but he’s going to be fine. Rest and ice and anti-inflammatory should do it.”

“Tish?”

“Very badly bruised, but no permanent damage. She didn’t see Dad’s face, so as far as she knows, we are just bizarrely supportive of your nontraditional career choice -which is true, actually. Or at least the most convenient version of the truth.”

“The lab. Happened?”

“Burned to the ground,” she says heavily. “Dr. Cuvier was found dead, and his body shows signs of torture. SCPD is sorting through what’s left, including the… the people you found. Only nine have been identified so far - Benjamin Wade, our six remaining missing persons, and two runaways in the missing children database.”

“Children?”

“Fifteen and seventeen.”

I close my eyes.

“Cuvier’s library is gone,” Dad says. “So is all of the equipment they didn’t outright destroy.”


Dad sighs. “Tell me what you could have done differently.” Before I can even open my mouth, he adds firmly: “Without being able to tell the future.”

It hurts to breathe deep, but I have a little chuckle anyway. “Captain gave you that speech too, huh?”

His only answer is a faint smile.

“How come I’m home?” Standard operating procedure after a mission gone wrong is the med table and a cot in the lair. My room has a higher quality mattress but absolutely nothing in the way of emergency medical supplies.
“You weren’t at first,” Dad says. “You were out of sight for a few hours while Risdon had you and then while Elaine patched you up at Panoptic.”

Mom runs her hand across his shoulders. “We thought it would be better to have everyone together inside the fortified keep. Also, this way Abby knows where you are.”

My sister does not do well with people disappearing on her. “About that. Um. Wanna tell her. Whole thing. Whole big green thing.”

My parents have an entire, wordless conversation just over my head, and I don’t catch a word. Then they both nod.

“Cool. You guys can do it. I’m tired.”

“This is your secret,” Mom says. “We’ll explain our part and answer her questions, but as soon as you’re not high as a kite, she should hear it from you.”

I do not like this plan. Being anything other than high as a kite sounds excruciating. But I make a grunting, croaking noise that was supposed to be, “Ok.” They seem to understand.

Dad smooths my hair away from my forehead. “Get some rest.”

On their way out the door, Mom stops and says over her shoulder. “Oh, and Dad’s mayor.”

“Mayor-elect,” he amends.

“Oh, good,” I say vaguely. “Have fun with that.”

It’s amazing how exhausting it can be to simply stay conscious. They’re barely into the hall before I’m out like a light.

Every time I close my eyes, I drown again.

I’d be impressed with my subconscious and its endless creativity if it weren’t so fucking terrifying. I drown in riptides and crashing waves. I drown in cold clear river water with my foot trapped under a rock, locked in a glass case slowly filling with water, tied to a car battery and thrown into Starling Harbor. I drown on dry land in my own fluids.

And of course I drown with my head submerged in a chipped enamel wash tub.

“Jonny, wake up.”

Risdon’s going to shove me under. I can’t go under again. I cannot go under.

I surge up out of the dream swinging, and Mom just barely manages to deflect my fist.

“Whoa, easy there. You’re ok, baby,” she says, gripping my wrist and easing me back down. “Everything’s ok.”

“Sorry.” Jesus, did I just try to punch my mother in the face? “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’d be weird if you weren’t a little jumpy right now.” She lets go of me and busies herself adjusting the dimmer switch on the lamp, giving me a moment to calm down. “Tish wants to see you.”
“Oh. Ok.”

Mom kisses my forehead before she leaves.

“How are you feeling?” Tish says when she leans in my doorway.

There is no answer to that question that does not involve lies or expletives, so I glide right past it.

“How have a seat.”

She sits primly on the edge of the armchair, shoulders straight and ankles crossed. I’m starting to understand why she was cast as fairy royalty in that ridiculous, glitter-infested play.

“Relax, princess.”

“No, thank you.” She gives me a smile so easy and meaningless I suspect it’s reflex. I’ve seen that smile on Dad, in front of cameras or board members. “Not for a while, I don’t think.”

I feel like I should say something, but there’s no Hallmark sentiment for, *I’m sorry your father turned out to be a serial torture-murderer and then died.* I give it a shot anyway: “I’m sorry about your father.” This gets me only a wry, sad smile, so I try again with something closer to the truth. “I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

She shakes her head. “Please don’t say that. You’re the one who got hurt, and I think it might have been my fault. And your family has been frighteningly nice to me anyway. Your mom just started lending me clothes, as if it went without saying that I’d stay here, and your dad’s only explanation was, ‘You need a safe place to sleep.’”

Of course it’s not nearly that simple. But then again, yes, it is that simple.

“I thought we were going to die,” she whispers.

“Yeah, me too. ‘Specially when you took the gun.”

A shaky laugh escapes her. “This is going to sound selfish, but when the blindfold came off, and I saw who you were, the first thing I felt was relief.”

If it’s selfish, then I’m selfish too. I didn’t want her kidnapped and tied to a pipe, but once she was there, I was grateful to hear her voice. “I guess when you’re that scared, any familiar face will do.”

“Not because of that.” She lays her hand on the blankets a few inches from mine. “You know Abby feels very safe with you.”

I’ve known that since the afternoon Lyla took a bullet in our backyard and my kid sister padlocked herself around my neck with the same total trust she placed in Dad. It was one of the highest compliments anyone had ever paid me.

Tish looks me in the eyes. “I knew there had to be a reason.”

If we’re going to have a Lifetime moment, this would be the time to say: “Thank you for jumping him when you did. Saved my life.”

“Thanks for the scalpel.”

“I was aiming for Risdon.”

She laughs. “Oh my God, that is terrifying.”
Tish reaches for my hand, and I’m hit with a flash of memory. Streetlights glaring past, the rock of a car in motion, and a small hand slipping into mine. Everything’s going to be fine, said a woman’s voice. Now it says, “You know I’m not going to tell anyone about your, um, volunteer work.”

I fall asleep with her thumb stroking the back of my hand, and I don’t dream.

I was absolutely right: being anything other than high as a kite is excruciating. The first time I wake clear-headed, my upper arm throbs in time with my pulse and my lungs feel like I’ve been breathing car exhaust. The rest of me is a generalized ache.

But I am sober, and Abby is curled up against the pillows on the other side of the bed, dozing with a book open in her lap and her limp hand mashing the pages.

Let’s do this thing.

When I poke her a few times, she blinks awake frowning. “Jonny?”

“Hey, junebug.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m the Arrow.”

Well, shit. I didn’t mean to do it like that.

She narrows her eyes at me. “Excuse me?”


For a long time, Abby just stares at me. Then she closes her eyes and lets out a long, slow sigh. It takes me a few confused seconds to identify the way her shoulders sink. Relief. She’s relieved. I cannot fathom why.

“Oh, thank God, I’m not crazy,” she whispers.

Stunned, the best I can muster up is: “Thank God?”

“I thought he was you. Or you were him. But then I thought that was paranoid, because how would you hide something like that for almost two years? Mom and Dad would kill you the second they found out. But it also made a lot of sense, because you definitely know how to beat people up, and you’re always gone and won’t tell me why, and - “

“You thought I was the Arrow.”

She gives me the full measure of her big blue eyes. “He took a bullet for me. No hesitation.”

I close my mouth. Nod, just once.

“Plus he smelled very strongly of vanilla.” A smile spreads across her face. “And he really liked the f-word.”

I see my parents hovering in the doorway, so I let my head fall back on the pillow. “If you already know the big secret, then I’m going back to sleep.”
“Abigail,” Dad says, and she startles. “Why don’t you come with us? There’s something you should see.”

She looks from them to me and back a few times. “Ok,” she says faintly. But she doesn’t get up right away. Instead she leans close to me and says, just between us, “He was gone so fast that night - I mean, you were gone so fast - I hardly had a chance to say anything.” She squeezes my hand. “Thank you for saving my life.”

You won’t get any awards, Dad said. Most of the time, you won’t even get thanked.

As it turns out, every once in a while is enough.

“Anytime, junebug.”
Chapter 8

All told, I lost four days.

I had my swim lesson with Risdon on Monday night, and I don’t get out of bed until Saturday morning. When I do, my arm hangs in a sling and my legs are embarrassingly wobbly. My head pounds like the worst hangover I’ve ever had, and I break into a cold sweat at the slightest exertion.

A lot can happen in four days.

For one thing, Abel Cuvier is all over the newscasts.

If I thought the media flipped out when the Bloom story broke, it’s got nothing on this. The grisly details attract international attention, and GNN seems to think we tuned in for a horror movie instead of the morning news. The death toll is reported as anything from the sixteen it actually was to a hundred sixty. Word-on-the-street interviewers encounter nauseous shock, genuine tearful sympathy, and plenty of vocal disappointment that the doctor is too dead to be tortured to death again.

Naturally someone dug through Cuvier’s personal life and realized he had a daughter, so now Tish’s student email overflows with recommendations that she kill herself.

When McKenna Hall came to take her statement about the night of her father’s death, Dig warned the detective, “It would be best if no one else knew she was here.”

“Is Panoptic providing security for Miss Cuvier?” Hall said.

Dig steamrolled right over Tish’s honest answer and said, “Yes, she’s a client.”

“It could be awkward for you, if anyone realizes I’m here,” Tish tells Dad at the breakfast table. “My last name is poison, and you’re a very public figure. I understand if you need me to leave.”

He smiles as if she just told a knock-knock joke or made a silly pun. “If anyone finds out that you’re here, we’ll have bigger problems than the press.”

A wave of senators have reversed themselves on Kobel, and its remaining opponents are keeping very, very quiet. Every pundit with a microphone and an opinion confidently predicts the bill will pass by a landslide. The president has already promised to sign it into law.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” Aunt Thea says, glaring mutinously at the TV.

Uncle Roy looks gutted. None of us really knows what to say to them.

“I’m going to… I don’t know. I’m going to go do something not here.” Aunt Thea rolls back a few feet, spins the chair around, and heads off down the hall.

Uncle Roy sags in his chair. Abby goes to sit next to him, and she lays her hand on his back.

Deshawn Taylor shows up after breakfast, his tie askew and face pinched. “Oliver, you’re going to have to take a stance on this Cuvier thing. You know it’s going to snowball until it catches fire the week of the inauguration, so we need to take the high ground and hit it out of the park.”

If he always mixes metaphors like four year olds mix paint, I think I see why Mom does all the
final edits. He looks around for her, but this morning he’s safe. She’s lying down with a headache - the kind that requires the bedroom curtains drawn and as little noise as possible. The kind she hasn’t had in over a year.

When Taylor finally leaves an hour later, Dad comes to find me in the living room. The tiniest jerk of his head says, Follow me. He leads me to his study, and my stomach sinks.

Historically, serious talks in Dad’s study have begun with things like: What prevented you from passing this class, exactly? Are you aware that all state and municipal traffic laws do, in fact, apply to you? Was it really necessary to punch that Kappa Alpha in the head? Why does CelebCast have you on video vomiting in the middle of Nuxalk Street?

So when I close the door behind us, the first thing I say is, “Did Taylor tell you to choke up on the leash?”

“What?” Dad frowns at me in surprise. “No, nothing like that.” He sits on his desk and pats the space beside him. “Just come talk to me for a minute.” When I sit down and finish adjusting the sling, he says, “Mom mentioned you might be having some trouble sleeping.”

I sit up straight, and shame prickles over the back of my neck. If she’d been half a second slower, I might have blacked her eye.

“Nightmares are pretty normal after an experience like that. So is lashing out on a hair trigger.”

“They’re not nightmares,” I say, because this is nothing like the giant winged demon in Fantasia that gave me bad dreams when I was five.

“I know,” Dad says quietly. “You’re back there again. Or it’s like you never got out at all.”

I can’t speak, so I just nod.

“There’s no shame in it, and anyone who thinks it’s weakness can go to hell.” He lays a hand on the back of my neck. “Sometimes talking about it can help.” At the look on my face he says, “It doesn’t have to be now, and it doesn’t have to be with me or Mom. But you’ve got no shortage of people who would understand.”

A knock on the door saves me from having to reply. Milena leans her head in and says, “Mr. Queen, Charles Simpson is here to see you.”

I recognize the name as a campaign donor too generous to ignore. Dad and I get to our feet, and I’m on my way out the door when Milena ushers in a black-haired man in a well-tailored suit. Behind his desk, Dad goes perfectly still.

“Mr. Queen, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” The man nods to me. “You as well, Mr. Queen.”

In a voice I recognize - the Arrow’s voice - Dad says, “Galen.”

My double take would probably look hilarious to anyone who wasn’t me.

Galen, leader of the Black Hand, mass murderer, and profiteer of misery and misfortune, stands with his hands in his pockets, broad shoulders relaxed but squared to us. He’s about five foot seven.

Five-eight, tops.
“What do you want?” Dad says.

“To congratulate the mayor-elect. Fifty-eight percent of the vote, very impressive.” He turns his unsettling green eyes on me and says, “My sympathies on your recent alcohol poisoning.”

My blood runs cold. He knows exactly who we are. He’s known since we burned down the Port Authority. He’s chosen this moment, after nearly three years, to show up in person and make it abundantly clear that he knows.

I take a step back almost involuntarily.

In the voice people used to hear right before suffering deep tissue puncture wounds, Dad repeats: “What do you want?”

“I’ll speak plainly,” Galen says, hands slipping out of his pockets to glide along the top edge of a chair. “You did considerable damage to my organization three years ago, which did not endear you to me. Unfortunately retribution would have been expensive, conspicuous, and probably messy.”

“Very messy,” Dad agrees with a glare that could give someone an anxiety attack if he’s not careful where he points it.

“And so I have left you and yours untouched. But the moment you cost me more than I’d spend to be rid of you, that will change. Bear that in mind when I call the mayor’s office for a favor.”

“You don’t know me very well if you think I’ll find that persuasive. And Charles Simpson will be credited the full amount of his donation. I don’t want your money.”

“No, of course not,” Galen says quietly. His strange, unblinking eyes narrow, and he looks Dad up and down like a python assessing prey that might be too big to swallow. After a long moment, he says, “How would you like to see your sister walk again?”

I breathe in sharply, and not even Dad can hide his reaction to that. “Don’t talk about my sister.”

“Her most recent experimental therapy achieved some partial success, I know, but I’ve read the accessible portions of Cuvier’s work. His reformulation of the drug could let her walk unaided.”

“I’m supposed to take your word for it?”

“When his colleagues at the Chimera Institute take a closer look at his lab rats, they’ll find exactly what I did. Take their word.” When Dad says nothing, Galen’s hands slither back into his pockets. “They tell me she fought like a dancer. Do you remember how graceful she was?” His head tilts, and I half-expect a forked tongue to flicker out at us. “You could have that sister back again.”

Dad lets out a noise that is one part scoff and three parts bitter laughter. “And all it would cost me is my soul.”

“Nothing so dramatic.” Galen’s eyes flicker upward; a man of lesser composure would have rolled them. “A favor here and there. You might discuss prosecutorial discretion with your district attorney. You might reinstate certain experienced public servants, and I may refer you to reliable business contacts in the event a city contract goes up for bid.”

What, no chocolates in gold foil on your pillow? But I couldn’t snark at this man out loud if I wanted to. My mouth is too dry.

Dad takes a step toward him, fists clenching. “Get out of my house.”
“You may find there is safety in usefulness,” Galen says. “Armies in retreat will burn assets to keep them out of enemy hands.”

“Get out, or I will put you out.”

Galen pulls something white from inside his jacket, and he slides it across the desk. He’s giving Dad his card, like in an old movie. It is blank but for a twelve-digit number. “I’ll show myself to the door.”

Like hell he will. I stalk him all the way to the foyer, praying that no one - especially Tish - wanders into view.

“Thank you for your time,” Galen says when I open the door and gesture him through it.

Just before I close it, he turns to me and smiles.

“He was in our house!”

Hunched over in a straight-backed chair, Dad watches me pace in front of his desk. “I know.”

“He was in our house.”

“I saw.”

I’ve barely slept, my arm hurts, my everything else isn’t much better, and everybody wants to have heartfelt conversations with me because of how I almost died. Then the leader of an international crime syndicate strolled in our front door. I’m a second away from swiping the lamp off Dad’s desk and sending it flying across the room.

“Sit down, Jonathan.”

I make an inchoate, frustrated noise. I sit.

“We’re going to call everybody in here, and we’re going to discuss what this means. It might be better,” Dad says very quietly, “if we didn’t mention what he said about Thea.”

“What? Why? That part seems kind of important.”

He shakes his head, and suddenly I get it. Paternalistic secret-keeping used to be his thing, Mom says. He’s spent thirty years learning to trust people with the truth, but if you scare him badly enough, his first instinct is to grab control of everything in sight - especially information.

“You mean don’t mention it to her or Uncle Roy.” I grip the arms of the chair and lean forward. “Don’t you think they have a right to know that a cure is out there?”

“It’s not a cure,” he says sharply. “It’s a distant possibility of a cure, discovered by torturing human beings, and all on the word of a crime lord.” He shakes his head. “Desilva and Risdon are too dangerous for anyone to run even more risks chasing a miracle.”

