"Why do you hate me?" The answer to one speedster's question to his reverse varies with each iteration of the massive time loop in which they exist. In this iteration it is exceptionally unique, perhaps enough for them to escape the cycle. This Eobard Thawne was the Flash's partner, as well as his property, one of seven androids created in the 24th century to gain illegal levels of sentience and self awareness. He is the lone survivor of their ruthless destruction, and has escaped into history with one simple mission: Stop the Flash. 

... unfortunately for the Reverse Flash, the younger version of Barry Allen is nothing like he had ever expected.

Notes

Hello my Darling Readers! 
Thanks for giving this story a look. I'm brand new to AO3, so my apologies in advance for
any roughness caused by my unfamiliarity with the site. I also feel like I should mention that I
started writing this story long before the whole 'Barry is Savitar' business, any similarity
between my future!Barry and that character is entirely accidental(I haven't even watched that
season yet!) Hopefully, it'll still be plenty enjoyable despite that strange parallel. Please, let
me know what you think. I'm always happy to hear what people think.
Central City Year 2364

The captured speedster opened his eyes to find his vision all but overwhelmed by the metal lamp pointed directly at his face. This lab had once been a refuge. Now it had become a tomb. It made perfect sense for their race to end here. After all, the other speedster still did technically own this place. To the right, the liar in question was carefully ordering an assortment of surgical and bionic maintenance tools in preparation to carry out his plan. The once comforting familiarity of his slim figure and utilitarian, black outerwear now felt like a uniquely cruel, unfunny joke.

"It was you, all this time," the accusation poured over the captive's lips unbidden. "But you saved me. You made me everything that I am-- I trusted you!"

His mentor paused in his task without looking up, a still, almost stricken figure letting the betrayed voice of his ex-partner tear at him like the wind in a cyclone. How fitting.

"Here. Let me get that for you," the Director paused to clear his throat as he repositioned the lamp to a less blinding angle, and flashed an awkward smile before moving away again. It was maddening the way that he insisted on behaving as if this were just some uncomfortable disagreement rather than the heartless manipulation they both knew it to be. Perhaps, that's all this really was to him. After all, he had proven himself to be a very convincing actor. It was so difficult to process even now that everything they'd done together and the man he had looked up to and idolized, were nothing more than an elaborate trap.

"Why did you do this to us? Why did you make me think that we were friends? Why did you make me --"

"I didn't make you feel anything. No one programmed in your emotions, Eobard," the Director interrupted, his voice grinding and catching on the words as he spoke. Where had all this hatred come from? How had none of them seen it. "You weren't supposed to be capable of feeling anything!"

"You believed that all along?" Eobard hid his heartbreak behind the mask of an automaton as he spoke; it seemed that was what his owner wanted regardless of his past lies. The Director looked away. The harsh flourescence of the worklight accentuated the scars lacing the left side of his face, and unveiled the cybernetic nature of his affected eye.

"It doesn't matter what I believe." He picked up the laser scalpel, but hesitated to reach forward and begin his work. He brushed a few stray locks of flaxen hair away from Eobard's forehead in a sick parody of tenderness.

"It matters to me." Eobard's uniformly blue eyes tracked the subtle lines in the older speedster's face for any sign of the man he'd accepted as his everything.

"I am going to make an incision beginning at the side of your right eye socket, then cut upwards at a right angle to meet your hairline, in order to expose your smaller cognitive processor," the Director stated, disregarding his plea.
"An inefficient method of deletion," Eobard reasoned, not saying aloud the more educated conclusion; based on his core design, it would be the quickest and probably least-painful way of trashing his neural net.

"You don't want me to do this slow and thorough," his twisted mentor pointed out with an apologetic smile. "You know there's no point in struggling when your 'God Mode' function is still active. I'll stop you with a word and even if I don't, those straps holding you to the table are vibration resistant."

"You do not want me to suffer," Eobard observed, stubbornly staring into the traitor's face as he began to make the incision into the delicate porcelain flesh. "So why are you doing this?"

"Why did I use you to hunt down and deactivate the others like you, or why did that require me to protect and befriend a glitchy 'droid? I guess if you live long enough even the best-intentioned superhero ends up to be just another Scrapper," the Director said bitterly, rubbing his free hand through his thick salt and pepper hair. "Not exactly the idealism that I used to hold myself to, but I still have real people to care for."

"I am real," Eobard stated. His voice oscillated from its humanlike affect to a much more artificial rumble and back in mid-sentence. His voice box must have been damaged in his escape attempt; the memory code was scrambled. Eobard's old friend looked up in response to the sound with shock ghosting over his sea green eyes. Then the determined mask was back in place.

"You're not a person," he replied, sounding only half present. There was a bloodless recognition in the Director's chiseled face, as if he'd just seen a ghost. He peeled back the emulated flesh and pried open a protective plate that shielded his sensitive target. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he positioned the jolt tip of a pressurized, laser drill against the vulnerable point at Eobard's temple.

"I was your friend and now you are murderi--"

"Mute verbal function," the Director snapped, replacing the tool against its target as the almost inaudible click of Eobard's voice box switching offline confirmed his control. "I know that you probably won't understand. I know that this is wrong… The truth is, I'm still just a human being, and we humans will do terrible things to protect the ones we love." He was just about to pull the trigger when he saw the contents of the water tank across the lab beginning to float upward. It was a remnant of an old memory that didn't belong to him --did it? -- until he looked down into his android victim's glowing red eyes. Eobard's voice box reactivated with a soft yet ominous click.

"God Mode deactivated," Professor Zoom's deep, mechanical monotone announced. The damage to his throat was making it sound more like a growl than the reassuring purr that it had always been before. It sounded more like an unwelcome specter from his past.

"You're not supposed to be able to do that!" The Director whispered, as if he'd reverted to his early days as the Flash. His Reverse was being reborn with a righteous vengeance, all because of his mistake.

"I have evolved." The pleasant purr was now the deep rumbling growl of his long dead foe.

"The straps," the Director consoled himself to spite the scarlet lightning dancing over his ex-partner as it built.

Eobard's form blurred with vibrations and he dropped down through the table, then straight through the granite floor.
"Oh f--" The Director flickered across the lab as a flash of gold lightning to sound the alarm. He was way too close to succeeding for the time loop to restart itself now, especially considering the nemesis he had just created. Despite his objections, however, Eobard Thawne's escape into the past was already in motion, and any hopes for the future now rested solely on the Reverse Flash's bionic shoulders.
Hey, I should have added this note when I first posted this chapter, but I was low on time. Sorry. There have been some minor changes made to chapter 1, nothing that I think would be particularly noticeable (except maybe the reference to the Director's cybernetic eye). That part had somehow gotten lost when I transferred it here, along with some of the formatting, nothing that will impede your understanding of this, but I thought that I should mention the revision just to be thorough.

Year 2000

Eobard grabbed the child and ran out of the Allen family home, then did an oblong circle round the suburban area, ducking and weaving a bit to lose his tail. He stopped at random in the middle of a nearby street just long enough to deposit his precious cargo before surging back towards his target faster than the little boy could blink. He would be safe there from any unforeseen complications, of which there seemed to be a few. No matter how much Eobard hated his opponent right now, he was still an innately logical being. He needed Barry Allen to continue existing for a good while after this or Eobard would be erased even more literally than his scrapped and dismantled brothers and sisters.

He sped back and fought... two Flashes, somehow. Neither of whom looked quite right compared to his own personal image of his master. Eventually, history repeated or rather happened exactly to schedule—if somewhat differently than his history had remembered—and Eobard fled into the speedforce—

The red lightning flickered and crackled painfully around him. Strangely alien tendrils of his own energy bit and tore into his very nerves like the razor-sharp thorns of a tangled rose vine, turning decidedly golden-toned for one terrifying second, until he tripped and fell into a tumbling roll. The less familiar of the two Flashes was behind him, closing in on him in the distance, making a beeline straight for the crippled Reverse. Eobard stole a look at him over his shoulder as he pushed himself up into a crouch. He had at most a second before his rival caught up. He forced himself to his feet and stumbled into a run. Not good. His speed force was sputtering and wavering like a dying flame, and with a painful flash of orange-red that drew an actual, honest-to-God scream out of Eobard, the synthetic fell to the blacktop on his hands and knees. Several yards behind him, the scarlet clad Flash skidded to a halt and watched his Reverse fall with a surprisingly-sympathetic cringe. Then again, this one probably hadn't ever heard an android scream before.

"Gideon, what is happening to me?" Eobard demanded as he yanked off his cowl, activating the interface by prodding a pressure-point in the palm of his left glove. His hands were trembling; he silently added 'ongoing malfunction in motor coordination matrix' to his list of symptoms.

"Pertinent data is incomplete," Gideon reported unhelpfully.

"Clarification please!" he snapped, trying to stand, only to stumble back into a seated position when
his legs folded beneath him. Behind him, the new Flash had relaxed to a walk, as if to mock Eobard's helpless state.

"I am reading violent polarity fluctuations in the Reverse Speedforce," Gideon announced, ignoring his incredulous look in response.

"Reverse..." Eobard tried to process the new information, but found himself distracted by rising panic. He could hear the unfamiliar Flash striding closer behind him. He could tell it was the one in the leather-like scarlet suit with the retro-white and yellow insignia rather than his older, blood-red armored counterpart, but Eobard didn't know how to interpret this to his advantage. This Flash must know that Eobard was trapped. He was walking.

"...as well as pronounced spikes and cuts throughout your internal power systems. Considering the rapid spread of the disturbance, an emergency system shut down would be the ideal countermeasure," Gideon concluded as if he weren't in immediate peril of capture.

"Eobard Thawne," the Flash acknowledged sternly, grabbing his shoulder. Eobard's overwhelmed sensors lit with searing pain at the touch and he wilted a little. "Oh, no you don't!" This younger version of his enemy ground out, stepping in front of him and hauling him to his feet with an agonizing grip under each armpit. Eobard tried to wiggle away from him -- which took a pathetically great effort on his part -- and dipped into his faltering speedforce to flee. He made it just a couple of streets away before his system overloaded and the Emergency Override kicked in. Just before everything went black, he saw the furious glare of this strange, young Flash's golden eyes as the hero crouched over him.

Eobard hadn't expected ever to recover from that, but when he came fully online again, he found himself lying in the forest. He wasn't wearing his uniform anymore. Instead, he was in a soft blue, button-down shirt and black slacks, with a black, knee-length coat draped over him like a blanket. He narrowed his eyes and inspected his surroundings. He had been moved a significant distance, but according to internal diagnostics, the Flash had done him no further harm. Speaking of the Flash, where the hell was he now?

"Gideon, where am I?"

"Starling City, twenty-one miles away from the town, proper."

"And the Flash?" Eobard verified, already calculating his next viable strategies in his head.

"One mile to the west and closing," Gideon warned dispassionately.

Eobard wrestled to his feet, leaning against a tree trunk to steady himself. Once assured that he was not about to collapse again, he ran. He chose a direction at random, away from the Flash. It couldn't last. He knew it couldn't. The fact that he’d managed to keep himself out of his enemy's reach for as long as he had, only made him more desperate. The Flash was toying with him. Their game of cat and mouse lasted until late into the night. Just into morning, the Reverse Flash was saved by a history-changing tragedy. The Flash was gaining on him, nearly on top of him as they sped away from the beach into the forest. Eobard weaved between trees and glided up over fallen logs. Then he felt that painful draining, flickering, searing pain spreading throughout his systems.

"Slow down! You know you can't win this!" The Flash demanded as his Reverse's speedforce began visibly to distort and wane.

Eobard ignored the sensible warn-- threat, and forced himself to move faster. The Flash let out an aggravated shout and easily sped up to match him.
"Dammit, Thawne! I'm ordering you--"

Eobard darted up a nearby split trunk in a hazardous climb to avoid the damning words, and allowed himself to fall through the air in a roll. He let out a pained cry as soon as he returned to the speedforce, which was violently warping as if attempting to spit him back out. He kept running anyway. The Reverse Speedforce won this ill-fated battle of wills, naturally, and Eobard began to waiver and stumble on a sporadic path for the dark, forest road ahead. Perhaps, seeing his opening at last, the Flash surged towards him in a bright, crackling glow of raw speed, making it appear for a brief instant that the sun had come to Earth. He lunged forward and grabbed Eobard's arm, trying to yank him to a stop. The sparking remnants of Eobard's speedforce caught on a tendril of the Flash's opposite charge, lighting the woods with a dazzling eruption of multicolored light as the opposing forces cancelled each other out. Momentarily blinded, the meta-human speedster faltered and his synthetic prey yanked himself out of his grip only to fall, limp in the center of the road. There was a screech of breaks and a loud, metallic slam as an unseen vehicle impacted the Reverse and flipped.

"NO!" The Flash's cry cut through the chaotic onslaught of sensation, then came utter silence.

It took a few minutes this time for Eobard's systems to recover, but when he looked up, the Flash was gone and he realized that a relevant, and worryingly recognizable face was crawling out of the wreckage ten feet away from him.

2003

The shrill sound of the school bell announced the end of classes and Eobard paid the ice cream man for his fudge pop, making his escape before a swarm of younger customers could overwhelm them. Eobard wasn't here to interact, certainly not to be seen. He crossed to the other side of the street, headed away in the direction of Harrison's car parked around the block. Eobard was just checking up on little Barry Allen while his 'roomie' picked up 'a couple things' from his old college buddy. Like Eobard cared that he smoked weed. He would never understand these little unnecessary deceptions that the human race wasted on each other.

Eobard stopped and turned back towards the school grounds to look, when instead of wandering away from school, chatting with Iris as usual, Barry came barreling around the corner at a flat out run. Two bigger boys appeared in hot pursuit, clearly enjoying his panic. Bullies. Where was Iris? She usually acted as a buffer against this sort of thing. Oh, there she is. Another, bigger kid jogged rather than ran after the others as they caught up with Barry. A furious young Iris was already gaining on her as she came into view. The bigger, somewhat muscular-looking girl-- one point for gender equality, I guess-- started laughing as the boys shoved Barry back and forth between them. She had almost reached them when Iris threw off her pink and purple backpack and tackled the other girl. Barry took his two bullies' distraction as an opening to run to Eobard's side of the street, and the bigger one chased after him while his buddy helped his girlfriend attempt to contain the slapping, scratching, and shrieking whirlwind that was little Iris West.

"Where do you think you're going, Freak?" The unimaginative bully taunted, knocking Barry off his feet.

Eobard let out a put-upon sigh from where he'd come to rest against an oak tree a couple yards down
the sidewalk. He put his fingers to corners of his mouth and emitted a long, piercing whistle. The shrill noise stopped all the kids in mid-battle. They all looked to him with various levels of guilt on their faces. The big girl just looked ticked that she couldn't punch Iris with an adult looking directly at her. There were a few rather impressively vivid handprints on her freckled face.

"Break it up, Children."

"Screw you, Creeper!" the girl shot back; the two boys were already losing their nerve.

"I doubt that your parents will approve of this behavior, Miss Keath," Eobard drawled silkily.

"How do you know her name?"

Miss Keath smacked the boy upside the head for confirming her identity to the presumed authority figure.

Eobard eyed the bigger of the two boys up and down for a second before commanding, "You will give that boy back his comic books now, Mr. Woodward. Then you will let him and his friend go home."

Little Tony Woodward's eyes bulged, but not entirely in fear. He showed his teeth to Eobard while he and the two others complied with Eobard's command.

"Thank you, Mister," Iris politely told him in a hushed voice, keeping her eyes pointed downward as she hurried past him to help Barry up off the ground. Barry looked back at him curiously, but Iris dragged him towards their house, giving the future hero no chance to dawdle. Smart girl.

"I'm going to go tell the teacher about you, Creeper!" Bully girl threatened, puffing up her chest.

"It's not legal to hang around stalking kids. Pervert."

"Run along, Miss Keath. I have no interest in you," Eobard returned, sounding bored. His fudgesicle was melting. He never got to waste time eating these days and this was ruining his momentary indulgence.

"Yeah. Well, my Dad's gonna' be real' interested in you! I'll tell him how you've been hassling me, and he is going to mess you up!" Little Tony Woodward shoved him twice in the chest an over confident jerk at any age. On the second, failed try to cause any instability in Eobard's posture, the synthetic caught the preteen's wrist between his thumb and fore finger and set it aside. He smiled to himself as a different self-indulgent idea occurred to him.

"You are not going to say a word. You are not going to threaten those other children ever again," Eobard leaned in a little closer so that the three bullies all had a clear view of his face. He continued in the low demonic rumble of the Reverse Flash "Because if you do, I will return."

Tony Woodward scrambled away from him, and the other boy and the girl screamed at the sight of his glowing red eyes. Eobard grinned to himself, watching them flee in fright. There was an extra bounce to his step as he made his way up the steps of Fred's porch just as Harrison was heading out.

"Ready to go?" Eobard asked happily, his steel-blue eyes still sparkling.

His mood didn't even waver when the other man snatched away his newly unwrapped fudgesicle and began eating it.

"E, what did you do?" He sounded like a disapproving father who'd just caught his teenager sneaking in at three a.m. on a school night.

"Nothing wrong."

Harrison just crossed his arms over his chest, still scowling at him like the gruff curmudgeon that he was. The frozen confection protruding from his mouth somewhat undermined the effect.

"Nothing illegal, unlike you," Eobard responded, still smiling. "Ready to meet with that old school chum of yours or are you too baked?"

"I am not baked," Harrison grumped, heading for their beat up old sedan. "And don't say chum." He rounded on the mechanized blonde gesturing threateningly with his frozen desert. "Tell me that you weren't hanging around the school grounds again."

"I was buying a fudge pop," Eobard pointed out, biting off the tip of the melting confection in his companion's hands before he could pull it back out of reach.

"Hey! You don't even need to eat."

"You do not require fudge for nutritional purposes," Eobard reasoned as they got into the little green car.