“You mean don’t mention it to her or Uncle Roy.” I grip the arms of the chair and lean forward. “Don’t you think they have a right to know that a cure is out there?”

“Dad.” He’s not even technically on the team anymore. He’s crazy if he thinks he’s calling the shots. “If you don’t tell everyone the whole story, I will.”

When he turns his eyes on me instead of the floor, they exert at least as many kilopascals as your average twin turbo. I wait for the smackdown.
Instead he nods.

They seem freaked enough that I feel like my freakout has been validated, though none of them tries to destroy anything. As for the hypothetical cure:

“He and Desilva have had Cuvier’s library for what, two days?” says Mom, who still looks a little grey from the migraine.

“And you said they can’t even access the most crucial files,” Uncle Roy says.

“He wants us scared and making mistakes,” Dig says. “This sounds like a bluff to me.”

Aunt Thea catches and holds Dad’s gaze and says, “I’m glad you told us.”

My aunt knows my father really, frighteningly well.

Over the next few hours, Mom digitally spies on SCPD’s investigation and the rest of us sort through the logged evidence, trying to put a picture together. The more I see, the more the sling itches. I do some googling of my own, and when Elaine shows up to check on me in the afternoon, I make a special request.

“So, Elaine,” I start, sitting on my bed while she peels off the day-old bandage on my arm and Dig passes her a fresh one, “is there any way you can get a hold of fast-acting tissue builders?”

She and Dig exchange a glance. “Legally and ethically?” she says. “No.”

“Illegally and, um, slightly less ethically?”

She says nothing at all, and her hands start moving again. She smoothes down gauze and tape, and she helps me get the sling on without too much jostling. When I’m all set, she sits on the edge of the bed next to me. Dig turns his back to give us a modicum of privacy, busying himself repacking the medkit.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Elaine says.

I don’t like the look on her face. “Can’t do what?”

“There are excellent reasons why physicians are not supposed to treat close family members, and I just can’t anymore.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m helping you get yourself killed.”

“Lanie, what are you talking about? You’re patching me up.” I reach over and smooth a hand down her back, the way she’s often done for me. “That’s like the opposite of getting me killed.”

“No.” She shakes her head hard, and her black curls brush over my hand. “I’m taping you back together just so you can go out there and tear yourself up again.”

“You’d rather I stay torn up?”

“This is the last time,” she tells me, looking me in the eyes. “I will get you what you’re asking for, but from now on, when you’re injured you will seek the help of a qualified professional with whom you have no personal relationship.”

I’ve been broken up with a couple times in my life, and somehow this feels like a breakup - all the hollow dread and the sense of abandonment. I remove my hand from her back. “You know that’s not an option.”
“It is,” she says, and Dig looks up at the sound of tears in her voice. “Jon, it is. All you have to do is hang up the hood.”

“You can’t expect me to do that.”

She just looks at me for a long time. Then she gets to her feet and takes a step away, eyes welling up. “Rest your arm. Don’t put stress on the stitches. I strongly advise against picking up a bow for the foreseeable future.”

“Elaine.”

She shakes her head and slips out into the hall.

Dig stares at the door his daughter just disappeared through, wearing an expression I’ve seen on Dad when Abby was crying and there was nothing he could do.

“You never wanted me doing this either,” I say, more accusatory than I meant to.

“No, I didn’t.” He snaps the clasps on the medkit and stows it under my bed. When he straightens, he looks me in the eyes. “You’ve noticed Oliver calls Starling ‘his’ city?”

I shrug with just my good shoulder.

“Like he owns it,” Dig continues. “Like all this ground and everything on it belongs to him.”

“He doesn’t think that.”

Dig smiles. “Yeah, he does. He’d never put it that way, but he does.”

My hackles rise. “He has done more for this city - ”

Dig raises an eyebrow meaningfully. “Exactly.”

“I’m on a lot of painkillers, man. Talk in straight lines.”

“The way Oliver feels about Starling,” he says, shaking his head, “in another century they would have called it noblesse oblige.”

I’m still a little offended on Dad’s behalf, but I’m not willing to argue about it. “What’s your point?”

“That’s not you, Jon. You’re not righting your family’s wrongs or doing your lordly duty by your vassals. I hope like hell you’ve got a better reason than earning your dad’s approval or not feeling like a screw-up.”

“Come on, Dig. You know Starling needs the Arrow right now.”

He nods, crossing his arms. “If it never mattered who was under the hood, then why does it have to be you?”

I sigh, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “Who the hell else should it be?”

An hour later Elaine brings a syringe loaded with a clear serum, and with the same businesslike, professional calm as always, she gives me the most painful shot of my life. “Your arm and any other damaged tissue are going to hurt. A lot. It will also ramp up your metabolism and make you ravenous for protein.”
“How fast will it get me back to normal?”

“A week at the earliest.”

She wasn’t exaggerating about the side effects. Half an hour in, every nerve ending in my upper arm starts shrieking and wailing and throwing a fit. After an hour, the white-hot pain dims to a throb, and I can stop punching pillows and kicking bedposts to keep from screaming.

It makes me a surly son of a bitch, though.

“So, a few months back, when you missed half of Midsummer,” Abby says thoughtfully, cross-legged on my bed while I comb through SCPD’s logged evidence. “Were you out in the hood?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Popped a stitch.”

“A stitch on what?”

“Gunshot wound.”

“You mean you’ve been shot before?”

“Grazed.”

“How could you get shot without me noticing? Is that even the worst that’s ever… oh, God, that motorcycle accident last September wasn’t an accident. What really happened?”

Arm throbbing, head pounding, I swivel my chair away from the desk. “Abigail, if you ask me one more question, I swear to God I will smother you with a pillow.”

“Come on, Queen,” a voice says from my doorway. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Abby breaks into a smile. “Terry.”

I am not in the mood for the six feet of jackass lounging against the doorway. “Who invited you?”

“Your mother,” McGinnis says, and before I can get all fired up about it, he assures me, “No, literally, your mom. She called me while you were passed out.” He ambles over to hug Abby as he talks. “Hey, kid. Can I borrow him for a minute?”

“Be my guest,” she says as he rubs his fleece sleeve on top of her head. Her staticky hair clings to his arm, and she flushes red, smoothing it down.

I lean back in my chair. “Borrow me for what?”

“Team meeting. Now come on.”

Team Arrow has crowded into the study. When I come in, the sunlight through the windows stabs me in both eyes and gives my brains a good stir.

“So where does this leave us?” Mom is saying as I sit down.
“It leaves us playing defense, for the time being,” says Dad, sitting on the desk. Apparently he will not be absenting himself this time. A week ago, he put on a mask to come get me. I hear they’re harder to take off than you might think.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Uncle Roy says, leaning against the bookshelf.

“You and Jon are wearing matching slings,” Dig says next to me. “Defense is the only game in town.”

In a stunning display of poise and maturity, I say, “Nuh-uh.” Then I amend it to, “Pump me full of lidocaine and give me my bow.”

“Jonathan,” Mom says on a sigh, sitting in Dad’s desk chair and leaning her elbows on the shiny mahogany. “How do I explain this to you? A big, important muscle necessary to draw the bowstring back has a forty-five caliber hole in it.”

“I can work around that.”

“No, you cannot. Try to keep up here: your left arm does not work!”

I jerk my head at Dad, which was a terrible idea, because my recently-stirred brains slosh around in my skull. “He once took out a bunch of drug dealers with his arm in a sling the same night he dislocated it.”

Mom crosses her arms at me. “The fact that your father did it is not compelling evidence of its wisdom.”

“You’re benching me?”

Dig says, “I’m pretty sure those were the medical professional’s orders.”

“I will enforce them with nagging and crying if I have to,” Mom adds, which is just low. Everyone knows that Mom-tears are my kryptonite.

Dad clears his throat. “Cuvier’s research is in Desilva’s hands, and Risdon knows the Arrow’s identity. I don’t know which of those two things worries me more.”

“Risdon,” I say at once.

All eyes turn to me.

I have not been looking forward to telling them about this, but everyone in this room needs to know who we’re dealing with. “When you found me and Tish, you noticed her, uh, her shirt was open?” He nods, and I don’t know how to say the next part. “He, um... Look, I won’t repeat what he said about Abby, because I feel dirty just thinking about it, but he definitely worries me more, ok?”

Mom’s hand covers her mouth. In the long silence while Dad works through that, his expression hardly changes, but the room ices over around him.

Only Aunt Thea does not look surprised.

Dig breaks the silence at last. “You know we’re taking the son of a bitch seriously, don’t you?”

I nod.

“There’s good news,” Uncle Roy says. “Between us, we took a big chunk of the Hand’s
There’s good news,” Mom says. “Cuvier’s raw data is all in perfectly normal English and Arabic numerals, but he recorded the real work - including the drug formulation - in a cipher. All the processing power on the planet couldn’t crack it in less than, say, ten years. And here’s the best news: they only took the encryption key when they raided the lab.”

Excellent. Well done, depraved mad scientist. “Do we know where it is?”

“He used an asymmetric algorithm,” Mom says, as if we’re supposed to know what that means. “Thank God for his paranoia, because Desilva needs the decryption key if she wants to read a word of it.”

Dig narrows his eyes at her. “That’s the best news?”

“With style and class,” Mom says. “But if you want specifics, you’re going to have to wait for more intel to filter in.

In the meantime, we have to be the Queens as well as Team Arrow. The next morning when Dad gives his first press conference as mayor-elect, Mom and Abby and I are standing behind him. I didn’t sleep well, and my shoulder throbs in spite of the extra oxy I snuck to get me through this thing. With my arm out of the sling for the cameras, every movement hurts. In retrospect, no one should have let reporters anywhere near me in the mingling Q&A that follows Dad’s speech.

I answer a few questions about how proud I am, how I always believed he’d win, he’s going to kick ass at mayoring, etc. Then a reporter holds out a mike and asks me, “What big changes do you think we can expect from your father, Jon?”

Through the haze of drugs and pain and exhaustion, I hear myself say, “I believe there was an idea regarding beheading Chief Broussard on the steps of City Hall.”

Heads turn in my direction. The woman with the mike breaks into a smile of incredulous glee.

Oh, shit. I did not just say that. I did not.
The flashing lights turn on Dad in an uproar of questions. “Mr. Queen! Mr. Queen!”

He looks straight at me, and a stranger might mistake his complete stillness for calm. “There is real and justified anger out there,” he says evenly. “But it’s often expressed with extreme rhetoric and tasteless jokes. People are demanding accountability, and they’ll get it. But despite what young firebrands might think, I answer to the law, not the mob.”

I’m not sure what any of that means in terms of realpolitik, but I understand perfectly the way his thumb and forefinger rub together. His hands are itching for a bow. If he had one, there would be an extra hole in me by now.

Afterward, Deshawn Taylor walks right up to me with his mouth open to chew me out, but then he stops. “No. Wait.” He points at Dad. “He won.” He points at me. “You are not my problem anymore.” And he keeps walking.

Dad takes three steps my way and stops in his tracks. His hands come up - I assume to strangle me - but then he runs them past his temples and laces his fingers together at the nape of his neck. I think he might be taking deep breaths. When his head comes up, he takes one long look at me, turns on his heel, and leaves the scene.

Mom appears at my elbow. “I think you brought a much-needed sense of whimsy to the proceedings.”

I look down at her. “You’re not pissed?”

She shrugs. “You should have heard some of the stuff I accidentally said to the press around the time we got married.” A little crease appears between her eyebrows. “Actually, no, you shouldn’t.”

“How bad?”

“You don’t want to hear.”

“How bad?”

She sighs. “Not long after we returned from our honeymoon, a reporter from GNN asked me, ‘So, how was Europe?’ And I said,” Mom hides her face behind one hand. “I’m still sore.”

I literally flinch. “Jesus, Mom.”

“We went horseback riding! Do you know what kind of weird muscle groups you have to use for that? I got cramps in places I didn’t know I had.” She bumps her shoulder against my good arm. “Point is, you’re in good company.”

For about an hour, I feel better. Then the newscasts start to appear.

“Visibly intoxicated Jonathan Queen made a bold statement on his father’s top priorities as he begins his mayoral term…”

They play the audio clip over and over again, and by dinner half the city is cheering on the feud between Mayor-Elect Queen and Police Chief Broussard. Starling loves a good feud. It’s why our politics are far more riveting than our professional sports.

“Do you know how much more difficult you just made it for me to actually fire the bastard?” Dad asks me at home, once he’s feeling less homicidal. “He might have bowed out gracefully, but no, now I’m going to spend the next six weeks denying that this is a personal vendetta! What were
you thinking?"

“Oliver, he wasn’t thinking,” Mom says. “He was tired and stoned and in pain. Let it go.”

And he does. There is more glaring and flared nostrils and clenched jaws and general grumpery, but he lets it go.

“You don’t have to come to the rescue,” I tell Mom. “I can take my hits.”

“I know you can, but tonight you don’t have to.”

It will be a month before Dad is sworn in, but the work starts immediately. He is in and out of the house, and at home he’s deep in conference with Laurel or Detective Hall or some other official whose support he’ll need.

“Broussard’s not going to like that,” Laurel keeps saying.

“Lucky for us, we won’t have to care what he likes anymore,” McKenna Hall answers. I am ninety-nine percent certain that Dad intends to make her Police Chief the second he has the power to do so.

“Hey, Detective,” I say one afternoon when I catch her on her way into Dad’s study. I should have done this a long time ago. I should have done this at the funeral. “Captain Lance told me something about you, not long before he passed.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“He said you always understood the job. He said, ah, if anybody was going to salvage the department, it was going to be you.”

Hall swallows hard and takes a careful breath before she speaks. “Thank you for telling me.”

While they save the city, the rest of us are doing our damnedest to find Desilva’s hidey-hole.

“We’re getting nowhere,” McGinnis says as we come down the stairs of the lair. “Time for a new plan.”

“We’ll work up a list and start narrowing it down,” Mom says.

She and Elaine come up with a dozen. Uncle Roy, McGinnis, and I suit up and spend two whole nights checking them out. It is strictly recon, slow and careful. Arsenal and I only have two working arms between us, so we are not looking for a fight. We scare some stray cats, McGinnis nearly gets bitten by the biggest alley rat I’ve ever seen, and Uncle Roy nearly falls through a rusted-out fire escape.

At dawn - bupkis.

“We’re getting nowhere,” McGinnis says as we come down the stairs of the lair. “Time for a new plan.”

“Great. Can’t wait to hear it.”

He tears his cowl off and scratches his scalp where the seam has been rubbing all night. I know the feeling, dude. “There’s something that’s been on my mind. You’ll have to pitch it to Tish,
though."

He tells me what he has in mind. I'm about as enthusiastic about it as I would be about a case of strep throat, and I'm ninety-nine percent sure we're going to do it.

At home, Team Arrow crowds into Mom’s office, and Uncle Roy steals the last chair, leaving me to hover by the bookshelf like a loser. In Dad’s study I could sit on the desk, but Mom will shoo me.

“Ok, everybody’s here,” Mom says, looking us over. She nods once, decisively, and looks at me. “What’s this idea?”

“What we need is leverage.” I turn to Tish. “You have something Desilva wants.”

She pales. “You want me to offer her the decryption key.”

“Convince her it’s for sale. Then make an appointment for us to kick her ass.”

Tish shakes her head hard. “She’ll see right through me. I have every reason to hate her, and she’ll know I’m trying to cheat her.”

“Yes, she’ll see right through you, but she doesn’t know the real you.”

Aunt Thea nods along. “Play a character. Someone who would sell to her, even after everything. Someone who just wants the cash and doesn’t give a damn about the rest.”

“Aren’t you an actress?” I say. “You can pull it off.”

Next to Tish on the sofa, Dig radiates disapproval. “Desilva’s too smart for this,” he points out. “She’ll scurry back wherever she came from the second she realizes Tish isn’t going to show.”

“Yes,” Mom agrees. “So she has to show.”

Thunderclouds gather in his expression. “We can’t ask her to do that.”

“I’m sorry, and I know it’s not fair,” Mom says in all sincerity, looking right at Tish. “But we’re asking. We will have eyes on you at all times and do everything in our power to keep you safe. The second the fireworks go off, we whisk you out of there. Are you willing?”

Tish wants to say no. No is all over her face. Instead she swallows and says, “Can I have some time to think?”

“We’ll need an answer by tonight.”

She gets to her feet - “Excuse me” - and slips out of the room.

McGinnis slips in after she’s gone, just in time to hear Dig lean forward and demand, “Are you serious? You want to dangle this girl in front of a murderous drug dealing mob captain?”

“We can protect her,” I say.

“Who is we, exactly?” Aunt Thea says.

Uncle Roy blinks at her, like it should be obvious. He jerks his head at me and McGinnis. “Me and the kids.”

“Terry is the only one in fighting shape right now,” Aunt Thea points out. “Maybe we should hand this one off to SCPD.”

“My arm is nearly back to normal,” I say, hoping that by the time we do this, it’ll be true. “Fast-acting tissue builders.”

They all give me skeptical looks, but Aunt Thea turns her attention to Uncle Roy. “You can’t afford to reinjure your shoulder. You know that.”

“It’s Risdon,” he says impatiently. “Don’t ask me to sit this one out. Not this time.”

Aunt Thea might have looked less shocked and betrayed if he had slapped her. He just wound his arm back sixteen years to throw that one in her face. Mom and Dig both wince.

I don’t move. Watching married people fight is a powerful paralytic.


She pivots away from him. “Don’t touch me.”

Then she’s gone.

Awkward.

“What just happened?” says McGinnis.

“None of your business,” Uncle Roy explains.

When Abby gets home from school (which Mom insisted she attend, on the grounds that “‘My brother got kidnapped by a psycho in the course of his vigilantism’ is not an excused absence”), Dad, Uncle Roy, and I are in the kitchen. Our coffee is getting cold on the counter. Dad stands with his hand held up a few inches above eye-level. “If you can raise your arm out straight and tap my hand, I will believe you are healed up enough to go back in the field.”

I get to about shoulder height before discomfort becomes pain. I push through it, and I tap his hand. Then I rear back and land a quick left jab in his palm. It hurts so badly I see stars. “Son of a bitch!”

They both look me over with extreme skepticism.

“You ok?” Abby says, clinging to the doorjamb with strange shyness.

“If he doesn’t stubborn himself to death,” Uncle Roy says.

Dad turns to Abby. “What’s up?”

“I need to ask you guys something.”

“Of course,” Dad says, pulling out the stool next to him.

She gets comfortable and takes her time working up to her question. Finally, she tilts her head and says, "If I wanted to help, would you train me too?"

I feel an instant, visceral no. My eyes snap over to Dad and Uncle Roy, and I note with fierce
approval that they are already shaking their heads before the words are all the way out of her mouth.

With neither surprise nor disappointment, she nods acceptance. The girl who rolled her eyes every time I offered to teach her basic self defense was probably not genuinely interested in learning to fight anyway. Her real question is something else. "Why not?" she says, giving us a careful, crystalline look. "Is it because I'm a girl?"

If we're completely honest with ourselves, that probably has a little something to do with it. I know damn well that small women can be extremely dangerous; enough of them have nearly killed me, and I'm acquainted with Sara Lance. But physics is physics. Mass and muscle and bone density matter.

But that is nowhere near a hundred percent of the reason. "Because you're Abby, stupid."

She looks genuinely hurt, which is just bizarre. Dad gives me an eyebrow and he turns back to Abby.

“I know I’m not like you,” she says in a small voice.

“What do you mean, not like us?” Dad says patiently.

“I mean nobody else turned into a useless mess after Mom got taken,” she says, staring down into the basket of her intertwined fingers. “Jonny’s the one that bullet actually hit, but I’m the one who freaks out over a stupid piano lid. You’ve all been through so much more than I ever have, and you’re - you’re fine.”

Dad closes his eyes, listening to all that. When he opens them again, he says, “I was twenty-two the first time I experienced anything as traumatic as what you went through at twelve. I wasn’t fine for a long, long time afterward.”

“Fine is kind of a relative term anyway,” Uncle Roy says.

Dad tips her chin up and makes her look him full in the face. “Trust me, Abigail, you are stronger than you realize.”

The back of my neck burns just remembering it, but I think she should hear: “I nearly punched Mom in the face the other morning when she woke me up from a nightmare. That’s how totally fine I am, ok?”

“I don’t see you hyperventilating over literally nothing,” she murmurs.

I shrug. “I don’t see you skipping class, stealing beer, or taking crazy risks that make Mom cry. And that was before anything traumatic ever happened to me.”

“We won’t train you,” Dad says, “and it has nothing to do with weakness.” At her skeptical look, he continues, “Remember when Kenneth Chan broke his arm in P.E., and you passed out?”

She looks away, embarrassed. “Maybe not the most convincing example, Dad.”

But Uncle Roy nods along; he knows exactly what Dad is talking about. "You said you couldn't stop imagining what it felt like, how much it must have hurt. That’s not weakness. That’s empathy.”

“It takes courage to leave your heart that open,” Dad says, “but you do it on reflex, junebug. It's what makes you such a talented actress, and it's also what makes you the last person I'd ever want
to teach how to hurt people.”

She crosses her arms. "The only reason our family is still in one piece is because you guys are really good at hurting people."

"That’s right. We’ve got the violence covered. There is more than one way to protect your family, so find your own."

She frowns and worries her lower lip. "Basically I can afford a squishy pink heart because you guys are going to pay for it?"

If that’s how she wants to think about it - “Yeah. We are.”

Softer but no less sure, Dad says, "Gladly."

Milena makes prime rib for dinner that night, and absolutely everyone shows up. Laurel and Lyla arrive within ten minutes of each other, and Dad takes a break from whatever mayor-elects do to sit down and have a real meal.

Looking around the table, I realize we have not had all of us in one room since Christmas.

Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea seem to have made up, judging by how close they sit and the easy, comfortable way she steals food from his plate. As usual at family gatherings, Mom and Laurel make yet another good faith but ultimately doomed effort to become best girlfriends, even though each one’s jokes fall completely flat for the other.

Next to me, Tish says very little, and her posture goes rigid every time someone smartasses my father. Aunt Thea, who took care to sit next to Tish and quietly keep an eye on her all evening, leans over and whispers, “Ollie’s not going to bite anybody’s head off.”

“Oh, he would never,” I mutter. “He’s just a big cuddly Funshine Bear.”

“Nobody’s head who doesn’t deserve it,” Aunt Thea amends.

For the first time in days, I see a genuine smile on Tish’s face.

Abby and Elaine sit across from me, talking and smiling as though this were any other Sunday night family dinner. McGinnis sits on Elaine’s other side, and halfway through the French onion soup, he pulls out his cell, taps it in frustration a couple of times, and holds it out to her. “There’s something wrong with my phone.”

I want to cover my eyes. I’ve seen him do this at bars shortly before last call, and I know for a fact that it only works because he is a lucky son of a bitch who looks like that vampire actor all the sorority girls love.

“What do you mean?” Elaine says, accepting the phone uncertainly.

McGinnis says, “It doesn’t have your number in it.”

Even Abby cracks up laughing.

Elaine glances at me, as if for permission to laugh along. To my surprise, I want her to. Hell, I even want him to have her number, if it will make her eyes sparkle like that more often.

All I seem to do is make them well up.
Dig leans across the table and holds out his hand for the phone. In a tone he learned from a long-ago drill instructor, he says, “Let me fix that for you, son.”

The table erupts. At the head and foot of the table, my parents are both laughing. I see their eyes meet, move over the rest of us, and then meet again. Elbow propped on the table, Mom rests her cheek against her fist and gives Dad a nod I can’t decipher. He just grins back at her.

After dinner it’s back to work in Mom’s office, sorting through the initial coroner’s reports on the sixteen victims found in Cuvier’s lab. Mom and Aunt Thea understand the science best; Uncle Roy and I are mostly scrolling through for identifying information.

“Preliminary findings…” Aunt Thea murmurs. “Scar tissue at the L1? Regeneration of the… But that doesn’t make sense. That’s not…” She flips through some more, and then she looks up in shock at the rest of us. “Galen wasn’t lying.”

Uncle Roy regards her cautiously, but Mom sits up straight and says, “What?”

“Cuvier successfully experimented with regenerating nerve cells in the thoracic vertebrae.”

“How successfully?” Uncle Roy says slowly.

“There’s unreconstructed scarring to the surrounding tissue from a knife wound, but the severed spinal cord itself was completely recovered, as if it had never even…” She stares down at the glassfile in her hands. “He wasn’t lying.”

Just then, Tish appears in the doorway. Her face is pale, and it only looks moreso with that ruby red lipstick.

“I’ll do it,” she says in a rush before she can lose her nerve.

We look at her, and we look at each other.

“Ok, then,” Mom says. “Let’s set this thing up.”
“Ms. Desilva,” Tish says, utterly in character as the iciest ice queen that ever iced. Everyone in sight is beneath her. It’s not our fault, and she wouldn’t dream of treating us badly, but nevertheless we are just barely worthy of speaking to her. “This is Laetitia Cuvier. I have something you need.”

On speakerphone, Ana Desilva’s voice echoes through Mom’s study. “I seriously doubt that.”

“I know you can’t read the files.”

Silence. Tish holds her breath, though her imperious expression does not falter. Mom, Dig, and I exchange glances.

Then: “I’m listening.”

“The decryption key for two hundred fifty thousand,” Tish says. “You get your secret formula, and I go back to Gotham with enough to start over.”

“We still run up against the problem of maybe you’re a lying bitch.”

“What, you think I want revenge? For a man who stood there and let you count all the way down to zero? No, what I want is to get out of Starling before my last name gets me killed.”

“Poor, innocent thing,” Desilva purrs. “I’m so sorry you weren’t daddy’s princess.”

Tish opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. Mom looks up from Mary and gestures frantically. Keep going, keep her talking.

As if she hadn’t hesitated at all, Tish says, “Will you give me my asking price or not, Desilva?”

“It seems to me that you already owe me a favor,” Desilva says thoughtfully. “I showed you what daddy really was, and then I put a bullet in his brain for you. Really, you should hand over the key and say thank you.”

Tish’s expression goes flat and blank as it did when Risdon pressed his nose into her hair, and she doesn’t say a word.

Mom’s hands flutter again - come on, come on, talk - but Tish hardly looks up. She’s going to need something more to shake her free of what Desilva just said. So I give the cellphone two middle fingers and mouth as dramatically as possible, Fuck you, bitch.

Tish’s eyes get very big. “Desilva,” she says, and a laugh bubbles under her voice, “I will send you the key with flowers and a thank you note, but not for less than two-fifty.”

“One twenty-five,” Desilva says, and Mom pumps her fist in the air.
“Two hundred.”

“One seventy-five.”

Dig gives the nod, and Tish says, “Done.”

“The Everglade Bridge at one. I’ll be bringing an associate to verify the key’s authenticity.”

“And I’ll be bringing one to verify that you’re not a lying bitch.”

Desilva actually laughs at that. “You’re more fun than your father. A better negotiator, too. You know I fleeced him on the splice deal. If he hadn’t been such a - ”

I hang up. The steel in Tish’s spine finally bends, and she lets her head fall into her hands.

“Nicely done,” Mom says. “Five out of five stars.”

Tish murmurs a very wet thank you, and then her shoulders start to shake.

Mom lays a hand on her back. “Oh, honey. Are you okay?”

Not for a while, I don’t think. She meant some of what she said to Desilva, though I suspect even she isn’t sure how much. I don’t know what to say to her, so I’m glad when Dig comes to the rescue. He brushes his boots along the rug a little louder than necessary so he doesn’t startle her, and he rubs a hand up and down her arm. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

She raises her tear-streaked face to him. “Can’t leave the house.”

“Yes. But do not underestimate the size of this house.” He pulls her gently to her feet.

Mom holds out her hand. “Before you go, could you leave the key with me? I need to make a copy and a few modifications.”

With some reluctance, Tish unclasps her necklace, lets the cross fall in Mom’s palm, and coils the chain in a little pile on top.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Dig says, and herds her out into the hall.

When they’re gone, we call in Uncle Roy and McGinnis. Watchtower and the three of us combatants lay plans.

“So Dig is going to escort her,” McGinnis says while Mom pulls up a 3D map of the bridge and surrounding area. “They make the trade, the GPS on the key activates, we follow them back to their illegal pharma-factory.”

“And then we ruin their whole day,” I say with satisfaction.

Uncle Roy taps three points at street level on the hologram. “We’ll stake it out from here, here, and here. Eyes from all directions.” He casts Mom a skeptical look. “We’re not bringing her the actual decryption key, are we? Because if this goes wrong, and Desilva walks away with everything she wants, I for one am going to feel like an asshole.”

“It has to be the real deal so it’ll check out when she tests it,” Mom says. “But before you freak out!” She holds up a hand. “I’ve programmed it so that, in the event she actually does manage to slip it into the drive of Cuvier’s library, it’ll fry the thing”

Uncle Roy grins. “I knew there was a reason I loved you.”
She looks at him over the tops of her glasses. “Flatterer. Now come on. Let’s talk contingencies.”

At midnight, it’s time to roll out.

Dig and Tish will be leaving first. “You ready?” he says, pulling on his jacket.

She swallows hard and holds up a hand. “Just give me two seconds.”

Mom frowns. “Are you okay?”

Tish hurries away and ducks into the bathroom. Dig and I exchange glances. Nervous puking is always awkward. But three seconds later she emerges with a fresh coat of red lipstick. “Okay.”

This time, I understand. “War paint, huh?”

She nods. “Now we can go.”

“My, uh, colleagues and I will be nearby, but don’t look for us,” I remind Tish. “Don’t even try to whisper to us over the comm, and do not touch your ear. I cannot stress this enough. Hands off.”

“Keep it brief, and keep your distance from Desilva,” Dig says. “I’ll be right next to you the whole time.”

“If she tries to touch you at all, run,” Mom says.

“If any of her people show up other than the one we expect, run.”

“So, basically,” Tish says, “I run if she does anything except exactly what we agreed on?”

“If she does manage to grab you, go limp like you fainted,” I say. “It’s really hard to drag a human shield, even a little Smurf like you.”

Tish laughs. Nervous giggling beats the hell out of nervous puking.

When we close the door behind them, Uncle Roy and McGinnis step out of the shadows.

My aunt and sister come to the foyer to see us off. It hits me that Abby has never done this before - never watched us leave, knowing the real reason. She is looking at us like we are about to go over the top of a trench at Verdun. By unspoken agreement, we keep our goodbyes as casual as possible. McGinnis even statics up her hair again.

Uncle Roy leans down to give Aunt Thea a quick bye honey have a nice day at the office peck on the mouth. “Don’t snap a heel, Queen.”

She punches his hip. “Don’t screw up, Harper.”

In the lair Uncle Roy, McGinnis, and I gear up. Mom fires up her bank of computers, and then she pulls out a little bottle of lidocaine and a plastic-packed syringe. I reach for them, but her keepaway game is strong. She preps the syringe carefully, and as she slides the needle into my upper arm, she says to me wistfully, “Bet you can’t make it home without a scratch on you.”

“You’re on.”

She needlessly adjusts the buckle of my quiver, and I make a big show of looking aggrieved.
“Shoot straight.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She steps back, hugging herself the way Abby does when she’s nervous, and she watches the three of us disappear up the stairs.

We ride out, the Bat on Dad’s Ducati, me and Arsenal on our own bikes.

We make it to the Everglade Bridge at the stroke of one, just as Dig parks the car in one of the riverside lots. The three of us in masks take up positions where we can see without being seen. Cars pass in a steady stream, but the area is otherwise deserted; no one is jogging the bike path with their Labradoodle at this time of night.

On the opposite bank, a mid-range Honda pulls into the riverside lot. Over the comms I say, “That model was recently described as ‘the most boring sedan in the universe’ by Gearhead.com.”

The Bat sounds far too much like Wayne when he says, “Tell me you are not being a snob about the mob captain’s vehicle.”

“I don’t like her,” I grumble. “She shot me.”

“Boring cars are forgettable,” Arsenal butts in. “So are getaway cars, if you’re doing it right. Desilva is nothing if not practical.”

We watch two pairs of extremely height-mismatched people get out of their cars and start walking the railed-off pedestrian path on the bridge. The bulky man walking beside Desilva carries a duffel that looks promisingly heavy.

Over the comms we hear Dig ask Tish, “You all right?”

“I am the empress of my immediate surroundings,” she says airily. “It’s everyone else who should be nervous.”

“That’s my girl.”

The four of them meet in the middle.

“Where is my key?” Desilva says.

In a tone that really should be accompanied by a scepter wave, Tish says, “Good evening, Ms. Desilva.”

“Where is my key?”

“Where is my hundred and seventy-five thousand?”

The big guy unzips the duffel and tosses it onto the concrete between them. Tish nods at the contents and lifts the necklace over her head.

I’d sell a kidney to see the look on Desilva’s face when she says, “You were wearing that the night we took the lab.”

“I’m flattered that you noticed.”
I can’t help it. I snort into a fit of suppressed laughter. Performance of a fucking lifetime, my God.

“Arrow, shut up,” the Bat advises me.

Desilva slips the cross into a tiny handheld drive, and with a few swipes she pulls up the odd symbols Cuvier invented. They ripple in the air and reappear as ordinary text. “It’s legitimate,” she says, and she gestures at the duffel. “Your money, Miss Cuvier.”

Tish leans down, zips up the duffel, and tries to lift it. She doesn’t get very far. A hundred and seventy-five thousand in cash is heavy. Dig steps in, never looking away from Desilva and her buddy as he does it.

“Enjoy the rest of your life,” Desilva says, turning on her heel. She stalks away across the bridge, and her man follows.

“Watchtower, is the GPS active?” Arsenal says.

“I’ve got a happy little blinky light moving toward the south bank,” Mom says.

“Well, that went exactly to plan,” Dig says. “I guess whatever is going to go horribly wrong on this one is going to happen on your end."

“I appreciate that,” Arsenal says. “From the bottom of my heart. Also, eat me.”