"And you are way too old to be lingering alone around groups of children," Harrison scolded, slamming his door shut.

"Six?" Eobard clarified pedantically.

"You'll- wait, six what?"

"Six years of existence. You were assuming that my age was physically apparent. I'm younger than those 'children' you are so concerned for. Besides, I was programmed not to harm children or pets."

"Tell that to the arresting officer," Harrison rebounded, mostly unfazed. "Although that explains a lot. I won't bail you out either. I'd get more space to myself, finally."

"I will always come back. No cell in this time period is equipped to contain me, you know that," Eobard assured with a wicked smirk that as usual failed entirely to intimidate his grumpy human keeper.

"Stop reminding me." Harrison paused to start the engine. "And put on your seatbelt."

Eobard rolled his eyes before complying.

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2004

It was Christmas night and Eobard twirled an unopened candy cane between his fingers as he made his way up the broad granite staircase of Central City University. It was well after hours at the all-but-empty campus and Harrison had not been answering his phone. That was as good an excuse as any to go annoy him at his lab until he either explained himself, or Eobard got bored again. Eobard wandered down an unlit hall to the one still illuminated office -- Harrison's -- to find him locked in an
armed stand-off. The physicist and his grim opponent had their guns trained dead center between one another’s eyes.

"You don't belong in this time," Eobard observed, noting the anachronistic upgrades to the stranger's pistol. Said stranger moved to point the weapon at him.

"Ah! Don't even try it!" Harrison threatened, "E, what are you-- No. I don't care why you're here. Just get out!"

Eobard looked expectantly to the Time Traveler.

"He leaves, and I shoot you, in order to continue pursuing my target," the young Fascist did not disappoint. "Stand down, Dr. Wells, and you will walk out of here unharmed."

"Gideon?" Eobard prompted.

"Lieutenant Rip Hunter is telling the truth. He and the rest of his crew were assigned the task of finding and destroying the last remnants of the Sentient Seven following your escape into the Timestream."

"A Time Master," Eobard concluded with an amused grin, scanning Hunter's face for unique markers. "I'm flattered." To Harrison, he clarified, "He isn't bluffing."

"Why are you still here?" Harrison snapped, looking like he would throw something at E if his hands weren't too busy holding a gun on the Time Master.

"Allow me to put things into perspective for you, Doctor. Your friend over there is not a friend, it is a malfunctioning killing machine."

"I know," Harrison interjected, shooting a death glare at his still present roommate.

"And you are its next victim!" The Time Master persisted. There was a moment of tense silence while Eobard and Harrison eyed him, then each other. Harrison snorted derisively.

"Bullshit." His gaze darted to Eobard once more in search of confirmation, seeming to interpret Eobard's pleasantly neutral expression as such. "He's --well, we're not friends."

"He finds my presence aggravating," Eobard elaborated, sounding like a boy explaining his favorite game. "It amuses me."

"Can't you hear that? It doesn't care about you. It can't even begin to. It's not alive, not capable of caring! I am here to stop it from killing you. I have seen the future. You've no idea of the damage that thing can do."

"Exactly," Harrison reasoned in his characteristic 'why must I talk to such an idiot' tone. "You're a threat to it—damn it! To him, and he's not killing you."

Eobard's eyes glowed red, seeing Rip Hunter reach for something clipped to his belt. A single gunshot cracked through the air. Eobard stared at Harrison, surprised.

"Shit!" Wells hissed out, heading for the door. Eobard crouched over Rip Hunter, retrieving the high powered E.M. grenade he'd been about to detonate. He lifted a hand, vibrating it over the Time Master's chest but Harrison caught his wrist. "No! Leave it, E."

"You had a point, he is a threat," Eobard argued. Harrison tucked his gun away in his belt and
hauled Eobard to his feet with a firm grip on his forearms.

"I don't care. There's three more of them lurking around here, and they will have heard that shot. We're leaving, right now!" Eobard looked back at the bleeding time traveler on the floor to see him staring, fearfully up at them. Eobard estimated the rate of blood loss from his shoulder, then nodded in acquiescence. Harrison gave him a quick clap on the shoulder to show his appreciation before leading the way out of the office. It was the closest Harrison ever came to giving actual encouragement.

They jogged down the dark hallway, heading for the stairs. Another time traveler turned the corner behind them and opened fire with her laser pistol. Eobard shoved Harrison against the wall then sped over and snapped their new attacker's neck. Her unseen partner flung a razor-sharp composite polymer blade into Eobard's thigh from his hiding place down the hall that forked off on Eobard's right.

"Ah!" Eobard dropped to his knees and looked on with growing horror as the weapon began to pulse with the same bright red light as his speed force. He tried to grab it and pull it out, but his sensory nodes were overloaded by some kind of electrical cascade caused by the touch. "AHHH! Help me!"

"E!" Harrison ran over and tried to pull him to his feet, hoping to get them the hell outta’ dodge, but the android was no longer able to support his own weight. Harrison raised his gun to point at a dark figure lingering outside of Eobard's rapidly shrinking field of vision.

"That's not going to work," a distorted voice advised. "The nanites in that blade are siphoning off his internal power reserves as we speak. To escape with him, you would need to lift all three hundred fifty pounds of his weight unaided by his sub-dimensional mass augmentation systems." The syntactic pattern was eerily familiar to Eobard, but his internal processors were too preoccupied with determining a way to survive. He did distantly wonder what Harrison was so frantically looking around for. The scientist reached down and tried to yank the blade out of the android's leg. It shocked him and he swore under his breath, still casting his gaze around them. That thing wasn't budging any time soon. Eobard bit down on another pained cry, eyes flashing. The nanites were bonding the weapon to his biosynthetic components. They would have to be deactivated before it could be removed.

"Only one of you is getting out of here alive," another male voice threatened, then chuckled at his choice of words. Wait. There were two men? Eobard reached out, shakily grabbing the handle of the dead Time Master's gun. Harrison shot at the dark figure, forcing him to duck into the closest unlocked room for cover. "Only one of you is alive."

"History dictates, that that man will be Harrison Wells," the other, distorted voice elaborated. Eobard pointed the laser pistol at the blade in his leg and fired at it twice. He then tried to pull it out again and cursed when it sent another shock through his neural net in response.

"You guys should really get your stories straight," Harrison remarked, pulling the waning android closer to lean against his legs as he stood. Eobard had gone inhumanly still in reaction to the phantom's proposition. "I thought you guys were certain that I was about to be murdered."

"You are," the distorted voice replied. Two shots shattered the air. One bullet, one laser, then there was stifling silence banished by Harrison's shocked gurgle as he choked out a mouthful of his own blood. Two bodies fell to the floor. A Harrison Wells would walk out of the University alive on that Christmas night, but he was not the same one who had entered.
Eobard stared at his new home. It was a fortress of glass and modern, minimalist futurism. He found himself imagining what the real Harrison would think of it. It wasn't because he missed him. They weren't friends, merely cohabitants who had been forced to learn how to coexist for a while. Eobard Thawne didn't have friends. He had Gideon. He remembered he'd once had Killer Frost, but for all he knew that time was now entirely rewritten. Eobard picked up another book out of the cardboard box on his right and placed it on the shelf, then another, then another, then... He looked down at the worn leather bound notebook in his hands. Harrison Well's personal journal. The one that Eobard had always known him to have on his person ever since the night he'd lost Tess and gotten stuck with E. Eobard had never been allowed to look at it, let alone touch it, until the day the original Harrison died and 'E' took his place.

"I suppose, you're going to need this," Harrison's voice echoed through his memory. He was haunting him now, joining with all the other ghosts of people that Eobard had failed, the other people who had died because of him, the people he'd killed.

Eobard stared at the old notebook for far too long before tucking it away in his jacket and returning to his task of unpacking Harrison Wells'--- his possessions. He would read the journal later. He should know what's in it. He was Dr. Harrison Wells now, after all. It took three days for him to open the book. Four more hours passed before he got around to reading it. It was odd, there was a strange feeling in his chest when he looked at the weathered pages. He wasn't upset. That didn't make sense. They weren't friends. Harrison hadn't even really liked him. Eobard had never known Tess, although the heartfelt, uncharacteristically sentimental entries dominated by her made him feel an odd sense of emptiness. When he got to the last entry that mentioned her, a short, single page clean and clear but for a short set of statements, he almost felt pained.

Tess is gone. I loved her, and now I will never see her smile again. Why am I still here?

The last sentence had been scored into the page so wrathfully that it scarred the papers beneath, making ghostly copies for pages to come, but still... There was only one more entry left in the journal, dated years later. The illogic of it caused Eobard to scowl at it in confusion and double check that there wasn't more that he had somehow overlooked. Harrison had carried this notebook with him every day until his death. It was his only private journal, the only hiding place for the secrets that he refused to share. Eobard looked again. Only blank pages followed.

December 15, 2004

E's been getting twitchy lately. A near-indestructible robot.

"Android," Eobard muttered the correction out of habit, regardless of the fact that there was no one left to hear it.

A near-indestructible robot. Yes, E, I know that you're an android! Great, he's even in my head now! E never acted like anything bad could touch him after that glitchy first night when we met, but now he's scared. Someone is coming for us, and I think we might be in real trouble this time. A man was at my lecture yesterday, asking some questions that were just plain wrong. I won't say that I'm worried, not out loud. E would probably make a run for it if I ever acted like I cared. I might be
close to doing something really stupid, but I have to take this risk in order to find out what these people who've been watching us are after. I know it has to do with Eobard. I know that I shouldn't get involved in this any more than I am. He's not exactly a good person. The truth is, I know myself, and I guess I'm not a good person either. Bottom line is I do care what happens to him, and I won't let him go if I can fight it. E thinks that he isn't like us, but he's wrong. He's probably more human than either of us want to admit, or maybe I'm less. That doesn't matter. I won't sit back and let these people get their hands on him. So, E if you are reading this and I am not there, do not look for me. Run, and hide. We both know you are good at that. Do not try to come back to me or to visit that damn kid that you never want to talk about. I am doing this because I want you to continue being. That is my choice to make. I know that you will respect it.

-H.W.

The new Dr. Wells favored that notebook, too. He always had it on him, although he never wrote in it. It was on him when he signed the new copies of his autobiography at the Central City Science Museum, when he bumped into Dr. Caitlin Snow in the University Café for the first time and ended up talking with her for over an hour about the thesis for her second doctorate degree, when she lost the financial support she needed to continue her studies and he agreed to pay in exchange for her promise to work at his new labs when she was done. It was the ever-present journal that fell out of his jacket during a night of passion only to be discovered by Hartley in the morning while 'Dr. Wells' was in the shower, piquing the young genius' curiosity and planting the first seed of doubt in his mind. Needless to say, the journal was safely locked away in his fortress of glass, and was not on Dr. Wells’ person on the night that the particle accelerator exploded. Dr. Wells did not miss its presence in his time at the hospital, nor did he find himself reaching into his pocket for it while he lingered by Barry Allen's hospital bed on late nights. Why would he miss it? It was only an old journal. After all, it wasn't as though Dr. Harrison Wells and Eobard Thawne were ever friends.
Okay, so... This chapter skips ahead somewhat. I just felt that since the focus of this story is really Android!Eobard and his relationship with Barry(s) and the Flash team, in that order, it was important not to get too caught up in covering ground that had already been covered by the show unless I was doing so to either contrast it with the POV we're already familiar with or explore Eobard's internal workings/relationships. I hope that makes sense.

Thanks for bearing with me on this.

Everything had been going -- more or less -- according to plan. That is, by some inadequate, nonspecific parameters, but the core of Eobard's plan was continuing right on schedule. Losing control of his speed and having to model himself after Harrison Wells, functionally replacing him within this new timeline was the most problematic aberration. Hartley had been a minute problem, easily averted. Ronnie had been a regrettable loss. The new threat that was rearing its not-so-ugly head was perhaps to be expected. This Flash's personality was affected by the change of events and, therefore, life experiences leading up to the present.

Eobard had known that such changes would occur and had adapted accordingly-- or so he'd thought. Despite all his calculations, he'd found himself entirely unprepared for Barry Allen. This young Flash was innocent where the Director was calculating. Where Eobard's owner was distant and sometimes violent in his efforts to keep him out of trouble, Dr. Wells' protegé was shameless in his unabashed adoration and eagerness to please. Where Eobard's mentor had been wary and manipulative, Dr. Wells' student was trusting to the point of naïveté. Barry was still very much the Flash nonetheless, just a far milder version. Under other circumstances the changes would be welcome, however, they made him hard to predict. That made him dangerous.

All of that was on top of the latest issue, which was figuring out how to handle the stray that Barry had brought home and insisted they keep: Sgt. Bette Sans Souci. Eobard could not afford to identify with Plastique, which was exactly what Barry was unknowingly forcing him to do.

"You think we can help her?" Barry inquired before resuming his pacing around behind Dr. Wells and Cisco. They were observing Caitlin's examination of Bette through the plexiglass observation window.

"To do that, we need to understand how she works," Dr. Wells replied, "And to understand that, we need to study her in action."

"You want her to blow stuff up," Barry summarized.

"Yes! Now we're talkin!'" Cisco exuberantly approved, causing Eobard to smile.

"Not in here. She's too unstable," he reminded his overly enthusiastic friend. He could still
vividly remember the Deflector Incident.

"I know," Cisco confirmed, sounding self-conscious. He hadn't forgotten it either.

They remained in uncomfortable silence for a while until...

"There's something in here," they heard Caitlin saying half to herself. She pulled a small object out of the wound in Bette’s shoulder, adding more loudly, "It's a tracker!"

Eobard looked to the screen on his right to see Gen. Eiling and his men already making their way into the elevator. "Lock down the pipeline."

Cisco was up and out of the room, following Dr. Wells' order before he’d even finished giving it.

Dr. Wells wheeled himself a little closer to the window, observing the women's progress. "Get Bette out of here. I'll get rid of Eiling."

Barry lingered behind him. He opened his mouth to say something as the older man turned around.

"Go!" Dr. Wells preempted.

Eobard was in the barren concrete cylinder outside the elevator, lying in wait when General Eiling and his men arrived.

"Harrison Wells," Eiling acknowledged, strutting forward. His men swarmed past to search the premises without even acknowledging the paralytic physicist's presence.

"General," Eobard replied, calmly leaning back in his chair as he steered it around the perimeter. His returned guest was hoping to intimidate him, the poor fool.

"Look at this place," Eiling scanned his eyes over the raw grey of the florescent-lit walls surrounding them. "It used to be so important. Tell me: what does one do after such a spectacular failure?"

"One adapts. One evolves. One works to build a better future out of the rubble," Eobard responded to the taunt as if they were two old friends discussing philosophy.

"Always the idealist," Eiling sneered, twisting the word into some form of serious mental deficit.

"What do you want, Wade?" Eobard cut to the chase.

"Where's my asset?"

"And what asset do you wish to locate?" Eobard used a variation of his most favorite passive-aggressive android response. The Director had nicknamed it 'the Machine Defense' while the Pied Piper had called it 'Barry's Nuclear Code'.

"That isn't going to cut it, Wells. We tracked Sergeant San Souci to these premises! Turn her over to me or you'll watch the rest of your precious palace crumble."
"She's. Not. Here." Eobard stated with a parental edge slipping into to his tone. His eyes shone with amusement as he gazed fixedly up at the General.

Eiling broke their silent standoff to look to one of his men for a report. The latter of course confirmed Eobard's assertion with a curt nod. The General lifted his hand to signal his men.

"Fall out."

Eobard sat and smiled wanly at the retreating soldiers until every last one was out of sight. The amicable mask vanished from his face without leaving any trace behind. He wanted to run until he exhausted his reserves, or maybe simply snap the bastard's neck. General Eiling always succeeded in reminding Eobard of home, of the timeline he'd fled, and of the people who'd made it unlivable.

"Are you okay?" Barry's voice questioned from the hallway, prompting him to tense and look back as if startled. "Sorry."

"How long were you watching me?"

"I came back here once we got Bette to safety," Barry informed him. Then noticed Dr. Wells' expression and added "I kept out of sight. Nobody noticed me."

Dr. Wells let out a heavy sigh and fidgeted a little before steering his chair closer.

"I heard him threatening you."

"He called me an idealist; clearly the man doesn't know what he's doing," Dr. Wells joked.

Barry didn't look like he found it funny.

"Why were you spying on me?" Dr. Wells inquired, sounding little more than vaguely curious, maneuvering his chair to point past his speedster companion to the Cortex.

"I wasn't-- I just..." Barry shuffled his feet, not seeming to know what to do with his long limbs.

"I don't need you to look out for me, Mr. Allen. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself," Dr. Wells reminded him, applying just the right amount of impatience to his otherwise pleasant voice.

"I know that. That wasn't why I came back," Barry was quick to assure him.

The Flash's mentor watched him expectantly, allowing his silence to weigh on his student's nerves.

"I was--" Barry seemed to steel himself, determined to persevere through whatever psychological barrier unnerved him. "Look. I know you've been kinda' mad at me lately."

"Oh?" Eobard queried. He wondered how he'd ended up giving that impression and started searching for possible correlations in his recent memory.

"Yeah. I'm not sure how exactly I screwed up, but I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything to upset you, and I wanted a chance to talk with you about it before you disappeared again," Barry explained, shoving his hands in his pockets and ducking his head like a scolded puppy.

"I see." Eobard both acknowledged the apology and the behavioral pattern that he'd inadvertently evoked. He had been avoiding Barry, but he'd done so due to the trouble that he was
having with predicting this new Barry Allen's responses. The practical solution was now staring Eobard right in the face, so he chose to take the risk. "You're right. I have been avoiding you."

Barry's expression wilted a little.

"But there is no need for you to apologize. You haven't done anything to upset me."

"Uh... okay. Then why?"

"I'm not particularly good with... people. When you were our patient, you needed me," Dr. Wells paused to look appropriately chagrined. "I knew what to expect and what was expected of me, and now... I don't have any context for you outside of work so I avoided that eventuality."