“I think I’d like to sit down, please,” Tish says faintly.

“Come on, let’s get you home,” Dig says, and I can see her grab onto the arm he offers.

“We’re moving,” the Bat says. “Talk us in, Watchtower.”

Mom sends us north on Desilva’s tail. For twenty minutes she choreographs us perfectly on three separate but parallel routes. It would be damn near impossible for anyone to tell we were following them.

“The old Pacific Lumber sawmill upriver,” Mom says. “We almost included it on our list for recon, remember? But there were several dozen more likely places and only so much time - anyway, that has to be where they’re going.”

“Copy that,” Arsenal says.

The three of us converge on McArthur Boulevard at the Starling city limits. We’ve only ridden about a mile when three bikes roar up behind us.

The moment before it happens, I know something is very wrong.

Not soon enough to stop it.

The lead bike leans into me and tries to run me off the road. I roar ahead of him and start shouting into the comm, “We got uglies!”

Arsenal takes one calculating look over his shoulder and decelerates hard right in front of us. The bastard next to me swerves and grabs the brakes like a panicky moron. He lowsides the bike, and we hardly glance back to see what happens to him.

A man in full black leathers zooms up on the Bat, playing a dangerous game, cannoning their knees together. The Bat nearly has the upper hand, but then Black Leathers pulls out something shiny and fires it into his rear wheel. Metal screeches, and the bikes diverge. The Bat wobbles
crazily on a half-shredded tire, and though he slows the bike, he can’t get control.

So he lays her down.

Oh, shit, that’s going to be some road rash. But he rolls to his feet, so I guess the plate armor worked. “Arrow, get your ass over here!”

I pull up next to him, and he jumps up to ride bitch.

“That was my dad’s bike,” I say. “Have fun explaining.”

“I’m telling him you did it.”

We’re slower and less maneuverable with two, but we manage to catch up to Black Leathers, who’s doing his damnedest to get up on Arsenal. Of course, now the Bat’s hands are free, and he throws something that sparks off Black Leathers’ engine case. His next throw catches the guy in the neck. He wobbles and skids out.

The third bike has disappeared.

“What the hell?” the Bat shouts at the empty highway.

“Risdon,” Arsenal and I say together.

“Gotta be,” he adds.

“The traffic cams caught the last rider circling around Race Street,” Mom tells us. “I lost him on St. Stephen.”

“The city still hasn’t fixed those cameras?” I say. “Fucking Jokerz.”

“He doesn’t seem to be following you.”

“This means Desilva knows we’re coming,” the Bat says.

Arsenal leans on his throttle. “Let’s see her stop us.”

I shake my head, but I follow where he leads. I can’t resist glancing over my shoulder and asking, “Comfy back there?”

The Bat thumps me in the ribs. “Shut up.”

When we hit the old sawmill, we don’t bother with recon. We do not sneak, we do not tiptoe, and we do not ninja.

Down on the mill floor where a few rusted skeletons of machinery still stand, the Black Hand’s illegal pharma-factory gleams under the harsh glare of clamp-on work lights. Reams of plastic sheeting cover everything, and I don’t know what all the tubes and gauges and levers are for, but it looks like science to me.

We crash through the windows and land right in the middle of it.

Desilva definitely knew we were coming. Two dozen men are waiting for us, but the poor guys seem to have expected us to use the doors. Instead we’re already in the middle of their precious chemistry set, and they’re hesitant to take a shot at us and shatter their delicate equipment. Lucky
for us, we have no problem whatsoever with smashing it all to hell.

“Kill them!” Desilva bellows in an impressively big voice for such a tiny woman.

Her men pour in on us.

I put arrows in the leading pair before they can even reach us. “That’s two,” I yell to the Bat.

Within five seconds, he has put a man the floor. “One!”

I’m having slightly more trouble with the mountain of a man currently swinging a length of pipe at my head. He is faster than a man that size has any right to be. The Bat lands on his back and bears him to the ground, and I spin at the sound of feet rustling in the plastic sheeting behind me.

Dodge, jab, smack down with the leading edge of the bow. A stocky blond guy falls at my feet. “Three!”

I hear a sick crack. “Two,” the Bat says from somewhere behind me.

Another dumbass takes aim at Arsenal’s head. I put an arrow through the meat of his upper leg, and he crumples. “Four!”

After that, I’m kind of having fun, honestly.

The Bat kicks me a thug, and I finish him. I leave myself open, and he swoops over to cover me. Glass shatters around us with a deliciously expensive-sounding tinkle.

“Careful with the library!” Arsenal yells at us. That’s when I realize the thin two-by-three rectangle of Cuvier’s data library stands with pride of place in the center of the room.

“She hasn’t keyed in yet,” Mom says in our ears. “Destroy that thing, and we might never know what’s on it, so please be careful.”

“Five!” the Bat calls out.

“Five, six!” I yell right back, to the sound of extremely satisfying screams.

Above us on the rusted-out catwalk, Desilva scrambles to her feet, bleeding heavily from a gash in her arm, an arrow lodged in her body armor. She doesn’t try to rip it out, which is smart. The thing is barbed, and her little hands are not going to budge it. Instead she snaps off the shaft and darts across the catwalk. Arsenal follows close on her heels, but his heavier step punches through the rust. He screams, but it hardly slows him down. He yanks his boot up with deep scores in the leather, and he throws himself after her.

That’s when Joseph Risdon shoots me in the back. Again.

It hits like a hammer, but at least it’s at much longer range this time. I scramble behind the steel housing of a long-gone splitter, and I see Risdon standing in the open sawmill doors, face twisted in rage as he squeezes the trigger and the gun clicks empty.

He shoves it in his shoulder rig, pulls a Ka-Bar, and runs straight for me.

Oh, hell, yes, let’s do this.

We collide at full speed.

I outweigh him by at least forty pounds, and the impact knocks him on his ass. I nearly get my
knee in his throat, but he’s up and dancing out of my reach.

After that, it’s like wrestling a housecat. The thing looks so friendly, and it’s not even that big - right up until the bloodcurdling yowl when it becomes a fifteen pound hellbeast clawing at your eyes. I’m taller, heavier, and my technique kicks his technique’s ass. But he’s meaner. Sixteen years in prison, and now he fights so dirty - fast, brutal, efficient - that he nearly gets his knife in my neck a couple of times.

A kick to the gut sends me reeling, and I realize I can’t take him. At least not alive.

I know damn well how much body armor he’s wearing, so when I backpedal and nock an arrow, I don’t aim for center mass.

His face isn’t wearing armor.

“Arrow, down!” the Bat yells.

I hit the deck just in time to not get my head torn off by a shotgun blast. I hear the Bat let out a frankly terrifying roar, and then comes the musical sound of a man getting his ass beat with the butt of his own sawed-off.

Risdon is already on me, that big Ka-Bar flashing in the low light. He brings it down on my wounded shoulder, tearing right through the reinforced leather, and he rips open Elaine’s careful stitching and all the newly knit pink flesh from the tissue-builder. I scream right in his face and come up with the little leaf-bladed knife in my hand. He stumbles backward, then takes off running.

I launch myself after him, leaping over moaning or passed-out henchmen - henchpersons, I guess, I see at least one woman - boots crunching in the tiny glass shards of the Black Hand’s pharmaceutical hopes and dreams.

An angry shriek draws my eyes.

Desilva surveys the scene from the doors of the sawmill. I see the moment when she realizes she has lost. She is Black Hand; I should have guessed what she would do next. It is, after all, a custom of war to burn assets in retreat to keep them out of enemy hands. She rips the key from her neck and crunches it under her boot.

Then she draws a little snub nosed revolver and takes aim at the library.

Arsenal takes a beautiful, acrobatic leap from the catwalk fifteen feet over my head, lands like a panther, and straightens to full height between Desilva and the library. Her first shot slams into his body armor, and he stumbles back but keeps his feet. Then in one seamless motion, his arms come up, and his first arrow sends her gun clattering to the floor. His next skewers her forearm and pins her, screaming, to the wooden support beam behind her.

Fifteen yards away, Risdon ducks down, tears something out from under an unconscious thug, and comes up in his well-trained shooter’s stance. I reach back for an arrow, but pain jolts through my entire upper body, and I can’t push through it.

I hear the shot. I see Arsenal’s hood flutter, as if disturbed by a sudden gust of wind.

The Bat falls on Risdon from the stair railing above.

Arsenal falls to his knees, and something dark creeps out across the floor in a messy circle around him.
Without a second glance for Risdon and the Bat, I hit my panic button and run straight for him. “Arsenal. Arsenal!”

On my last two steps, my boots splash in the puddle. Then I hit my knees next to him, and he sags sideways onto my shoulder. The entire front of his leathers glistens darkly, and the tang of iron hangs in the air.

“I’ve got you,” I mutter, leaning him back.

In the wash of red drenching his neck, a gash just beneath his jaw gapes open. Panoptic’s training takes over, and I immediately lay him down and try to stop the bleeding with my hands.

Slow and slurred, he tries to talk, and the only word I can make out is Thea.

“Hey, it’s going to be fine. You saved the thing, and she’s going to get her miracle. Everything’s going to be fine.”

He makes no answer.

“Arsenal. Arsenal!”

“Son of a bitch!” and I look up to see Risdon scrambling away from the Bat, who chases him for a half dozen agonized steps on a badly fucked-up knee. Then he gives it up and turns back to us. “Arsenal? Hey, Arsenal!”

I shake him, just a little. “Uncle Roy?”

His eyes stare blankly at me from behind the mask.

McGinnis half-hops, half-limps over to us as fast as he can, but his pace slows as he gets closer. “Oh, God,” he says quietly, and his boots splash in the blood like mine did.

“Honey,” Mom says in my ear. She is already crying. “What happened?”

I can’t answer her. I can think of no string of syllables that would explain this.

McGinnis squeezes my good shoulder and taps his comm. “Watchtower,” he says in a steady, measured voice. He starts hop-limping away from me. “We have Desilva and the library. Yes, ma’am. Yes.”

While he hobbles out of earshot to explain, I kneel in the puddle of blood for what feels like a long time. Maybe it’s a minute. Maybe it’s half an hour. Warmth soaks into my socks and the lining of my leathers. I keep my hands pressed to Uncle Roy’s neck. In time I hear boots on the filthy concrete. A big hand grips my shoulder. I look up into Dig and Lyla’s stony expressions.

“Go with Lyla,” Dig tells me. “I’ll take care of him.”

I shake my head. I can’t move from this spot. “I have to keep pressure.”

Lyla crouches down next to me, her eyes soft as I’ve ever seen them. “Come on.” She pries my blood-slick hands away, and she pulls me to my feet. “Come with me.”

“It’s all right,” Dig tells me. “I’ve got this.”

“I can’t - I can’t just leave him.”
Dig’s mouth presses into a tense line. “I said I’ve got this.”

Lyla leads me away, and my boots squelch like I’ve been jumping in rain puddles.

The next few hours don’t even feel real.

I follow Lyla down to the lair, and Mom jumps up from her workstation and hurries to meet me at the bottom of the stairs. I shy away from her outstretched arms and shake my head. My leathers are drenched in blood.

She looks me over, and her face crumples. “Ok,” she says through tears. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

With as much gentleness as if I were a preschooler with a skinned knee, Mom peels off my bloody jacket, and she carefully cleans, re-stitches, and bandages the ugly fissure in my arm. When she has finished wrapping it in plastic so I can shower, she looks over her work and says, “I used to be able to to kiss it better.”

“I’m not five anymore, Mom.”

“It was simpler when you were five. Back then all it took to keep you safe was to let you snuggle under the covers with us during a thunderstorm.”

“I’m going to get in the shower.”

She steps quietly out of my way. “Ok.”

I sit on the cold tiles for a long time, letting the water beat down on my shoulders. I don’t cry, and I don’t frantically scrub my uncle’s blood off of me. My hands don’t even shake. I just sit under the spray, watching the water run red and then pink and then clear.

“It was reported to SCPD, and they’re calling it a mugging gone bad,” Lyla tells me after I’ve changed into clean clothes. “John made sure he was not found in his leathers.”

All these details and logistics. A world ended, but we have to be worried about what he was wearing.

“Desilva is in FBI custody,” Mom says. “Tonight must have completely changed the game, because they’re charging her with enough to put her in prison for a total of two hundred and fifty-six years.”

“Oh.”

She tilts her head at me, and she decides that what I need right now is busywork: “Would you unload Cuvier’s library from Lyla’s car?”

I carry the damn thing downstairs. The computer Uncle Roy took a bullet for. It better have that miracle on it. It fucking better.

I turn to Mom and Lyla. “What about Aunt Thea?”

They look at each other, because what kind of dumb, vague question is that? What about her?

“She’s asleep,” Lyla says at last. “Elaine gave her something to help.”
I’m afraid of the moment when I’ll have to face her. Afraid I’ll have to tell her that I let Risdon get away from me, and that’s why her husband is dead.

I’m afraid she already knows.

Mom turns on the library, slips in a copy of the decryption key, and lets it run. “When it’s done, we’ll send the contents to the top one hundred med schools in the world, see what they make of it. I think he would have liked that idea.”

Are we talking about what Uncle Roy would have wanted, about his legacy, the way you talk about dead people? Are we doing that? Because I’m fairly certain tonight didn’t really happen. Fairly certain the world will snap back into its proper shape any second now, and Uncle Roy will come down the stairs two at a time, asking who kicked our puppy.

An hour passes. It doesn’t. He doesn’t.

Then Mom comes to sit next to me on the sofa, and she tugs on my arm.

Our size discrepancy tilted in my favor when I was about fifteen, and these days I’m eight inches taller and sixty pounds heavier than she is. I don’t fit on her shoulder anymore, but sometimes she likes to pretend otherwise. As a rule, I let her.

This time I pull away.

The decryption key finishes its work, and Mom transmits the files, like Uncle Roy would have wanted.

It is dawn when we slip quietly into the foyer at home. Through the arched doorway into the living room I see McGinnis perched on the edge of the sofa with his injured leg held out. Next to him, Elaine twists around to stare at us.

Abby comes down the stairs, Tish trailing behind her. At ground level, Abby’s eyes lock on me, and I’m pretty sure she’s about to come over here and hug me. Involuntarily I shift my weight onto my back foot.

She makes it half a step before Tish catches her by the wrist.

Dad and Dig emerge from the study, ashen-faced.

The night Dad hurried up the Cuviers’ front walk to meet Abby coming down the porch steps, she walked straight into his arms with no reservations whatsoever. I used to be able to do that. Some seventh grade disappointment, some junior tournament injury, and his hand on the back of my neck would scoop me right into a hug. Mom was always softer and cuddlier - both herself and her colorful clothes - but Dad was safe.

If I walked into his arms right now, I am certain he would let me. I am also certain I would lose it in front of my entire family.

McGinnis gets to his feet, hiding the limp as best he can, just barely leaning on Elaine all the way to the foyer. Abby sidles up under Dig’s arm, and he squeezes her close. Mom slips an arm around Lyla, who reaches for Elaine’s hand.

Slowly, silently, everyone gathers in a rough circle.

There is nothing to say.
Chapter 10

The days blur together. I walk around with my arm in a sling once again, feeling slightly disconnected from reality and generally useless.

Aunt Thea hardly says a word to anyone, and what she does say is mostly angry. When McGinnis tells her that Uncle Roy died safeguarding Cuvier’s research in the hopes that she might walk again, she snaps, “I don’t want to walk. I want my husband.”

Milena makes too much food, as she always does in response to trauma. That first night without him, we sit at the dining room table doing normal, alive-people things like chew, swallow, and burn our mouths on the lentil soup.

Someone’s spoon splashes into their bowl. I hear the sound of my boots in Uncle Roy’s blood.

I excuse myself.

Dad turns into a robotic stranger, and if Tish found him slightly intimidating before, now she sits up straighter every time he walks into a room. Not even Abby can soften him with her upturned smile, her hand smoothing across his shoulders, or her head nuzzling up under his arm. He doesn’t ignore her or brush her off, but his hugs and reassurances and even the way he says “junebug” are all mechanical.

Abby has always taken for granted her power to stroll into the impregnable fortress that is Oliver Queen, and she is baffled and heartbroken that this time she’s locked outside with the rest of us. “It’s like he doesn’t feel anything,” she says, slumped between Mom and Tish on the sofa one night.

“That’s not true, baby,” Mom says. “I promise you that’s not true.”

“Then how can he be so cold?”

“He lost his brother,” I say, looking up from the police report on my glassbook, and I know from Mom’s expression that this is indeed the right label. Brother-in-law is more accurate but less true. “What do you want from him, Abigail?”

“I don’t know,” she murmurs. “I want him to be here with us. Just here.”

For the sixth or seventh time, Tish says, “I know this is the worst possible time to have a houseguest.” Her fingers twist together nervously in her lap. “Maybe it’s time for me to - ”

“No. It isn’t,” I say impatiently, because Jesus Christ, sixth or seventh time. “Not as long as Risdon is still out there. Your dad’s house? The press will stake it out the second you go back. The dorm? At least three hundred people have access to that building. So no.”