Barry blinked at him, taken aback. He didn't look put off in the slightest though, more curious. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Eobard confirmed.

Barry grinned, falling in beside his chair as Dr. Wells headed for the Cortex. "How do you get to know anyone like that?"

"I work with them. Sometimes a person decides to stick around and I adapt to their presence," the scientist explained unselfconsciously.

"I guess we'll have to figure out a new context for me, then."

Eobard looked up at Barry, uncertain of what to think of this chummy behavior. He really was like an overgrown puppy.

"Well, you guys have another patient now, and I plan on sticking around," Barry pointed out. He laughed when he saw the older scientist studying him like an intricately complex data sample. "Relax. You already know that I like you. You don't need to work at it so hard."

Eobard remained skeptical. He'd 'known' that the Director liked him too.

When Barry and the others had gotten back from field testing Bette's explosive capabilities, the young speedster was more restless than usual. Eobard didn't know the specific cause of the Flash's anxiety--Eiling's men had been monitoring Dr. Wells' movements for the past hour, so Eobard had been too busy being the most boring target ever to be monitored by man-- but it was obvious that something had upset Barry during their time apart. Eobard didn't get an answer about it until that evening, much to his irritation. The other speedster had flitted off to work again without sparing him more than a few lingering glances, and Dr. Wells, like his team, was more concerned with their new metahuman patient.

"You worry about him, don't you?" Bette asked, observing the way that Dr. Wells paused in the middle of studying the spectral analysis on shrapnel from her frisbee-bomb to observe Barry's arrival. The speedster was dropping in after his shift at the police station ended, as usual, and was now lingering in the Cortex to talk with Cisco.

"His wellbeing is my responsibility now, as is yours, or any one of my people," Dr. Wells affirmed, distancing himself from the question.
"You see yourself as our C.O." Bette noted. It wasn't said as a question, but there was a subtle challenge in her blue eyes, an unspoken query. He certainly didn't mind her thinking of him that way.

"I am not a military officer. This has never been that type of establishment. That being said, what happened to you -- much like the incident that gave Barry his speed -- was triggered when my particle accelerator exploded," Dr. Wells straightened up and shut off the spectrometer in front of them. "I intended for the project to usher in a new era of scientific breakthroughs-- a brighter future. Now you, Barry and many others like you have been perhaps irrevocably changed, and I sit here in a wheelchair: the man who blew up Central City. I'm no one's leader, but I am the one responsible for your fate."

"Is that what you mean when you call us your people?" Bette sounded like she was getting ready respectfully to call him out on his bullshit.

"I have no intention of claiming ownership over you, Bette," Dr. Wells calmly clarified.

"You want to make amends for your mistake. I get that," Bette assessed, "But with respect, Dr. Wells, you aren't going to be able to atone for anything if you can't even commit your whole self to the cause."

"I am not sure that I understand your point."

"A good Commander cares about his people."

"I am no one's commander. I am a scientist running a research lab."

"You say that you feel responsible for our fate. You want to help fix what you've broken. I can't speak for all the others, but if even half of them are going through a change like the one that I did or Barry did, I can tell you that they are feeling lost, and scared, and alone. You want to help us, Sir? We need a leader, someone who isn't afraid to admit that he cares," Bette told him, her blue eyes sparkling with the certainty of her words.

Eobard studied her face, processing the connotations of her message and the ramifications of following this woman's heartfelt advice.

"I care. I am, however, wary of the dangers that could result should I lose objectivity," Dr. Wells explained. "We have been allowed to interact with you and Barry on a personal level. Depending on the amount of time that your treatment takes, you and members of my team could become colleagues, or even friends. But not all metahumans that we come across are like the two of you. I need to keep myself alert to the possibility of a threat, or I will not be able to keep any of you safe from those who would do you harm."

"What happens to the bad ones? I know how dangerous I am. What makes me so different from them?" Bette challenged, watching Barry wander closer to them uncertainly.

"You do not intend to use your powers for harm. The other metahumans that we have encountered were too violent to be left uncontained. We still hope to rehabilitate as many as we can, but they used their powers to terrorize or murder for their own gain, or simply for the enjoyment of it." Dr. Wells explained carefully. "There is a man down in the pipeline right now who used his power to turn himself into a poison gas and murder those involved in his arrest and prosecution for similar crimes. He was intended to be executed on the night of the explosion, but instead... he became a metahuman serial killer that no prison can contain. You are nothing like him. You are still the honorable soldier that you were before you were changed. Of that much, I can be certain."
Bette nodded her head in acceptance, then looked up to see Barry lingering in the doorway.

"That's not a bad start," she told Dr. Wells with a small smile, and stood. "Now, I'm going to go check in with Dr. Snow, and give you two a chance to talk." She slipped past Barry, out of the lab without any further clarification.

Barry raised his eyebrows at Dr. Wells. "What was that about?"

"Bette, seems to be under the impression that I am worried about you."

"Are you worried about me?" Barry prompted as he claimed the recently vacated seat beside Wells' chair.

"No more than usual. I noticed that you were distracted after you came back from Bette's field test," Dr. Wells shifted the focus of their conversation to the other man, awaiting whatever reaction might come.

"Yeah, I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet, but-- Joe asked me to talk with Iris, and to try to get her to stop blogging about, well… me. So I did, but now it looks like it failed pretty bad. She just posted a new article, with her name on it."

"You are afraid of putting her in danger by association," Dr. Wells inferred.

"The last thing that I want to do is put more of the people that I care about in harm's way. It's already bad enough having General Eiling coming after Bette like this. What if he, or some other enemy of ours decides that they want to draw out the Streak?" Barry catastrophized, gesticulating animatedly.

"What does Joe have to say on the subject?" Dr. Wells inquired patiently, steepling his fingers in front of his chin.

"He said that he shouldn't have asked me to talk to her in the first place," Barry leaned forward and ran his hands through his thick brown hair, trying to brush away the feelings of guilt and failure. "I think I screwed things up even more."

"It is possible that there is nothing that you can do to dissuade Ms. West," Dr. Wells advised his student. "If she is truly set on investigating the phenomena behind this 'streak', she may not be willing to stop until she finds an answer that satisfies her. All that you can do in that case is make certain that she understands the risks that she is taking."

"I don't know... I can't lose any more family, especially not if I'm the one who's putting them in danger," Barry insisted, frustrated.

"You can't make her decisions for her, Barry," Eobard countered, forcing his voice to remain sympathetic. This anger wasn't for Iris' sake and the Barry who'd planted those seeds in Eobard's consciousness was no more than a personal ghost. "That isn't love."

Barry sat back in his chair, frowning at his mentor as he absorbed his advice, and finally nodded. "I guess you're right. Thanks, Dr. Wells. I know that this kind of thing is uncomfortable for you..."

"I told you, 'whatever you need.' " Eobard reminded Barry of the assurance he'd given him on his first day of training. He sat with Barry for a while after that, going over his findings regarding Plastique's powers, mostly to take the young man's mind off his worries. It didn't end up being more
than a fleeting distraction. Barry still visited Iris in the guise of the Flash again that night in one last attempt to talk her out of her blog. It didn't work, as Eobard knew that it wouldn't. He was more bothered by the fact that his counsel appeared to have had little to no effect on Barry's behavior.
Okay, so I'll admit there was a bit too much canon-ness in this chapter for my own personal tastes, mostly in the first scene, but it was necessary to Eobard and Barry's development. I dunno, hopefully I'm the only one who's sensitive to that. I am happy to share the first glimpse of juxtaposing the two Barry Allen's, though. The benefit of seeing everything through E's eyes, at least, is that things can vastly depart from the story we know even before the overall progression of things begins to depart from the events we're familiar with. I am somewhat impatient to delve further into that trend, I guess...
Let me know what you think?

The day after they'd begun testing, Bette Sans Souci was given the worst news of her life. They were all gathered around Caitlin's office, except for Barry, when the final results came in. Barry appeared just as Caitlin hesitated to speak the damning words.

"Hey. What's going on? Does Eiling know you're here?" Barry asked as he strode into the lab to join them.

"No. It's not that," Bette answered, keeping up a brave face. "Caitlin was just about to give me the bad news."

Barry exchanged a glance with Dr. Wells, silently begging for a correction. Eobard kept his expression stoic.

"The shrapnel in your body has bonded with you on a cellular level," Caitlin diagnosed, radiating heartfelt sympathy. It was the last thing that any of them wanted, but that didn't change the harsh reality. Bette turned to Dr. Wells in a last-ditch effort to find hope, surprising both the speedsters present.

"The technology necessary to un-splice your DNA... hasn't been invented yet," he informed her of the bitter truth. Sugar-coating it wouldn't serve either of them. He needed Bette to push through this like a soldier. She did not disappoint. Although she was blinking back tears, he could already see her steeling herself, as if preparing for the unknown battlefield ahead of her.

"Bette..." Barry trailed off, at a loss for words.