Tish’s hands go still in her lap, and she says pointedly, “I appreciate your concern.”

I look away long enough to take a breath and very deliberately unknit my shoulders. If I’m going to let all this slow-simmering anger boil over on an innocent bystander, I could at least have the decency to pick somebody who can punch me in the face. I meet Tish’s eyes again. “Sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s all right,” she says softly.
“What he means,” Mom says, looking at me over the tops of her glasses, “is that we’d worry if you left, and we already have enough to worry about.”

“Thank you,” Tish murmurs.

Aunt Thea finalizes the funeral plans, and the day before we bury Uncle Roy, Mom, Dad, and I accompany her to the funeral home for the viewing. His mouth looks strange and wrong, and there is very obvious makeup giving him creepily life-like color.

“Clean his face,” Aunt Thea tells the funeral director, who explains that some amount of cosmetics is necessary.

“We’ll make it so subtle as to be unnoticeable.”

She nods once. The second her eyes brim, she storms away from us.

Dad stares down into the casket, and Mom stares up at Dad.

“No one’s ever going to know who he really was,” I say. “He died saving research that will help millions of people, but it’s going down as a mugging.”

“The people who loved him knew exactly who he was,” Dad says, and they’re the right words, but the wrong tone. It’s like he’s reading from a script.

“I shouldn’t have told him about the cure. This is exactly what you thought would happen.”

Dad shakes his head. “He deserved the truth regardless.”

I look down at Uncle Roy’s clasped hands, arranged neatly over the buttons of the suit he wore at his and Aunt Thea’s twentieth wedding anniversary back in March. She designed and made it for him herself. The high collar hides the gash in his neck remarkably well.

“How would you have explained it,” I ask slowly, “if Risdon had drowned me that night?”

Before they can answer, a voice behind us says, “My condolences.”

Galen.

I’m too angry to be afraid. I step toward him, but Dad grabs my shoulder right at the strap of the sling.

Galen’s head tilts sinuously on his neck. “Have you considered my offer?”

“Go to hell,” Dad says.

“I would remind you,” Galen says, lip curling, “how many media outlets would be happy to publicize your son’s civic improvement project.”

“And risk a libel suit when their claims can’t be substantiated?”

“If you don’t think I can furnish evidence - “

“No,” Mom says. “You can’t. At least none that anyone will believe, when I’m through with you.”

“You are going to leave us in peace,” Dad says. “And you are going to pull your operation out of Starling altogether.”
For the first time, I find out what Galen’s laugh sounds like. It’s dry and crackling, like something slithering through dead leaves. “Out of the goodness of my tender heart?”

“The last time you threatened this family, we shut down your trafficking operation, burned your headquarters to the ground, and handed a dozen of your highest-ranking members to law enforcement.” Dad looks at me and gestures between us. “We didn’t want to, you understand. After we got what we came for, we were ready to go home. But you really pissed off my wife.”

I thought I’d seen every variation of Mom’s smile, but this icy cold one is new. “A few nights ago we smashed the last profitable thing you had going in this city. Imagine what we’ll do to you if we ever make you a priority.”

Galen steps into her space, eerie green eyes fixed on hers. “We are the Black Hand, and we burn behind us what we cannot use. The conference in two days is nothing if not a powder keg. How difficult do you think it would be for me to supply a spark?”

“Get out,” Dad says quietly.

Galen nods sarcastic respect to Uncle Roy’s casket, and he leaves.

Sara’s flight gets in late that night, and without a word I grab my keys and head for the back door. The ride to the airport means at least twenty minutes out of the house, doing something halfway useful.

“There are plenty of people with two working arms who could pick her up,” Mom calls after me. I don’t look back. I can drive one-handed just fine, thank you.

As the door closes behind me, I hear her exasperated, “Jonathan!”

At arrivals, Sara stands on the curb in her trenchcoat with her rollaway bag at her feet. In the darkness, she makes nearly the same exact picture as the last time I picked her up. Maybe that’s why when she gets in my car, the first thing I say to her is, “Does someone always have to die for us to see you?”

Her eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

“No, really, who should I get killed next?”

Sara seriously considers slapping me. Her hand rises and everything. But instead she says, “Get out from behind the wheel. You shouldn’t be driving with that arm anyway.”

She takes me to Panoptic and leads me down to the lair, where I have not set foot for days. She slips on strike mitts, which I have not touched for weeks, and she says, “You want to lash out?” She holds them up. “Lash out.”

“No,” I say flatly.

She gives me a look eerily reminiscent of Dad.

“I’m not in the mood for this.”

She smacks me in the head.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m pounding my free hand into the leather of the mitt.
Sara absorbs the blow expertly. “I know you can hit me harder than that.”

Damn right I can. I tear off the sling, and I land frantic punches.

“I barely felt that!” she yells at me.

Liar. I’m forcing her back toward the wall.

“Come on. Hit me. Hit me as hard as it hurts.”

Then the shredding pain in my arm is too much, and her infuriating calm is too much, and fuck this noise. I’m done.

When I collapse to the floor, Sara follows me down. She sits cross-legged while I fight through big, ugly, angry sobs. She doesn’t look grossed out when I snort back snot before it can drip everywhere. Then she waits patiently while I catch my breath, combing my hair away from my sweaty face. All the while, she murmurs to me in Arabic. It’s half-song, half-poetry, and I have no idea what it means.

“If you could not tell anyone about this,” I croak after a while, staring at the ceiling, “that would be awesome.”

She smiles, sending a tear sliding down her cheek. Eyes on the bank of glass at the other end of the lair, she keeps running her fingers through my hair.

The Sunday of the funeral dawns bright and gorgeous.

All fifty-six of Panoptic’s employees come to the service. This is not the first time they have lost a colleague, and they have a very specific ritual. “Hey, kid,” Darius Jones tells me in the lobby, “we’re going to Marky’s for a few rounds afterward. Tell some stories, see him off right. Ramirez can give you a ride.”

“Thanks, man,” I say in all sincerity. “But - family, you know?”

“Of course. I just wanted you to know you were welcome.”

A dozen tattooed young men show up, looking extremely uncomfortable in their cheap suits. I’ve never seen them before in my life, but Aunt Thea greets them by name and asks after the mentoring program at Bridge House. They treat her like the dowager empress of some lost civilization, and to a man they claim that Roy Harper saved their lives. “I’d be in the Heights or in the ground, if it wasn’t for him.”

There’s your immortality right there, the Captain might have said.

Mom cries unashamedly while Dig gives the eulogy, and Aunt Thea glares at the flower arrangements. Elaine and Abby sit on either side of me, arms looped through mine.

Mom, Dad, Dig, Lyla, Sara, and I stand as pallbearers, and we carry my uncle out into the May sunshine.

If it weren’t for the police escort, we’d never have made it from the funeral home to the cemetery through the crowds of protesters. Signs with Cuvier’s name misspelled. Justice for the Sixteen. Vote Yes on Kobel. And everywhere, the stylized bow and arrow.

“Powder keg,” I mutter.
“It won’t come to that,” Dad says.

We bury Uncle Roy, and all I can think is that there’s no particular reason it shouldn’t be me in his place. If one night I screw up or guess wrong or roll snake eyes, how long before everything I’ve done is undone? How long before the cartels and gangs and corrupt officials take back every inch of ground we’ve gained? Regardless, no one would ever know. What could anyone even say about me at my funeral? Well, he was kind of an asshole kid, halfway cleaned up his act, won some MMA tournaments, and oh I think his family liked him.

I know I’m not invincible. More than once I have felt the complete, clear-eyed certainty that I was about to die. But then I didn’t, and that was the end of it. Moving on. Walk it off.

Watching my family lay flowers on Uncle Roy’s casket, a chill fear creeps into my bones. It’s not the heart-spiking terror of, holy shit that’s a gun in my face. It is the slow dread of, oh God what would that do to my little sister?

The second we get home for the reception, I go upstairs to tear off my tie so I can breathe.

When I look up into my mirror, McGinnis’ reflection meets my eyes. He stands in my doorway, looking more sincere than I’ve ever seen him. “Are you ok?”

I turn to face him. “What do you want me to say?”

He looks me over, then says very deliberately: “I heard a rumor that you got your uncle killed.”

I freeze where I stand.

“Which I thought was strange,” McGinnis says, slipping his hands into his pockets and ambling into the room, “because I was ninety-nine percent sure that a convicted murderer named Joe Risdon pulled the trigger. But some asshole is going around telling people that it was your fault.”

“Shut up, McGinnis.”

“Come to think of it, that asshole looked a lot like you.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

But McGinnis comes right up to me. “I was there. I saw what happened. It was not your fault.”

“I had the shot,” I say thickly. “All I had to do was take it, and he’d be here.”

“Sometimes you do everything right, and it goes to hell anyway.”

One of these days, people are going to stop quoting Quentin Lance at me. I look at the floor.

“Hey.” He gives my shoulder a shake. “I’m really sorry, Jon.”

“You,” I say slowly, “are a Nimitz class douche canoe.”

“I know,” he says, and he starts herding me toward the door. “Come on downstairs. Milena can’t lift the iced tea dispenser by herself.”

Not an hour into the reception, Deshawn Taylor arrives and says to Dad, “So sorry for your loss, turn on the newscasts.”

A fire is raging across the street from the Convention Center. People are throwing trash cans through storefront windows.
“McKenna Hall wants your help,” Taylor says. “I hate to do this to you, but it’s all hands on deck right now.”

Dad looks to Aunt Thea.

Fear brings out the best in my aunt - all her fire and fierce strength - but pain shows her at her worst. “Go,” she tells him. “I guess I should be grateful you came to the service this time.”

I don’t know what that means, but it lays him open to the bone. In a voice I’ve never heard before, he says, “I am so sorry, Thea.”

Then he leaves with Taylor.

At nightfall, Detective Hall calls the Arrow.

“We could use your help out here tonight.”

Standing in the corner of my living room, watching Mom and Aunt Thea bid goodbye to the Lance sisters, I sigh. “What am I going to do that eight hundred cops in riot gear can’t?”

“Protesters have been putting the Arrow’s silhouette on their signs. You know the one,” she says. “From where I stand now, I count four of those and another six arrowhead posters.”

“They think I’m on their side, and you want me to, what - prove them wrong?”

“Are you?”

I turn my back to the room. “What?”

“Do you want Starling to burn over this?”

If she had asked me a week ago, I would have rolled my eyes at the question. Tonight, the thought crosses my mind that maybe this is what it will take for things to finally change. Thirty years of the Arrow, and maybe the only thing that will leave a lasting mark is to burn the godforsaken city to the ground.

But I have no idea what to build in its place.

Risdon is out there somewhere, and now that Desilva is in custody, he may very well be free to do whatever he wants. Likely what he wants is to hunt me down and finish what he started that night with the washbucket. If he has half a brain, he’ll expect me to be on the rooftops above the protests tonight.

Cold wraps around my insides, but so does a fierce willingness. Let him come. I want to look him in the eyes while he dies.

“I’ll be out there,” I tell Hall.

I go to the lair alone.

Someone - probably Lyla - cleaned the blood from my leathers and replaced them on the mannequin. The display case opposite them stands empty. Arsenal’s gear has been moved to the bank of glass at the far end of the room, sealed in lovingly with Dad’s old gear and Mom’s old computers. I don’t know who did it, but I feel a pang of resentment. They’re already putting him away.
I suit up in the locker room.

On my way out, I meet my parents coming down the stairs. Dad physically blocks my path. “Not tonight.”

“City’s burning,” I say. “Get out of my way.”

Dad shakes his head. "I never should have put a bow in your hands."

“Why?” I know it’s cruel, but I say it anyway: “Because I got Uncle Roy killed?”

My father so rarely raises his voice, Mom and I both jump when he yells, “Because it could just as easily have been you bleeding out on the concrete!”

Silence. I match Dad’s glare dagger for dagger.

Mom steps up to me. “You’re in no shape to go out there.”

“My arm is fine.” It’s about fifty percent true.

“I don’t believe you, but even if it were.” She lays her hand on my chest, just left of center. “You’re in no shape.”

“I have a job to do.”

“Risdon is off his leash somewhere out there,” Dad says, “and he’s going to be hunting for you.”

“Good. Saves me the trouble of finding him.”

“He’ll kill you, Jonathan,” Mom says.

“Your faith in me is touching.”

“You were planning to go out alone, no one on Watchtower, without even telling anyone you’d be hooded up. You know your head is not screwed on straight right now. Risdon has backup, two working arms, and no restraint whatsoever. He will kill you.”

The possibility has never felt more real or immediate. I wonder if some mortician will make me up like a clown.

I could do what Mom says. I could sit here on my ass, letting the man who did this to my family run free. Hoping SCPD takes him out before he does too much collateral damage. I will never be able to look Aunt Thea in the face again, and I will probably have issues with mirrors too.

They say a hero is a man who is afraid to run away.

“I’m going out there.”

“I won’t let you.”

“How are you going to stop me?”

Her jaw sets. Dad takes a step toward me, and all three of us know that if he decides I am not leaving this room, that is how it will happen whether I like it or not.

I’m going about this the wrong way. All wrong. So I look Mom in the eyes. “On the way home from the Port Authority,” I say quietly, "you asked Dad why he brought your reckless teenager as
backup.”

Her lips part in surprise. “You were awake to hear that?”

I turn to Dad. “Do you remember what you said?”

He looks about ready to strangle someone. “I said that I trusted you to make the right call when it counted.”

“Do you trust me or not? Am I the Arrow, or am I just playing dress-up?”

Mom reaches for my hands, and in that low voice she says, “I’m asking you please not to go.”

The best I can give her is: “Mom, I’ll come back.”

Dad looks up sharply, but Mom hardly moves. Only her expression changes; her eyes fill with tears exactly the way they did the night I took that first bullet from Risdon. It’s obvious she doesn’t expect me to comply when she whispers, “Promise me.”

I can’t do that, so I squeeze her hands, and I bend my head so she can kiss it.

Dad lets me walk right past him to the stairs.

From the roof of the overhang at the entrance to the Convention Center, I survey the wreck of the day. Firefighters work to damp down the last few smolders of the burnt-out cars parked up and down Duwamish. Glass glitters in the street, and yellow tape cornered with colored synth-flares marks off restricted areas.

A crowd of thousands mills around the convention center, working up to a chant or a straggling march every so often. Len Broussard’s cops patrol the area in humvees and tactical gear, looking more like an occupying army than a civilian peacekeeping force. They’re so tense you could use them for mouse traps. One poke and snap.

Dad moves among the protesters forty feet below me, talking quietly to people with McKenna Hall trailing not far behind.

I tap on the lenses built into my mask, and I zoom in to scan the crowd. For now, things are more or less peaceful, but I snap to alert every time I see someone reach for their belt or get pissy with a police officer.

“Two armed robberies coming over the police scanners,” Mom says in my ear. “Somebody’s making the most of the chaos.”

“I’ll take care of one,” another voice offers. Sara. “Can the Bat handle the other?”

“I’m insulted that you feel the need to ask,” the Bat answers.

“Isn’t your leg fucked up?” I ask him.

“Didn’t you reopen your gunshot wound?”

“You keep an eye on the crowd, Arrow,” the Canary says.

I guess I’ve got backup. “Maintaining position.”
“Oh, God,” Mom says, and I can picture her wide eyes. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” all three of us demand.

“There’s been a shooting at City Hall.” I hear her fingers flying over Mary’s keyboard. “Mayor Lee was struck in the chest by a high-powered rifle at long range.”

“Is he alive?”

“They’re rushing him to Starling General now.”

My jaw sets. “Galen.”

“Almost definitely Galen,” Mom says grimly. “If he can’t have his toy, he’s going to smash it so no one else can play with it.”

“What are the odds Risdon was the trigger man?”

“It would explain why he’s not out here taking potshots at you,” the Bat says.

I can see the moment the news hits the crowd, and that’s when it happens. What, precisely, it is, I can’t really say. People will probably argue forever about who started it and how, and by the time it catches my eye, it’s already a brawl. Bellowed words rise up, and right up on the line of cops below me, one officer has a man on the ground. Other protesters are trying to drag him off, and more cops are trying to drag them off in a messy round of swinging fists and truncheons.

Powder keg. Boom.

The panicky anger sweeps through the crowd as if by electric current, setting people yelling and shoving and crashing against riot shields in waves. Somewhere down in that tangle of bodies is my father.

I have to do something, fast, but I have no clue what. What the hell kind of help does Hall expect me to be with this? Every weapon I have hanging off my back or my belt will only make this worse.

But she didn’t summon the Arrow because he is a weapon. She summoned him because he is a symbol.

“Watchtower, can you light me up and amplify my voice as loud as possible?”

“Yes, of course.” Apprehensively, Mom says, “What are you going to do?”

“Do it now.”

The floodlights of six different mobile SCPD units swing over and converge on me blindingly, and there is a squeal of feedback from their giant speakers.

“The floor’s all yours,” Mom says.

Great. Perfect. Now, how to address two or three thousand people? Hey, you? But the words come.

“Starling!” I bellow, and I hear my digitally altered voice echo across the plaza. “STARLING!”

I’ve never had this many eyes on me, or at least not live and in person. Murmurs wisp through the crowd like wind through tall grass - *Arrow, that’s the Arrow, oh my God, it’s the freaking Arrow,*
are you kidding me, oh my God.

Dad and Uncle Roy’s years in the hood have given it a power I never could have achieved on my own. I have their attention.

“How many of you are From Here, born and raised?”

There is a nonplussed silence, and then someone cheers. It catches, sweeping through more than half the crowd.

“So am I, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Another cheer.

“When this is over, the conference speakers and half of these protesters are going home. Those of us who have to stay and pick up the pieces - what kind of city do you want?”

There are yells and murmurs, but I can’t even see past the lights glaring in my eyes.

“No, don’t tell me. Show me.”

If I’ve misjudged this, they might take it as a call to start kicking the shit out of people. For a few tense seconds, I listen to the rising tide of voices. Wait and see.

Then, slowly, the floodlights dim, and I watch the crowd below me retreat behind the police line, forming orderly groups, allowing cops and paramedics to move among them. I catch sight of my dad helping a woman to her feet. He looks up at me and nods.

“That’s what I want too,” I say, still massively amplified. “Thank you.” Feeling a little cheeky while I’ve got the big mike, I hold out a stern finger and add, “Now don’t make me come down there.”

There’s a ripple of surprised laughter, including Mom’s over the comm. Then the speakers whine with feedback again, and I melt back into the shadows.

“Arrow 3.0, stand-up comedian,” the Canary says.

“Did you guys grab your armed robbers?”

“So many insulting questions tonight,” the Bat gripes.

“All hands on deck here at the Convention Center,” I say. “Find a rooftop, keep an eye out.”

We don’t sleep. Until daybreak we patrol the area, breaking up fights before they can escalate. People are almost as surprised to see the Canary again after all these years as they are to see the Bat three thousand miles from his home turf. More than once, that moment of slackjawed shock gives us enough time to disarm them and send them to separate corners to think about what they’ve done.

The first time I get within spitting distance of three SCPD officers, they draw on me reflexively. Against every instinct I have, I keep the bow pointed at the ground. “Go ahead,” I tell them. “But if you kill me, who’s going to do your job for you?”

Trent Parsons squints at me in the glare of the mobile unit’s floodlights. “Has anyone told you that you are much douchier than the other Hoods?”
“If either of them had caught you harassing mayoral candidates, you’d still be in traction right now.”

His partners stare at him, and when he shifts his weight guiltily, their shock turns to disgust.

Parsons lowers his weapon. “There’s a fire on Philpott and Third. Could use some help with evac.”

I nod, and I fire a grappling hook to the nearest rooftop to see for myself.

The Bat and I are dropping the last two evacuees off with EMS, both of us trying to get our coughing under control, when the news comes through: Mayor Lee is dead.

The Canary sighs heavily, leaning on her staff. “It’s dawn,” she says, nodding at the first reddish streaks in the sky. “Shift’s over, boys.”

At home, I slip in the back door just before six o’clock, feeling like I might collapse on the floor and sleep for days before I ever make it to a bed.

Tish and Abby sit at the kitchen island, still in yesterday’s somber black dresses, makeup smudged under their eyes. Abby’s head whips around at the creak of the door, and the second her eyes land on me, she shoots me a glare.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

So many people have disapproved of me lately, I don’t bother trying to guess what I did this time. “Do what?”

She hugs herself, and the anger melts into hurt. “Disappear.”

Guilt twinges in my gut. I’ve never had to check in with her before, and it didn’t even occur to me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

“We couldn’t find you, and then we realized where you must have gone, and you went alone, and your arm is still messed up, and you just got finished telling us that man is still out there.” She takes a deep, shaky breath. “You can’t just disappear.”

“I won’t do it again.”

She nods, and she gets to her feet. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’m going to bed.”

I watch her out of sight, and Tish quietly gathers up the plate and mug that she left on the counter.

“Hey, um. How bad?”

Tish turns to me with more sympathy than I probably deserve. “She was pretty upset.”

“Like, piano lid upset?”

She winces. “I was worried for a minute, but no.”

I pull out a stool, thunk down onto it, and lean my elbows on the counter. “God damn it.”

Tish starts rummaging in cabinets, pulling out a saucepan, vanilla, and a bear-shaped honey bottle. “We watched you on the news. You did some really incredible things last night, you know that?”

I make a grumpy noise in reply. Then I fold my arms and rest my forehead on them. I am so far
beyond tired that I can’t even drift off while I listen to the homey little noises of her doing kitchen-y things. The pilot light on the stove clicks, and the flames jump up with a little whumph.

A couple minutes later, Tish comes up to me so quietly that it’s her perfume that tips me off to her presence. She smells expensive, like Mom does. “Here,” she says, and ceramic clinks down on the granite.

I raise my head. A mug of something creamy and frothy steams next to my elbow. It smells like nutmeg. I look at Tish, whose hands are wrapped around her own mug, and I narrow my eyes at her. “Stop being nice to me.”

She smiles, reaches out, and runs her hand across my back. “Nope.” Smooths her hand back and forth. With every pass, my bunched-up muscles relax a little more.

The creamy thing tastes like warm, drowsy comfort. I finish it quickly, and I slump sideways against Tish’s shoulder.

“Go get some sleep,” she whispers.

I nod into her arm.

Upstairs, I pass out on top of the covers with my shoes still on.

When I wake in the late afternoon, Mom is knocking on my door. “Jon, do you have a suit that’s clean?”

Apparently the deputy mayor doesn’t particularly want to be responsible for a city that could go to hell at any moment. She and the rest of the city council are passing the hot potato to Dad as fast as possible. They have set up the most slipshod inauguration since Sebastian Blood’s. On the steps of City Hall, there is enough time for some bunting and a microphone with a podium, but apparently not enough for proper security.

“Damn it,” Lyla says. “If we’d done this in June, like we were supposed to, we’d have ten bodyguards for the event. Half our staff is covering bigwigs at the BioConference, so there will just be the four of us - me, Dig, Jones, and Ramirez.”

“And a whole contingent of SCPD,” I point out. “Also, this is about as public as it gets.”


The inauguration is surprisingly well-attended for something so last minute. Despite his other responsibilities right now, Police Chief Len Broussard shows up. I haven’t seen him face to face since Captain Lance’s funeral. “Where’s your executioner’s axe?” he asks me, grinning.

I jerk my head at my left arm, hanging in its sling again. “Do I look like I can lift it?”

He laughs a big, booming laugh and pounds my good shoulder just slightly too hard. “That smart mouth is going to get you in trouble someday, kid.”

“I look like I can lift it?”

“Someday? What do you think Dad did ten seconds after they took the cameras off us?”

Broussard nods. “My youngest is your age. I know how it is.”

Aunt Thea, Mom, Abby, and I make a tableau of supportive family off to the side, and Dig and Lyla take up posts not far from us. I see Jones and Ramirez down at the base of the steps, weaving steadily through the crowd, eyes roving everywhere.
I have never seen anyone take an oath as seriously as Dad takes his oath of office. He does solemnly swear to discharge the duties entrusted to him, to uphold the law, and to serve the citizens of Starling City to the best of his ability. It’s hard not to internally scoff - what do you people think he’s been doing for thirty years? Next to me, Aunt Thea seems to be thinking the same thing.

Mom, on the other hand, wears an expression of soppy, beaming pride. It’s kind of gross.

Dad has just said the final words when the justice of the peace’s head turns to pink mist.

The report of a rifle echoes across the square.

Screams. Dig and Lyla are moving before he has even hit the ground, dragging all five of us Queens to cover. But men pour out of the crowd, pulling on ski masks and brass knuckles, and the rifle keeps cracking. I rip off the sling, and Mom and I keep Abby covered between us.

Lyla hustles Dad over to us, her favorite Glock barking in her hands. Dig goes to work too, and two masked men take nasty gutshots. But holy shit, they get to their feet and keep coming. Splice. Gotta be. Neither pain nor fear will stop them.

The cops all around us rally and open fire, but there are too many men closing in on us. Dig drops one, but they dogpile him. He takes a blow to the head, and I can’t see what happens. Can’t see, shit, I can’t see.

No one is supposed to know what Oliver Queen is capable of, but when someone grabs Mom, Dad breaks the guy’s jaw and then crunches his knee the wrong way out from under him.

A man in black drags Abby away from Mom, who shrieks and pepper sprays the hell out of him. Where did she even get that? He stumbles away blind and screaming, but there are more - too many more.

In the middle of it all, Risdon ascends the steps, rifle slung across his back. Alone among them, he is not even masked.

Aunt Thea sees him too. She reaches for a nearby cop who’s shouting into her radio, and she steals the woman’s sidearm with nimble fingers. With perfect, icy calm, she levels the gun at Risdon, pops off the safety, and opens up. One. Breathe. Two. Breathe. Three. A neat cluster of holes appear in the center of his chest.

The body armor saves him, and then there are too many civilians and cops in the way, and Aunt Thea has no clear shot. From behind us a masked son of a bitch overturns her wheelchair, spilling her across the white steps, and the gun clatters away.

I dive on him, and we roll down a few steps, and the pain jolts him free of my grip. When he lunges at me, I bounce his head off the stone, and he’s out.

I scramble back toward Mom and Abby, who are screaming for each other as Risdon’s men drag them apart. Dad coldcocks the guy who’s got Abby and kicks his limp body down the stairs. Len Broussard tears another man off of Mom, gets him on the ground, and starts pummeling his face. Another ski mask pistol-whips him from behind, and he slumps sideways with an ugly, guttural noise.

Lyla pulls Aunt Thea back to her chair. Dad gathers Mom and Abby close, head up and scanning the crowd.

His eyes lock on me, and then everything goes black.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I said Tuesday, and you know what? In many parts of the world it is already Tuesday.

I just could not wait to share this with y'all. This has been an amazing ride, and I can't believe we're nearly to the end of it. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have.

A brief epilogue will follow on Friday.

Please be aware, this chapter contains disturbing material, including graphic violence, torture, and the threat of sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I come to hanging by my wrists.

My feet drag the floor, and I get them under me to take the pressure off my shoulders. My hands are bound just over my head with a long length of rope thrown over the only intact rafter in the row of charred, exposed beams overhead. Above them hangs no ceiling, only a low, fat moon.

To my right, Mom slumps unconscious on the filthy, buckled hardwood floor, handcuffs gleaming in the low light. They are secured to an eye bolt screwed deep into the floorboards. In front of me, Abby lies across the hearth of a long-dead fireplace, wrists zip tied together and tethered to the beautiful wrought iron fireplace guard. Dad sits with his back against it, hands cuffed to the rusted curlicues on either side of him. His left hand stretches as close to Abby as the chain allows. Her hair spills across the hearthstone only a few inches from his fingers.

“Jon,” he says. “Are you ok?”

“Where are we?”

“You’ve been here before.”

Nightbugs chatter to each other, and the air smells of pine. Half-crumpled stone walls and arches rise up around us, blotting out stars, and steel support beams stand cruciform high above our heads. Ivy climbs the chimney.

I know this place.

Dad brought me here not long after he told me the truth about the family business. “The fire was not an accident,” he said.

“Then who?”

“No threat to us now,” was all he would answer.

Dad and Aunt Thea were still in the process of reclaiming the house after Isabel Rochev’s stunt at
QC, and there was some dispute between the family, the bank, and the insurance company. What with the drawn-out legal battle, the house was neither razed nor rebuilt.

“Thea and I never planned to live here again anyway,” Dad said. “Everything that made it home was long gone.”

“They say it’s haunted now.”

He smiled. “Could be true.”

“Some of the guys, uh, bring girls here.”

“I’d have done that myself back in college,” he admitted.

I looked around the summer weeds growing up around the bones of the house. “You’re just going to leave it like this?”

“I think every city needs some haunted ruins. Don’t you?”

Once upon a time, the room I hang in now was a third floor library with fourteen-foot ceilings. It was beautiful. I’ve seen pictures.

“How do you feel?” Dad says.

I take careful inventory, because his question is not simple concern for my welfare. “Shoulder hurts, and I’m still kind of concussed. Otherwise, I’m good to go. You?”

“Headache, bruised ribs.” In other words, get him loose and he is in decent shape to seriously ruin somebody’s day.

“Why aren’t we dead yet?”

He looks at me steadily, letting me work out why the psychotic mercenary with a sixteen-year grudge might not want this to be over so soon.

“Oh.” Cold washes over me. “It’s like that?”

He glances from Abby to Mom and back, and beneath his careful calm I see the same fear that is clawing its way up the back of my throat. “Pretty sure it is.”

I open my mouth to say something - you know, devil-may-care heroic fortitude - but my breath catches. Because I know what happens now. I’ve been here before.

For two weeks, I’ve been here every time I closed my eyes. In the worst of the nightmares, my family was here with me.

When I finally manage to say something over the sound of my pulse crashing in my ears, it is only a hoarse, “Dad.”

“Hey, hey. Breathe, Jonny. In slow, out slow.”

Once, twice, three times, and the world sharpens into focus around me. Twice more, in slow, out slow, and my spiking heartbeat coasts down to normal.

While I get a hold of myself, Abby stirs with a pained sigh. Slowly she shifts, hair falling across her face, and I see the jerk of panic when she tries to sit up and comes up against the limits of her bindings.
“You’re ok, honey,” Dad says. “You’re ok.”

She goes still at the sound of his voice, and then she awkwardly pushes herself up to sitting. Her eyes fall on Mom, on the careless angle of her head and her slightly open mouth, and she pales. “Is she breathing?”

“She is,” I say quickly. “Just knocked out.”

Abby takes a good long look around, and in a choked voice she asks Dad, “Why are we here?”

He deliberately misconstrues her question. “Risdon must have thought it was poetic. Now listen to me carefully.” He catches her eyes and holds them. “No matter what happens, you stay calm. Don’t talk to Risdon or his men if you can avoid it. You’re the least restrained, so if you get a chance to run, take it. Don’t look back, don’t worry about us.”

“What? No.” She shakes her head hard. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“That was not a request, Abigail.” He cranes his neck and peers at the top of her head. “Lean over for me and -”

“Won’t matter nohow,” a voice reassures her. “Got a man at every exit. You won’t get far.”

Risdon stands in the arched doorway, whipcord thin without the body armor, and he greets us with a smile and a pleasant, “Evening.”

Facing him in my leathers with a bow in my hands was one thing. In my shirtsleeves with my wrists tied over my head, I am wide open and vulnerable. When he takes his first step toward us, I have to remember to breathe again. In slow, out slow.

“We should wake Mrs. Queen,” Risdon says. “She won’t want to miss this.” He strolls over, crouches down, and gives her cheek insistent little slaps.

Mom sits up so fast that she head butts him right in the nose. “Ow!” she yelps.

“Son of a bitch.” He stumbles back, hand to his face, and he presses his boot down on her shoulder to force her prone. Dad’s cuffs rattle and snap taut against the wrought iron. Risdon leans some weight onto Mom’s shoulder, and she hisses in pain. “Now,” he says. “Slow this time.”

Her eyes dart around the room, lock on each of us in turn. When he lifts his boot, she sits up slowly.

Risdon grabs her chin. “Glad you could join us, ma’am.”

She looks him right in the eyes until he laughs and shoves her away.

“You wanted the man who sent you to the Heights,” Dad says. “I’m right here. There’s no reason to hold them.”

“My God, you’re right.” Risdon waves at the three of us. “Y’all be on your merry way.”

“You have made,” Dad continues, voice dropping into the subbasement, “an extreme tactical error. But let my family go, and maybe you’ll live through the night.”

Abby’s eyes widen. She has never heard that voice before. She has never seen that murderous expression on his face.

Risdon only chuckles. “I call that bold talk for a man chained to the home decor.”
“Fair warning.”

“Look, Ollie, it’s like this,” Risdon says, drawing himself to his full height, standing over Dad. “I spent sixteen years in hell. Just shy of six thousand days. And I been planning all this time how I’m going to visit every single one of them on the folks responsible.”

“It seems like that would not include anyone who was five years old at the time,” Mom says icily. “Or, say, not even born yet.”

As if she hadn’t spoken, Risdon starts to circle us. “The gangs in there, they don’t think much of a man unaffiliated. Broke six bones my first four years.” As he passes Abby, he rolls up his sleeves to show her the silver scars winding up and down his arms, and she recoils. I see the fresher, pinker scar of a messy gash in the meat of his thumb. Yeah, that was me.

“They call these defensive wounds,” he tells Abby. “Got more under the shirt. Got others I can’t talk about at parties.” He straightens, circling back around, and to my parents he says, “I used to plan how I was going to pay it all back to you. And here, come to find you went and pissed off an employer of mine who knows your names.” My skin crawls as he passes behind me; I don’t like him where I can’t see him. Finally he comes to a halt midway between me and Mom, and he smiles. “Then it occurs to me you got kids. Seems you like them pretty well too.”

Mom’s eyes shine with angry tears, and she shakes her head. “They have nothing to do with this.”

“I’m thinking instead,” Risdon says slowly, “I’m going to pay it back to them.”