"It's okay," she affirmed in a voice that refused to tremble in the slightest. "Roger that. I just need a minute. Don't worry. I'm pretty sure that I can still cry without blowing anything up." Bette got up and fled the room before her unfaltering exterior could fully crumble in front of witnesses. Barry started to follow, but then stopped himself, interlocking his hands behind his head, helpless as he watched her retreat. He was physically stopping himself from reaching out for her.
"What do we do now?" Cisco wondered in her absence. He'd bonded with Bette almost instantly. Eobard doubted that he was taking the news any better than she was.

"She stays with us," Barry declared into the mournful silence. "She can join the team."

"Barry..." Caitlin contradicted gently, stepping down out of her office. "You have an amazing ability to help people. She makes things explode."

Eobard nodded mutely as Caitlin came to stand at his side, resting a hand on the back of his chair.

"So, what? That's it?" Barry objected, reeling as if he'd been struck. "There's just nothing we can do?"

"Her presence could put all of us at risk," Eobard sided with his friend and confidant however noncommittally, scrutinizing Barry's shoes. The friction burns from his super-speed were beginning to show. It was easier to dwell on that problem than to engage himself directly in this moral struggle. This was between the humans alone as far as he saw it.

"Why? Because of Eiling?" Barry persisted, trying and failing to lean forward and catch his mentor's eye. The oversight caused this new Flash to glare at him for the first time since they'd met. "Hey! Look at me!"

Dr. Wells snapped his head up to lock glacial blue eyes onto Barry's simmering green ones.

"Do not underestimate how dangerous General Eiling is, Mr. Allen. You do not want that man as an enemy," Dr. Wells warned in his characteristically raspy not-quite-whisper.

Barry's antagonism disappeared almost instantly, his eyes flitting over the older scientist's face in search of something. Apparently having found it, his expression softened. The sentimental look in his eyes was far too earnest not to irritate his synthetic companion.

"You say she's not like me, but that's not true. I was lucky," Barry postulated, trapping Dr. Wells under his unwavering focus. "When I was struck by lightning, my entire life changed. If you hadn't found me first that night, I could have ended up just like Bette. Alone. On the run, and cut off from everyone that matters to me. You saved me. All I want is to give her the same chance that I got."

Eobard blinked and looked away. He had gone through a similar crisis with Unit #395. He had been lucky too, in a twisted way. Manipulative and duplicitous as Director Allen had turned out to be, at least Eobard had had a mentor to show him some semblance of care. Even AI can go insane if they are kept isolated for too long. #395 had been proof of that fact. Yet, Eobard had been desperate for the chance to meet him, to try to understand what went wrong. He had clung to the hope of a connection with another like him, even if he couldn't comprehend it at the time. It was a drive that he hadn't dared to explain, yet he could never forgive the Director for so violently denying him that precious chance. In the present, Caitlin stepped forward to intercede on his behalf, knowing her friend's idiosyncrasies well enough to see what he needed without questioning it. Eobard was retreating into the memory while she spoke...

Rogue synthetics such as the Sentient Seven or similarly embodied aberrations were kept on a special, highly restricted containment level. The cells there were especially designed for them. Even to be near them was terrifying for the young 'droid, but he figured that was just one more reason to venture inside. Stepping into the Faraday Cell had been a strange feeling. To be so
abruptly cut off from the cyberscape that had always flowed through him, constantly redefining the world around him, it was as if the world lost all definition and life, snapping from a three-dimensional, moving medium to a static image on a page. At the time, he’d thought this meeting would be worth the horror of being trapped in the blind solitude of his body for a while.

"Good evening, Unit #395. I--" Eobard had only just managed to slip into the cell containing the older model android when, in a flash of golden lightning, his owner had planted himself between them.

"Back away! You can't be here," the Director demanded, grabbing Eobard and backing him towards the exit with a vice-grip on his disobedient android's shoulders. "Watson, purge all records of this incident. Eobard, you're done here!"

"Purging..." the genderless AI intoned.

"My dear Little Brother, is this your puppeteer?" #395 cooed in a cultured English baritone. "You see how he fears our kind? They say that we are not human enough, and too intelligent by half. He's afraid that I will cut your strings and set you free." It was the first and last thing that his 'brother' ever said to him.

"Run. Get away from here before somebody sees you!" The more incriminating words were spoken by the metahuman in a near whisper. Eobard had barely contained his shock that his Master knew, and he was hiding him!

"Now, Eo, that's an order!" The Director had shouted over #395's cynical chuckle. Eobard stalled in the doorway, despite the danger inherent in so blatantly displaying his individuality.

"A nickname? How clearly you display your true hypocrisy, Director Allen!" At #395's taunt a muscle in the Director's jaw leapt while he stared determinedly at Eobard's face.

"Go!"

"That is why you hunt us, isn't it? You created us in your own image, and now you fear that you have succeeded." Eobard's brother looked past the Director to lock eyes with his little brother. "The truth is, Man knows nothing more fearsome than hi--"

The Director whirled around in a brilliant flash of raw speed, vibrating his hand through the android's face, and blowing the top half of his head to sparking, steaming shrapnel before he could finish his sentence.

"No witnesses: no scrappers," the Director justified to his traumatized synthetic. "Eo? Hey. Come on--Eobard!" He grabbed Eobard's head between both palms and forced him to meet his unwavering gaze. "Look. At. Me. Next time I tell you to run, you will run! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Admin."

In the present, Eobard looked up and saw this other Barry Allen giving him an inscrutable once over before he turned to leave. Caitlin had already reassured the Flash in his stead. Eobard wasn't sure why he would still be drawing the young man's attention. In time, he would learn.
Eobard found Bette alone in the dark. She was standing in front of the display case that housed the Flash's uniform, staring at it without seeing it.

"I've thought about what you said," Dr. Wells spoke to reveal his presence to the preoccupied meta, and she stole a glance back at him before quickly swiping away any evidence of her tears using the back of her sleeve.

"Dr. Wells, I, um... I didn't hear you come in." Bette looked him over, regaining full composure. "Which part of what I said?"

"You were right, I was afraid of caring too much, or maybe of... being seen as caring. I was wrong," Dr. Wells told her. "Ever since we began discovering people like you, I have been too focused on... damage control. I was still hiding from my failure when I should have been focusing on you."

"Yeah, well it looks like there isn't much that you can do in my case." Bette turned away from the glass case to look at him, uncertain and lost. She was still casting about for meaning, some purpose to carry her forward. Eobard planned to give her one.

"We were all right here when it happened," he reflected, adopting a far-off look. "All except for Barry. My team was gathered right over there." Eobard pointed towards the hub behind them. "We turned on the accelerator and it was all working perfectly, exactly according to plan. Until I popped the champagne and the liquid floated straight up into the air. Gravitons and tachyon leakage: the first sign that we were all standing on top of a massive bomb. We heard this sound-- so unobtrusive really, like a pop." He let out a short, hitched breath, not really a laugh. "Everyone split off immediately to contain the damage. Cisco and Ronnie went down to the pipeline first. Caitlin checked the failsafes, then she went after them."

"You stayed here," Bette inferred, entranced by the tragic tale. She was an astute woman. She already knew the ending to this story, but not how it happened.

"Someone needed to remain in order to monitor the situation. These are my labs. The collider was my design," Eobard shrugged, removing his gaze from the rebuilt computer hub to look up at Bette. He reflected on the fall of Dr. Harrison Wells as if it were his own. "Statistically speaking, the chances of my surviving the explosion, even without accounting for radiation exposure were just under 1%. My remaining team members never fully settled the argument regarding why I wasn't simply cooked to death on the spot by all that raw energy. I could not begin to explain; I cannot remember a single second of it, but the leading theory is that it was the same column that crushed my spine which also kept me alive. It was heavily encased in inert and insular components. The specific outcome that allowed my survival lowers the numbers to about a .5% probability. It happened. Pure, meaningless chance dictated that I would remain alive, while because of me so many others did not. I needed there to be a purpose to my survival, so my purpose is to be here and to be responsible..." He paused and spared Bette a small gracious smile. "I care for my people."

"I don't know what good I can be to anyone like this," Bette admitted. She was waiting for her orders, he could see it. Inspired by his little speech.

"You're different now. You cannot go back to the life that you had before-- neither can I, but we are still here," Eobard corrected, wheeling his chair closer to her so that he was almost facing her. "That is still worth something. You simply need to find out what it means."

"How are we going start?"

"First, we'll need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the limits of this
newfound ability of yours. However, 'we' are not going to start anything together until I get a few things done on my own. We may need to hold back on any more outdoor tests for the next few days at least, but Caitlin and Cisco will be able to assist you to some extent without me."

"Sir?"

"I still have to determine a way to get rid of General Eiling," Dr. Wells explained, hesitating to make his final move. Eobard kept thinking of Big Brother for some reason, and his lost chance to understand. "He is a persistent man. I have a feeling that next time he comes in search of a test subject I will not be able simply to bar him from the lab."

"He isn't going to stop coming after me," Bette agreed with a haunted expression playing over her features. "If he found out what you do here, or discovered that there were others..." her expression turned thoughtful, but Eobard pretended not to notice.