I wish the first thing through my head were something noble or stoic or quippy. But no. It is just wordless terror howling up my spine and roaring in my ears.

The second thing through my head is, Please, please don’t beat me to death in front of my baby sister .

Only then does it sink in that he plans to hurt her too.

“Hey,” I say past numb lips. “I shot you in the hand and fucked up your drug deal and tried to kill you a couple of times, and you’re pissed. I get it. But my sister never did anything to anyone. You don’t have to hurt her. You have me, right? You don’t have to.”

He breathes in slow through his nose. “You know what, kid?” he says, hand coming to rest on his belt buckle. “I swear to you I won’t leave a mark on her.”

Oh God. I’m going to be sick. I can’t breathe, and I am going to be sick.

Abby has no context for that, but she knows damn well it’s not a good faith promise. My parents watch me choke down bile, and they know exactly what Risdon just said.

“You are going to die choking on your own blood,” Dad says.

“I’d be interested to see how you manage that.” Risdon turns to me, and he slips his hand into his pocket. When he withdraws it, brass knuckles gleam on his right hand.

“Don’t,” Mom says as he takes a step toward me. “Please don’t.”

He doesn’t walk - he moseys. By the time he is halfway to me, I am already shaking like a day-old kitten with low blood sugar.
“Jonny,” Abby says.

"Look at me, Abigail,” Dad says. “Eyes right here. You look at me and nowhere else.”

“But Jonny.”

“Right here. Right at me.”

Mom yanks with all her might at the eye bolt, cuffs cutting into her wrists and furious sobs escaping her. “Please don’t. Don’t hurt him, please, we sent you to prison, it was us, do whatever you want to us, just don’t hurt him, don’t you touch him, I said don’t touch him, don’t you fucking dare!”

I shrink as far from him as I can, which is not very.

“I’m going to tell you this at the beginning,” he says affably. “This stops the second you tell me which of them is going to take your place.”

“Don’t touch him, I said take me!” Mom yells. “Jon, tell him.”

I look at Dad, who mouths, It’s ok. I can go unscathed, and they’ll pay for it. Gladly.

If Risdon had asked me, just after pulling my head out of that washtub the second or third time I passed out underwater, if he should do it to one of my parents instead, I don’t like to think about how I would have answered. I was desperate after an hour, and after two I might have agreed to almost anything.

But we’re not there yet. I tremble all over, and I shake my head.

“No smart remarks?” Risdon asks me.

Not a goddamn word.

He starts simple. You don’t really need complicated gadgetry or detailed anatomical knowledge to make someone suffer. We’re fragile, like Elaine says. There are so many ways to break us.

A gut punch knocks the wind out of me good and solid, and my muscles spasm for air that won’t come.

“So, Mayor Queen, Mrs. Queen. Thirty years saving the city, and look where we are now.”

I’m pretty sure the next blow leaves a hairline fracture in my cheekbone. Silver linings: I can’t catch my breath long enough to scream.

“You give Starling a hero, and they set the dogs on him. Give them justice, and they murder a man in the courthouse hallway. Give them medical miracles, and they riot in the streets.”

This time I don’t think he cracked the rib. Just bruised. Probably.

“You are going to lose everything for your little crusade. I’m taking it all. I hope it was worth it.”

He notes with interest the spreading bloodstain on my white sleeve where the gunshot wound has reopened. I’ve mangled and re-mangled it so often, at this point even gentle touches are painful.

Risdon is not gentle.

I’ve caught my breath now. I scream.
After that, I retreat as deep into my head as possible, trying to block out Abby’s crying and Dad’s soft murmurs to her. It’s harder to block out Mom’s yelling. I don’t look at any of them, because the one time I catch my father’s eyes, there are tears in them, and this is terrifying enough already.

Then Mom’s voice lowers and hardens, and what she says next startles me back to full awareness.

“Joseph,” she says.

Who?

“Joseph.”

She’s talking to Risdon. What the hell?

“I read your file,” she says doggedly. “You risked everything for an ideal once too. I know you come from a long line of Marines - your father and grandfather and great grandfather. I know you had an older brother who died in Afghanistan.”

“Shut up.”

“Joseph, I know about the dishonorable discharge.”

He turns away from me to get in her face. “I said shut up.”

I realize she is doing her damnedest to keep his attention on her. Partly it is to give me a reprieve, but it is also to keep his back to the other side of the room, where Dad is still murmuring gently to Abby. She pulls something from her hair: a bobby pin. Dad’s tone doesn’t change, but the content obviously does. He is talking her through bending it into the correct modified S-shape to pick a handcuff lock.

Mom looks Risdon right in the eyes, terrified but steady, and she says, “A hundred years of honorable men, and look where we are now.”

He grabs her by the chin again. “You’re bolted to the floor, watching me destroy everything you love piece by piece. Ain’t shit you can do to stop me. That’s where we are, ma’am.”

Abby lets out a little sob, which seems to grate Risdon’s last nerve. He spins around, kneels in front of her and reaches for her face. She flinches away, but he grabs and holds her, and he wipes the tears from her cheeks with both thumbs. “Hush, baby.”

Dad twists sideways at what looks like a painful angle and kicks him in the throat. I realize that up until now, even circling us like a vulture, Risdon has been careful to stay out of Dad’s reach.

Now he stumbles back sputtering and gasping. His mouth moves, but only a rasp of breath comes out.

“You do not call her that,” Dad says.

I expect Risdon to retaliate. It’s probably what Dad was hoping for, come to think of it, maybe to get him close enough for a triangle choke. But instead Risdon makes a horrible noise that I think he intended as a scoff. He turns back to me, and he draws his Ka-Bar from the kydex sheath at his belt.

That is when Abby starts to struggle for air.

She claws at the fireplace guard behind her, and she tips her chin up to clear her airway. Her breath comes faster, deeper. Too fast, too deep.

Oh, God, not now. Not now, junebug.

Risdon gestures harshly at Abby and glares at Dad.

“She has panic attacks,” Dad says. “She needs her meds. They were in my wife’s purse when your men cleared it out.”

I lift my head and stare at him. What meds?

Risdon waves that off with a look of disgust.

“She needs the medication,” Dad insists. “This will only get worse if she doesn’t get it.”

I glance at Mom for an explanation, only to see her hurriedly working the silver comb out of her hair. Dad made it for her as a Christmas present last year. The tines flash in the moonlight, and they aren’t symmetrical. One is a hook pick, the next a snake rake, ball pick, double round… and a modified S-pick.

Oh, Abby, you glorious little faker.

My sister gasps and pants - “can’t breathe, can’t breathe” - and tears run down her face. Snot too, I think. Give the girl an Oscar. All of the Oscars.

Risdon crouches down in front of her again. He shoves her back against the fireplace guard, and he covers her mouth with his hand, forcing her to breathe through her nose. Then he makes the only sound he’s capable of right now: a soft shhh.

My parents pop their cuffs at almost the exact same time.

Dad tackles Risdon to the filthy floor, and Mom grabs his knife when it slides toward her. She runs straight for me, and she stands on her tippy-toes to reach over my head and cut me loose.

I collapse onto her shoulder, and she eases me to the floor. Quickly she kisses my forehead - “I’m so sorry, baby, everything’s going to be all right” - and she scrambles over to cut Abby’s zip-ties.

Dad passes Risdon’s guard and lands a punch to his face, which has already taken some abuse tonight. Risdon makes a horrific, hissing cat noise through his fucked-up throat, and they roll sideways.

Footsteps pound in the hall. Risdon’s men are coming.

My father and I are both free. They are not going to like what they find.

Six of them pour in, all told, and they converge on Dad and Risdon. I yank one away from the pile, trying to dig my way to Dad, who has fought his way to his feet. Risdon crawls away from him, and two men force Dad back a yard.

I’m a little busy breaking someone’s wrist, so I don’t see what happens next.

But I hear the snap.

The man falls limp in Dad’s hands, his head dangling at an obscene angle. The body thuds to the floor.
I stare.

Then Dad looks right at me, and in a split second I understand.

If Risdon were smart, he would have come for the Arrow. That guy doesn’t have a family. He doesn’t love anyone, and no one loves him. What he has is a code. But the Arrow isn’t here tonight. Risdon came for Oliver and Jonathan Queen, the dumb son of a bitch, and we are going to drown him in his own blood.

Risdon scrambles up to the relative safety of his men, and with his face twisting in pain he breathes, “Alive. If can.”

“Jon, here.” Mom passes me Risdon’s knife. Then she grabs my sister’s hand and starts pulling her toward the windows. “Come on, honey, we’re taking the back way out. Knock the rest of the glass out of the frame for me, please.” She goes to work tugging the rope down from the rafter. I assume that’s how she plans to get us out of a third floor window.

Dad and I form a barrier in front of her and Abby. The nauseous fear in my stomach eases for the first time since I woke up here, and my panicky pulse slows to an almost leisurely thudump. My shaky limbs steady. This, I know how to do.

Six men come screaming down on us.

They are not amateurs. Even spliced out of their minds, wild with adrenaline, they fight smart, targeting my weak left arm and Dad’s stiff right shoulder. And holy shit, they take damage that would put a Spanish fighting bull out of commission, and they keep coming. One nearly passes my guard spitting blood and breathing raggedly from what sounds like a broken rib puncturing his lung.

We tear into them savagely.

I have sparred with my father a few hundred times, and the night we raided the Port Authority I saw the security camera feed of him taking on a small army by himself. I’ve seen him fight for life-or-death stakes.

But I’ve never seen this. Tonight he is holding nothing back.

The knife flashes in my hand, and I’m pretty sure I nicked that guy’s brachial artery. He doesn’t know he’s dead yet, but he’ll bleed out in under a minute. That means I’ve just killed a man. On purpose.

I feel only fierce satisfaction.

The way Dad and I fall into sync is like no teamwork I’ve ever experienced before. We achieve some kind of nirvana, I swear - fast and brutal and nearly telepathic. Dad throws an attacker over his hip, and I stomp hard on his face. I knock the next one back on his heels, and Dad crushes his windpipe.

“There are men at ground level,” Mom says, securing the rope to the window frame. “That complicates things.”

“I don’t see that it does,” I say. They try to stop us, we kill them too.

Dad has armed himself with a dead man’s knife, and he goes for Risdon’s throat. One of the two remaining thugs tries to jump him, and whatever Dad does to him happens so fast that all I hear is
the scream. Risdon takes the moment of distraction to try to kick Dad’s knees out from under him. Dad crowds him enough to lessen the impact, but that had to hurt.

I guard his back against Risdon’s last man standing. The guy lands a powerhouse of a punch to the bloody hole in my shoulder, and the pain nearly takes me to the floor. But if I go down, I leave Dad wide open.

That big, messy punch has left the guy vulnerable. I slide up under his guard, and I do something kind of horrific to his throat. He hits the floor gurgling.

Risdon looks over at the sound. In the sudden, panting silence, he realizes six bodies surround him.

He runs for it.

I break ranks with Dad to take off after him.

“Jon, don’t!” Dad yells.

But I’m through the door, chasing Risdon down a wide hallway, dodging the places where the floor looks rotted through. I’ve got a longer stride, and I’m gaining on him fast.

He disappears around a corner, and I skid around it seconds later.

A dark shape waits in the shadows, and the blast of a gun deafens me. The knife skitters out of my hand, my right leg crumples beneath me, and oh, holy shit, that’s splintered bone I’m seeing through all the red. Oh, Jesus, I can’t feel it yet - too much adrenaline - but it looks horrifying.

Risdon steps right up to me and presses the muzzle to my forehead, finger still on the trigger guard.

Dig once told me, from experience, that if a man has you at gunpoint, “you had better hope he’s a sick bastard. That kind of man wants to savor the kill, draw it out. He’ll talk, he’ll gloat, and the best part is he’ll get in your space with a ranged weapon like an idiot.”

“I’m going to kill all three of them slow,” Risdon says in a wet, spitting whisper. “But first I’m going to - ”

I wrench the gun out of his hand by the barrel. He doesn’t even have time to establish a guard before I’ve got him in a mount, and I slam the butt of the gun down hard into his face.

Risdon’s nose breaks with a crunch.

I slam it down again. Break his orbital bone.

Again. Shatter his jaw.

The pistol comes away bloody, and I don’t stop.

His frantic bucking stills, and I don’t stop.

“Jon, that’s enough.”

I know it’s Dad’s voice, but the words don’t even make sense. Besides, some psycho is completely drowning him out with a frenzied, feral string of curses.

*kill you I will fucking kill you son of a bitch you’re fucking dead you hear me*
“Jon, he’s gone.”

Me. It’s me snarling those things.

“Jonathan!”

I stop. I sit back, panting hard.

“You’re losing a lot of blood,” Dad says in the tone he might use with a wild animal he intended to free from a bear trap. “Let us help you.”

Us?

I finally look up. Dad is favoring his bad knee and leaning heavily on Dig, and Lyla comes up behind them, holstering her weapon. At the other end of the hallway, the Canary swings her staff onto her shoulder, and the Bat keeps to the shadows.

“Area’s secure,” Lyla says. She crouches down next to me, and in her gentlest voice, she says, “Let’s get you taken care of.”

Then Mom and Abby come around the corner, and if I live to be a hundred, I will remember with perfect clarity the looks on their faces when they catch sight of me. It’s all the horror and wariness and pity you might feel for your rabid Labrador before you put him down.

I hear sirens outside.

“It’s over,” Lyla says, reaching for my mangled lower leg. “It’s all over, Jonny.”

I slap her hand away. “Don’t touch it.”

“I need to stop the bleeding.”

“I said don’t.”

Mom comes to kneel next to my good leg, and she reaches for my face. Combs her fingers through my hair a few times. “Look at me, sweetheart. Come here.” She pulls me sideways, and the Canary drags Risdon out from under me. It jostles the broken bone, and I feel the first stabs of pain.

I mean to say Mom, but my face is going numb, and my lips don’t work properly. What comes out is more like, “Mama.”

Well, that’s humiliating.

Lyla goes to work on my bad leg. I have no idea what she is doing, because I don’t dare look, but it feels like she is holding a lit match to raw nerve endings. I make more humiliating noises.

“Come here,” Mom says, though we both know I have not fit on her shoulder in a very long time. She pulls me down anyway.

“’M cold,” I realize. Shock. That means I’m going into shock.

“I’ve got you,” Mom keeps saying as the world fades out. “I’ve got you.”
I wake to the feel of a warm weight pressed against my less-injured side.

“Hey, frat boy.”

When I open my eyes, my first thought is that no one in the history of the universe has ever been as pretty as Laetitia Cuvier at this very second, sitting up in her chair and smiling warmly at me. Behind her is a broad window set into a blandly green wall, and the sunshine pouring through it turns her auburn hair to fire.

“Hey, pretty girl.”

Oh, God, someone gave me the good drugs again.

“Mon Dieu, ces analgésiques sont très forts.” She sets aside the glassbook in her lap, folds down the railing on the hospital bed, and reaches for my hand. “How do you feel?”

With some trepidation, I look down at my leg, and I’m somewhat surprised to see that it’s still attached. A black electromyographic cast extends from my knee to my ankle.

“Are you in pain?” Tish says.

My whole lower leg pounds dully like a far-off drum, and I know for damn sure that at some point it is going to be excruciating. But for right now, the smile I give her is a little doozy. “Nah. Stoned off my ass.”

She laughs (ten points to me - no, a hundred points to me) and picks something up from right next to me on the mattress: a black cord with a round black button attached. “When you need it, the self-serve morphine is right here, ok?”

I turn my attention to the weight next to me. Abby is tucked snugly under my arm, curled up in a ball with her back pressed to my side. I can feel her slow, steady breath on the inside of my elbow. It tickles.

“Don’t wake her,” Tish says. “This is the first she’s slept for more than an hour at a stretch.”

I am not in any hurry to wake her. The last time I saw my sister, she had just caught me wearing another man’s blood after I caved his face in. The next time she opens her eyes, I expect she is going to look at me different.

I expect I will deserve it.

“Hey, man,” Dig says from the doorway. “Good to have you with us again.”

“Hey.” Now that he is here, it occurs to me to wonder: “Is everybody ok? Where are my parents?”

“They’re fine,” he assures me. “Already back at work.”

“Here.” Tish picks up her glassbook. “This casted just an hour ago.”

The video she pulls up from the Star Herald shows a crowd of thousands packing Duwamish Street outside the convention center. As it zooms in, the caster’s voice says, “Mayor Oliver Queen appears unshaken by his family’s ordeal at his inauguration. This afternoon he met with protesters outside the historic Bioethics Conference, where Thursday night’s demonstrations erupted into violence. Newly appointed Police Chief McKenna Hall accompanied him to discuss their concerns with the leader of the anti-GMO movement and ensure that today’s protest remains peaceful.”
“After Risdon took you,” Dig says, “Chief Broussard set a curfew and declared zero tolerance. When the crowd wouldn’t disperse, things got out of control. Rubber bullet took out one kid’s eye. Empty cop car got set on fire. Big mess.”