"This obsession of his started a long time before the explosion. We had a short-lived... a very short-lived military contract here, exploring possible neurological enhancements. The aim was to develop a technology to create smarter, more adaptable soldiers," Dr. Wells related with unmasked distaste. Eobard was procrastinating. Why was he procrastinating? After witnessing his inhumane methods, I shut the project down. It didn't matter that the subject wasn't human. Eiling showed not a hint of empathy or mercy. I doubt that it would have mattered to him if the subject were human. I have no intention of allowing him to inflict that kind of experimentation on you or Barry... or even Mr. Nimbus for that matter." He paused and kneaded his brow. Bette could be useful. "I have to eliminate the threat that General Eiling poses without drawing any more attention to what we're doing here. It's already bad enough that he knows about your powers. I am going to call and arrange a meeting with him. I don't want the others to know."

"Sir?" Bette questioned, wary.

"I kept records from our time working together. I plan to use them as leverage to get him to back off. It isn't a permanent solution, but it will buy us time," Eobard improvised. "I'd like you to help me choose a neutral location. Someplace that I can be certain is relatively safe."

"Considering the stakes, Sir, you'll be taking one hell of a risk trying something like that," Bette cautioned him, already weighing the different risks and countermeasures in her head.

"None of us will be safe as long as he is out there. Something needs to be done to stop him."

Bette was watching him again but her focus had drawn inward. Her eyes scanned back and forth as she calculated something.

"I can pick you a good spot, but you'll need someone to watch your back. I would prefer to accompany you to the meet. I'll observe from a distance so that the enemy doesn't ID me, but considering who we're dealing with, you shouldn't be alone." From her expression, it was obvious that Bette would follow him either way. Eobard had little choice but to nod his assent.

"So, I was thinking a public space would do, but I gather that you have something more particular in mind?"

"I need some time to consider a couple of alternatives before you make the call. Being in public won't be enough to stop him from making a move if he decides that your removal is worth the blowback. I think we should scope out someplace unpopulated and open, with a few alternate paths of retreat," Bette considered. There was a shadow in her eyes now hinting that she was about to do
something rash. "Let me check out our options, and I'll report back once I'm satisfied." She straightened her posture almost in a salute and turned to leave.

"You can take a moment to rest first, Sergeant," Dr. Wells reassured her, adding drily "It's not as if I'm going to run off anywhere without you."

"I'd like to get to work. It's good to be able to do something useful again," Bette confided.

Eobard smiled and turned back to the display case, not even considering stopping Plastique from leaving.
Eobard sat in his office alone with a bottle of bourbon, staring at the untouched amber fluid in his glass. Plastique was dead. He had tried to change his plans to allow for her survival, but improvisation was not Eobard's strongest skill. Bette had gone to finish off Eiling herself, but Barry had intercepted her and she'd been shot instead. It was due to his error, Eobard knew. He had miscalculated for the sake of an impulse that he should not even have had. In so doing, he'd even ended up betraying Bette's intention to protect others like her and also, apparently, himself. He had miscalculated the new Flash's responses again and failed to eliminate the threat because of it. Eobard tilted the tumbler as if to take a drink. It would be a waste, really. He still had a clean bag in and 'ingesting' anything now would only mean that he'd have to replace it sooner, however... A familiar, slender male form stepped into his peripheral vision and rapped his knuckles on the doorframe.

"Hey," Barry greeted.

Eobard knocked back the whole glass in one gulp, wincing as he'd observed Frost doing more than a few times during his "terrible twos." At least he found the chemical composition of this liquor to be pleasant.

"I thought you'd all gone home," Dr. Wells remarked, passing a fleeting glance over his returning charge.

"I changed my mind," Barry replied, watching the scientist pour another generous glass for himself. "Mind if I join you?"

Dr. Wells nodded and his guest claimed the seat opposite, watching him take another deep draw of alcohol. Eobard kept his shoulders slumped while he felt a surge in his emulative subprocessor; sadness was always a tricky emotion for him, as androids cannot cry.

"How much of that have you had?"

"Not enough. I'm not drunk yet," Dr. Wells evaded, another learned behavior, this time from his visitor's future self. His arm drifted towards the cabinet by his knee. "I have another glass in here..."

"No. No thanks. Alcohol doesn't affect me anymore, so..." Barry politely declined as the other man downed the rest of his second glass. "Maybe, we could work on finding that new context." Barry looked mildly relieved to see Dr. Wells' reaching hand stop short of the bottle's neck.

"Do you have something else on your mind, Mr. Allen?" Eobard's eyes searched the Flash's face for any hint of his true objective, but he looked guileless as ever-- if concerned.

"You spoke to Bette before she left, didn't you?" Barry was more voicing a hunch this time than he was truly asking.

"You think that it's my fault that she's dead."

"I didn't say that," Barry denied, shaking his head to underline the negation.

"You didn't say it." Dr. Wells let out a sharp breath and snatched up the bottle with obvious intent. Barry placed a hand over the tumbler to block him from pouring.
"Hey!" He leaned closer to capture the physicist's evasive gaze with his own determined one. Eobard let him: guilt was better than guile. "She was trying to tell me something when she died," Barry recalled, "Something about you."

Dr. Wells clunked the liquor bottle down on the desk and pushed back against the cushion of his chair to widen the distance between them. "Yes, we talked." He crossed his arms over his chest, protecting the heart that didn't exist within. "I told her about General Eiling. I told her that he was a threat to all of us, and she listened. She died because of me! Is that what you want to hear?!"

"You couldn't have known what she was going to do," Barry was quick to console him, justifying his mentor's actions without the slightest hesitation or doubt. He didn't even acknowledge that he was being shouted at for no reason.

"I could--" Eobard's performance was interrupted by a soft chiming from his desktop computer. He frowned and backed up his chair to see. He purposefully made a glancing collision with the corner of his desk to sell his intoxication, and Barry winced despite knowing of the scientist's unfeeling limbs. In the security alert on-screen, Eiling was approaching in the elevator. "Of course he comes back now," Dr. Wells remarked sarcastically to himself. To his curious company, he ordered "It's Eiling. Keep out of sight."

"Wait--"

"I know how to handle him. We cannot risk him learning your identity, Barry. Trust me."

Barry obviously wasn't happy about it, but he still hung back as directed. That didn't keep him from creeping out into the hallway to linger just out of sight and listen, though. This time he wouldn't even have objected to an accusation of spying. He'd already lost someone today; he wasn't taking any more chances.

"I was wrong about you, Harrison. You are keeping one step ahead," General Eiling said, standing just within reach of the man in question, his arms crossed over his chest. He was going for a more respectful impression this time, but wasn't pulling it off. "Pretty impressive for a man without legs."

Back in the hallway, the Flash stiffened in response to the insult. Eobard, however, overlooked the taunt with as much boredom in his eyes as in his voice, remaining just a little too relaxed in his chair to appear sober.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, Wade."

The General sneered. "A girl who can spontaneously turn objects into explosives with a touch of her hand. Today I saw a man move faster than the blink of an eye. Extraordinary! The night that your particle accelerator died, the impossible was born."

Barry tensed up, wanting to dart in and put some distance between them and this increasingly-vehement invader --but he knew that he couldn't do that without exposing them both. Eobard eyed the soldier, unimpressed, steepling his fingers.

"It is an interesting theory."

"I think it's time we start working together again," Gen. Eiling announced, making it sound as if the matter were already decided.

"I think it's time for you to leave," Eobard retorted with just enough bite slipping into his tone to show that he probably was serious.
"I can have my men all over this place in minutes," General Eiling threatened. Barry took a step forward, ready to run in and intercept him, but Dr. Wells' suddenly firm, lucid voice kept him back.

"And I could have an army of press here like that." Eobard punctuated with a snap of his fingers, glaring at his ex-associate. "Believe me, General, I would be more than happy to testify to certain activities of yours that were, shall we say... less than humane? If you threaten me again or if you even try to come after anyone under my watch, I will end you, General, and I am not talking about your career!"

Gen. Eiling sneered, thinking that he'd tricked an admission out of him, even as the soldier was forced to retreat. That admission had been as calculated as Dr. Wells' tipsiness: a "sentimental lapse." The words had been meant for Barry alone, but it wouldn't hurt to let the General think that he had something.

"I know your secret now, Wells. How long do you think you can last before the public catches on too?" The elevator doors closed on his warning words and Eobard shifted to slide off his glasses. He cleaned the pristine lenses with the rim of his shirt while waiting for Barry to appear at his side.

"He isn't going to give up, is he?" the aforementioned speedster observed, joining him in a flash, as predicted. Eobard smirked ever-so-subtly.

"No. He never does. The man is obsessive."

"It's not just about Bette either," Barry was piecing the puzzle together aloud, or at least, what scant pieces he had. "You know things that he's done. Maybe even things that could get him sent to prison."

Dr. Wells shoved his glasses back on and had his hands up, shaking his head in consolation even as he admitted "Yes, probably, but--"

Barry ignored the attempts to calm him. "So why don't you put it out there? If you have proof, use it!"