On video, Dad and Hall move through the crowd with an energetic, bearded man in a wrinkled flannel button-down. He seems to be introducing them to the other protest organizers. They shake hands, ask quiet questions, and listen more than they speak. The cops nearby are all in blue patrol uniforms, and there is not a single gas mask or helmet or plastic shield to be seen.

“Let me tell you,” Dig says, “SCPD was not happy when Oliver and McKenna told them they were facing that mob without riot gear.”

“It doesn’t look like a mob to me,” I say.

Dig smiles, and he rests a hand on Tish’s shoulder with a familiarity I wouldn’t have expected. “It’s like Thea says. You’d better believe the costume matters.”

Don’t I know it. If Jonathan Queen had stood atop the Convention Center and yelled for a general chill-out, no one would have listened. But I did it in the hood. Now Dad and Hall have made sure that when the crowd looks at the cops, they see peacekeepers instead of faceless stormtroopers.

In a long shot, I catch a glimpse of Mom smiling and holding out her hands for a protester’s cellphone. The young guy hands it over gratefully, and she starts swiping at the screen with a little frown of concentration. I think she is fixing it for him.

Then they take a selfie.

“Winning hearts and minds,” Dig says, shaking his head. “Last night SCPD managed the most polite mass arrest I’ve ever seen. The protesters got to make their point, no one got pepper-sprayed, and hardly anybody even got handcuffed.”

“Maybe this mayor thing wasn’t the worst idea ever.”

Tish smiles up at Dig as she slides the glassbook into its case, and she slips her hand into mine. “I voted for him.”

“Aren’t you glad you didn’t run off to Kandahar and miss all this?” I ask him.

“Oh, we will,” he assures me. “There’s a hotel with an infinity pool and its own pomegranate orchard, and we are going.”

“But not yet.”

“No,” he says quietly. He gives Tish’s shoulder a squeeze, and through the gentle pressure of her fingers I somehow feel the reassurance as if it were mine. “Not just yet.”

They keep me at Starling General for four days after they weld my leg back together. Ten or fifteen years ago, this injury would have put me out of the vigilante business permanently. With Kord’s biotech, I may set off metal detectors for the rest of my life, but they expect me to get full function back.

Among the first of many visitors are SCPD’s finest, who ask me a lot of very serious questions in the presence of the family lawyer.
“What happened in that hallway, Jonathan?”

They already have the rest of the family’s statements, in which the new mayor and his family were targeted for political reasons, and heroic representatives of Panoptic Security unfortunately had to use lethal force to subdue our captors.

I say the minimum necessary to confirm this version of events.

“I guess the less said about vigilantes, the better,” I tell Dad with a tight smile the next time he visits. “And it would be a shame to start off your mayoral term with justifiable homicide in the headlines. We’d have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Yes.” Dad looks at the floor. “Also, if we told SCPD the strict truth, we would put Laurel in the awkward position of having to charge you with second degree murder.”

I swallow hard. I’ve been waiting for someone to bring up the fact that I killed three people, and I went a little crazy on the last one.

“You would claim provocation,” he says, meeting my eyes, “which would knock the charge down to voluntary manslaughter. Five to fifteen in this state.”

“He had a gun to my head. He’d just shot me.”

“None could dispute that the first two were self-defense. But you pursued a fleeing man who was no longer an immediate threat,” Dad says with neither judgment nor gentleness. “After you disarmed him, you announced your intent to kill, and you kept hitting him long after he was incapacitated.”

I would have kept hitting him until I was incapacitated if they had not stopped me. I would have kept hitting him if he had waved a white handkerchief and begged for mercy. I would have kept hitting him if fluffy-winged angels had come down from heaven to announce mandatory peace on earth effective immediately.

I think it over for a good long time, and Dad lets me have my silence.

Even after everything Risdon had done and everything he planned to do, I didn’t have to kill him. I did that because I wanted to. The law does not recognize “he had it coming” as a valid defense. Going by the shame that churns my insides when I replay the wet smack of the gun into his bloody face, neither do I.

“You told me not to go after him.”

Dad looks down at his hands. “I also told Risdon he was going to die choking on his own blood.”

Another long silence follows.

“I killed a man in anger,” I say, as much to feel the shape of the words in my mouth as for him to hear them.

Dad nods. “Righteous anger. Justified anger. But I won’t tell you it was right.”

The words slice out a hollow space inside me, just above my diaphragm and a little to the left. I imagine someday it will turn to scar tissue, an old wound remembered only when I move the wrong way.

Someday.
Right now, I know with leaden certainty: “I would do it again.”

He holds my gaze. “I won’t tell you it was wrong.”

I close my eyes. Three deep breaths. “The way Abby looked at me...” But I don’t have the words.

As in so many other things, with Dad I don’t need them. “She looked at me the same way.”

“I think maybe this is why I didn’t tell her for so long. I was afraid one day she’d look at me like that.”

He skims his hands alongside his head, and his fingers interlock at the nape of his neck.

“When I woke up, she was, um,” I pat the space beside me where she was curled up. “Like it never even happened.”

His hands fall, and he looks up at me. “You will always have killed those three people.”

I suck in a breath.

“You’re going to have to find a way to be the man who killed them, the vigilante with the code, and the brother she loves. Because they’re all the same man, Jon.”

“Masks all the way down,” I murmur.

Dad’s phone buzzes, and he checks it in irritation. “I have to go. But before I do,” he digs in his pocket, “Thea asked me to give you this.” He hands me a note on thick linen paper.

“Is this about, um…” Alone among my family members, Aunt Thea has not come for visiting hours. I can’t help wondering if she has finally started to blame me.

“She’s not avoiding you,” Dad says. “She’s in D.C.”

That night on C-SPAN, I watch my aunt walk onto the Senate floor. She walks slowly, with great effort and the aid of forearm crutches, but she walks. She takes her place at a podium to testify against the Kobel Act.

On the nightstand next to me, her note lies open-faced.

Jon,

So glad you’re going to be ok. I wish I could be there when you wake up, but I’ve got to go fight for a miracle. I gave Felicity a hug to pass along to you, just until I get back.

Love always,

Aunt Thea

P.S. - He had it coming. I’m sorry it fell to you, sweetheart.

Kobel dies in the Senate.

I fold the note up small and tuck it into my wallet.
Starling General releases me just before dusk on a Thursday, and when I swing out of the hospital room on crutches, it is my mother and sister who wait for me at the desk.

I was right. Abby looks at me differently.

“You ready to go home?” Mom says, jingling her car keys.

“I’ve been ready.”

Abby doesn’t fight me for shotgun, and my crutches ride in the backseat across her lap. On Duwamish Street, we glide past smashed storefronts and burnt husks of buildings, and I watch an elderly man sweep glass into a neat pile in front of a corner store. I make a deep, dissatisfied noise before I can stop myself.

Mom casts me a sideways glance. “We’ve rebuilt after much worse.”

“Doesn’t mean it won’t tumble down again.”

She reaches for my hand where it rests on my knee, and she covers it with hers. Eyes on the road again, she murmurs, “No, it doesn’t.”

“Can we stop somewhere before we go home?”

“Anywhere.”

Greenwood Cemetery smells of ligustrums and freshly cut grass, and May breathes soft evening warmth on my face as I hobble among the headstones. Mom and Abby lean against the car, waiting.

_In Memoriam_

_Roy Harper_

_1991-2042_

_Nemo vir est nisi qui mundum reddat meliorem_

I lay the crutches against a nearby statue of an angel - no disrespect intended, ma’am - and I sink down clumsily in the grass. Five years of Latin classes, and it takes me a full minute to parse the inscription.

“Nobody man is never... no, wait, that’s except. Except world render... Oh. I remember this one.”

I let my head fall between my hunched shoulders, and I let out a little huff of breath that couldn’t be called a laugh. “No man is he who does not make the world better.” I tip my head back. “Dig, was that you? Sounds like you. You military types love you some dead languages.”

The wind moves in the ligustrums and washes their dark, heavy scent over me.

“So, um. Hey.” I’ve never talked to a headstone before. I don’t know the etiquette. “I was supposed to have your back, and I fucked it up.”

A lifetime ago, my uncle leaned back against Mom’s desk in the lair and made it abundantly clear how he felt about jackasses named Queen who believe everything is their fault because obviously the world revolves around them.

_Climb down off the cross, moron_ , Captain Lance said not long after.
But I am going to say this, out loud, at least once: “Roy, I am so sorry.”

The shadows of the angel’s wings darken as they reach for me.

“Starling doesn’t know what you did for her, but I do. I won’t let it be undone.”

It is what I came here to say, but it seems oddly anticlimactic. Am I supposed to sense his presence or remember some inspiring thing he said forever ago or, I don’t know, experience some kind of inner peace? The wind could at least shut up rustling while I’m having a respectful silence.

I’ll try one more time.

“They say people sleep sound in their beds at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. All these years, that’s been you, standing guard on that wall, telling other people it was safe to turn out their lights. Defending the ones who couldn’t defend themselves. And I know what it cost you.”

My eyes burn.

“So rest now. I’ve got it from here, ok?”

And that’s my limit, right there. I sit with my bad leg sprawled out awkwardly next to me, and I tear up handfuls of grass while I catch my breath.

When I’m finished wiping my face on my sleeves, I start the awkward struggle to my feet. As if by magic, Abby materializes next to me. Without quite looking me in the face, she holds out both hands, and with her help I make it upright in one semi-graceful movement.

When I reach for the crutches, she steps right in the way and sidles up under my arm.

“What do you think you’re doing? I’ll squish you.”

She head butts my chest. “Maybe I’m stronger than you realize.”

“No.” Mom gathers up the crutches on her way over to us, and she assures Abby: “He’ll squish you.”

I hold a hand out. “Gimme.”

As if I hadn’t said anything, Mom tells Abby, “It’ll take both of us.” And she ducks under my other arm. They both look up at me, smiling expectantly.

I shake my head. “You are both ridiculous. This is what crutches are for.”

But I squeeze Mom to my side, kiss the top of Abby’s head, and take a step. I lean hard on my mother and sister, and they bear me up all the way home.

Chapter End Notes

References

"If you have to look along the shaft of an arrow from the wrong end, if a man has you entirely at his mercy, then hope like hell that man is an evil man. Because the evil
like power, power over people, and they want to see you in fear. They want you to know you're going to die. So they'll talk. They'll gloat."

- Terry Pratchett, *Men at Arms*

The Latin inscription *Nemo vir est qui mundum non reddat meliorem* appears in the Ridley Scott film *Kingdom of Heaven*, in which it is translated as "What man is a man who does not make the world better?" The modified version here came from a message board of Latin scholars who thought the grammar could stand improvement.

"As George Orwell pointed out, people sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf."

- Richard Grenier
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Since I was five years old, I have wanted to be a writer. Finishing my first novel-length story is a dream come true for me. This has been a remarkable experience, and it's bittersweet to see it come to an end. If you've made it this far with me and Jon, you have my sincerest thanks.

Love to Effie214 and RosieTwiggs. Y'all know why.

You can see most of Starling from the top of the Municipal Courthouse. She is beautiful by this light. The bay glitters gold in the west as the sun sinks into it, to the north the sleek towers of the CBD look carved from ruby, and to the east the white suspension bridge arcs away gracefully to the Glades. Rivers of white headlights and red taillights stream past in the streets below me. From up here, she looks busy and prosperous and peaceful.

And when did the city become she to me?

“Almost four months,” McKenna Hall says at my side. “Where have you been?”

It takes a while to recover from a shattered tibia. I could have been back on my feet sooner, but the one time I asked for fast-acting tissue builders, I got a bunch of crossed arms and serious looks.

“Cool your jets,” Mom said.

“Let SCPD shoulder the load for a while,” Dad said.

“Give that leg a chance to heal properly,” Dig said.

“If you go out there before you’re ready and get yourself hurt again like a stupid, stubborn ass,” Abby said, “I will wake you up with a rousing rendition of ‘The Sound of Music’ every morning until you’re better.”

So I healed up the slow way, which meant weeks on desk duty at Panoptic and sofa duty at home. Abby spent most of the summer keeping me company. Sometimes she and Tish played improv games in the living room until I laughed so hard I forgot my leg was on fire. Other times she curled up on the opposite end of the sofa with blank, half-lidded eyes and stared at nothing.

I shrug. “You had it handled.”

“I wouldn’t have turned down the help.”

“You’re not the little guy forced to go outside the system anymore. You are the system, Chief.” I turn my head just enough to glimpse her face from beneath the shadow of the hood. “I half-expected you to tell me to fuck off.”

She purses her lips. “The mayor and I had a serious discussion about tolerating vigilantism, the importance of the rule of law, and who watches the watchmen.”

I nod. “He told you to bring me in.”
“He did.”

“And you’re flipping him the bird and doing what you want?”

“You didn’t see the look on his face when he said it. I know him from way back. Trust me, he’s going to turn a blind eye.”

I just barely bite down on a sarcastic, *Wow, what a relief.*

She pulls out her phone and drags up a mugshot. “How do you feel about mopping up the remains of the Starling Black Hand?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

She taps her phone to mine to transfer the data securely, and then she heads for the rooftop service door. Just before she slips through, she looks over her shoulder and cocks an eyebrow at me. “We thought you might have been killed that night in the riots,” she says dispassionately. “A couple of gangs were claiming credit for it.”

I’ve always wanted to use the line: “Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated.”

“Your predecessors just disappeared one day too. Didn’t call, didn’t write. I never found out what happened to them.”

“Why do you care?”

She looks at me steadily. She cares.

“One was killed in action.” It’s true, if misleading, and the pain is still sharp right up under my ribs. “The other retired.”

She nods. “Did he get a happy ending? The retired one?”

I hardly see him these days. He is working seventy hour weeks as Starling’s most controversial mayor since the guy who oversaw integration in the sixties. Panoptic disarmed a small bomb in his mailbox last month. His wife’s debilitating headaches are more frequent than they’ve been in years, and his daughter cycles through anxiety and depression no matter how much money he throws at therapy and medication. He is mourning his brother, and his sister doesn’t know who to be more pissed off at: Joseph Risdon for breaking her back and shooting her husband, Uncle Roy for buying her legs with his life, or God for letting it all happen.

“I’ll be all right,” she told me and Abby the night she moved into the downstairs guest bedroom. “I know how to do this.”

“Do what?” Abby said.

“Lose people.”

She and Dad go for walks after dinner, on the orders of the physical therapist who made house calls for me and her both. Any offer to accompany them is gently but firmly turned down. Dad carries her forearm crutches, but more often than not she makes it home with no more support than his arm to lean on. I don’t know which of them needs this ritual more.

The retired Arrow has had kind of a shit year.

But last night he got home late, looking worn down, and he sank onto the sofa like he never
wanted to get up again. “Come give me a hug,” he told Abby, unashamed of needing one.

Within minutes he was passed out with her tucked under his arm, head tipped back, snoring faintly. I am not famous for my people skills or sensitivity, but even I could see the wistfulness on Tish’s face when she looked at them.

Mom came down from her office just as Abby started to untangle herself. “I had a bet with myself. Will Oliver make it to an actual mattress tonight? Looks like I win.” Then she made a moue, beckoned to Abby, and whispered in her ear. Abby bounded away upstairs and came rushing back down with a handful of tiny glass bottles.

It was a testament to how exhausted Dad was that he didn’t even twitch when Mom and Abby eased off his shoes and socks, stifling giggles.

Next to me on the sofa, Tish leaned over and whispered. “Won’t he be angry?”

“Oh, he’ll try.”

When he woke an hour later and caught sight of his brightly painted toenails, he did indeed try to be angry.

“You are both in so much trouble.”

He tried very hard.

Captain Hall tilts her head at me, one hand on the doorknob.

I smile at the gravel. “As close as we get.”

When the door closes behind her, someone else steps out of the lengthening shadows. “Are you sure you’re ready to get back out there?”

“The leg’s fine.”

“Yes,” Dad says, “but are you ready?”

I step up on the ledge of the rooftop to look out over the sea of lights below. Dad steps up next to me, tie fluttering in the warm August wind.

“I’m the Arrow. You’re the mayor. We’ve got a DA and a police chief on our side.” We’re loaded for bear, is what I’m saying. So let us march on our enemies, strike fear into their hearts, and drink our fill of their bitter tears or whatever.

I should know better. Stronger women and wiser men than I have been fighting for Starling’s soul since before I was born, and though they win battle after battle, there is never an end to the war. They give everything - their sweat and blood, their reputations, their lives - and the city claws it up greedily without a word of thanks. Thirty years after the Arrow first picked up a bow, she still needs someone to stand high atop a wall, keeping watch over the darkness.

But I can’t help hoping: “Maybe we can save her.”

Dad shakes his head, smiling softly. “Probably not.”

The shadows deepen in the streets below, and the southerly tugs at Dad’s suit jacket and tries to blow the hood back onto my shoulders. It flutters around my ears, but it stays up.

I look over at Dad. “Guess we’re too dumb not to try.”
His smile broadens, and he lays a hand on my shoulder.

For a long time, we stand just a few yards above the words carved deep into the pediment, leaning into the oncoming wind.

We watch night fall over our city.

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