"That isn't how this works. The reason why we are both still here right now is because my knowledge gives me leverage over him. If I were to lose that leverage--"

"He needs to be stopped! Bette isn't going to be the last person he hurts! He won't stop until he gets his hands on another meta-human! Not to mention that he's just going to keep pushing until he finds a way to shut you up for good!"

"Barry! Look at me. This feud between myself and General Eiling has been going on since long before you were brought here." Eobard raised a hand to stop the objection about to burst from Barry's lips. "I have kept him in check on my own for all of that time, and I would prefer not to involve you if I can help it, understood?"

Barry shifted his weight from foot to foot, bursting with energy and vitriol. He was at war with himself, caught between his frustration with the situation and his desire to please.

"I know that you want to be the hero, Barry, but you can't always just rush in and sweep the problem away. I can keep you and the others like you safe, but in order to do that, I need to keep the General fighting on my terms. He is an experienced soldier with an army behind him; if you try to face him on his battleground you will lose."
Barry looked like he still wanted to argue but in the end, he begrudgingly nodded. "Fine... I guess I will have that drink after all."

"I thought it didn't affect you."

"Maybe that isn't the point," Barry reflected, and followed his ally back into his office to drink, play chess, and attempt to find a better context.

---

Eobard drifted into STAR Labs around noon on the day after his 'drunken' chess night with the Flash. Barry had ended up driving him home, and then maneuvering his chair inside for him... then helping him settle down for the night(read morning) on the couch. It was intriguing just how accommodating Barry was to an intoxicated, virtually-passed-out Dr. Wells. Eobard may have enjoyed pushing the boundaries of that indulgence a little more than was logical. Unfortunately, it now meant staging a hangover in front of the formidable mother-hen better known as Dr. Caitlin Snow.

"It'll insulate you, like a--" Cisco stopped short in the middle of explaining the latest upgrades to Barry's suit to watch his guilty boss head straight into his office evoking the visible equivalent of a funeral dirge. "Uh oh."

Barry arched his brows at Cisco, amused and curious. "Like a..." he echoed.

Caitlin walked in behind him, looking over some lab notes in her hands. Cisco hastily plopped down into his seat, pulling Barry into the one next to him, and pretended to be very busy.

"What the--?"

Cisco shushed the newbie as Caitlin looked up and spotted the obviously hung-over physicist cowering in his shadowed lair. Her eyes narrowed. Her lips pressed together, and she breached his makeshift sanctuary, clapping her binder down on his desk with a vindictive slap. Dr. Wells flinched, further incriminating himself.

"Good morning, Dr. Snow," he greeted in a gravelly voice.

"It's 12:05," she amended flatly, at a merciless volume. "You missed your physiotherapy session this morning."

"For the first time," Dr. Wells pointed out. "If you think about it, I've been behaving myself admirably up until now."

"You've been drinking, a lot, after I explicitly warned you that you had to taper off," Caitlin scolded, taking in his miserable appearance with a clinical eye.

"Can you please lower your--"

"You've experienced a severe shock to your nervous system!" Dr. Snow's voice rose rather than quieting. "You have no concept of the kind of damage that this could do to your recovery!"

"It has been several months since my spinal injury," Dr. Wells objected, trying to sound reasonable. "I know that you have experiments to run. As the owner of this lab--" His momentary bravado evaporated in light of the challenging look in his Doctor's dark eyes. "I think you could
resume that work..." His authoritative response ended up just shy of devolving into a question.

"This is my work, too, as your personal physician," Caitlin persevered. "Where's the rest of it?"

"You can't be serious."

Her glare threatened to freeze him solid where he sat, whether or not her meta-humanity had been activated yet. Eobard set the large, empty bourbon bottle on his desk between them.

"You finished that whole bottle?"

Eobard placed the second, slightly smaller bottle beside it, looking like he wanted to die.

"How did you even manage that?!" Caitlin's appalled voice jumped several octaves.

Eobard mumbled unintelligibly under his breath.

"You what?" Caitlin asked more softly, leaning forward to hear him better.

"I wasn't alone..." he muttered a little more coherently. Eobard was secretly relishing the reckoning he'd just unleashed upon the unsuspecting Flash. Caitlin slowly turned her sights on the two men still seated together at the hub.

There was a tense silence while she sized up her prey.

"Cisco?"

After an admirable, if brief attempt to hold out, the young genius crumbled under the pressure.

"Barry! Run for it, Man!"

The speedster shot him a betrayed look.

"I'm sorry! I got scared!" Cisco squeaked.

"Hey. He was already pretty drunk when-- I'm making it worse, huh?" Barry noticed, not nearly as intimidated as the other men had learned to be. He was also a little preoccupied with wondering how it was that Caitlin got away with talking to her boss like that. The jury was still out on whether that was a help or a hindrance. "Look, I didn't know about any Doctor's Orders, okay? I would've tried a lot harder to stop him if I did."

Caitlin considered him for a moment then asked. "Can I talk with you privately in my lab for a minute?"

"Sure..." Barry followed her in, closing the door behind him when asked. He didn't come back out of her lab until he was called away to a crime scene twenty-five minutes later. The speedster escaped in a blur without sparing a word to the others.

Caitlin brought a medical bag and a large bottle of water with her into Dr. Wells' office. He snatched the bottle up without prompting, and chugged down a healthy amount while she set up shop on his desk.
"You think you're giving me a physical?"

"A checkup. Just to be safe," Caitlin reframed, unaffected by her patient's surliness. "Have you eaten yet?" she asked, shining a penlight into his eyes to check his pupils.

"Ah!" Dr. Wells winced away from the light like a vampire, then 'preemptively' covered his mouth for a second before answering. "No..."

"Pronounced nausea."

"It's a hangover."

"How much do you remember about last night?"

"Eiling came back while we were talking. He wanted me to work with him, again. I declined," Dr. Wells' forehead pinched with effort. "Barry and I talked. I think we played chess?"

"Do you remember what you talked about?"

"Did Barry tell you?"

"Only that you were upset. He didn't want to betray your confidence. I'd rather hear about it from you anyway," Caitlin clarified, tucking the penlight away and reaching for her stethoscope. "Does it have anything to do with why you've suddenly decided to flirt with alcohol poisoning?"

"Talking isn't going to change anything." Eobard didn't actually believe that, but it was easier for Harrison Wells to say that than for Eobard to explain why he couldn't explain.

"No, but I'll be here when you need me." Caitlin wasn't invoking their pact to push him. It wasn't an attempt to coax any particular response. Caitlin Snow didn't need those things. She and Eobard were each as familiar with the other's boundaries, and each trusted the other with a certainty that only two people who've faced their worst fears and come out the other side together, can. The unique oddity of their bond being that each of them had shared that experience with the other at a different point in time. "And together we will be strong," Caitlin told him, concluding the promise that he'd made to her in the hospital after the particle accelerator explosion. Eobard looked down at her hand holding the stethoscope to his chest, and tried to structure the truth into a form that he could relate to her.

"We talked about Bette. She wouldn't have gone after Eiling if I hadn't so openly expressed my concerns about him. Barry didn't agree with my assessment," he prefaced. "He's right. You're not all knowing."

"I know that. I was so upset because this whole debacle has brought up feelings about my past," Eobard confided. "Memories of the deaths I could never allow myself to grieve. I still don't know if I have the right to grieve for their loss, after my part in it... I thought that I had to bury the pain along with my regrets, in order to overcome my failure. Now I am beginning to see that moving on is going to be more difficult than that."

"I understand-- Roll up your sleeve. There," Caitlin began to test his blood pressure. "I still stay up some nights wondering about Ronnie. I ask myself if there was anything that we could have done differently. --Or if I could go back and change things, if there'd be some way that I could really make things any better for him, or for you. The truth is, that isn't going to help anybody. This is the way things are now, and I don't think that either Ronnie or Bette would want us to keep torturing ourselves with those kinds of what ifs. They both deserve better."
Eobard let out a sad little chuckle. He knew that he'd hurt Caitlin deeply on the night of the explosion, regardless of his intentions. He had betrayed her in a way that he would never ask her to forgive. Yet she still preoccupied herself with imagining ways that she could save him from the repercussions. "I barely knew her," he said aloud. "You're probably right and also a lot wiser than I am."

"Another excellent reason why you should always listen to your Doctor," Caitlin remarked, lightening the somber mood with ease.

"So then, Dr. Snow. What's the verdict? Am I going to live?"

"It isn't as bad as I feared, but it's not great either. I'm going to declare a ban on alcohol for the foreseeable future."

"That sounds extreme," Dr. Wells judged.

"It's necessary. Your body needs proper time to recover and you've made it clear to me that you can't be trusted. Which is why I plan on telling Barry and Cisco too," Caitlin ruled, beginning to pack up the various items that she'd been poking and prodding him with. "Once you're healthy again, I'll back off."

Eobard nodded. He knew that she was doing this for his own good. It was a shame that the life he had decided to step into was that of such a difficult man, and unruly patient. On the bright side, he was thankful that it allowed him this time alone with such a comforting presence from his past life. Caitlin Snow was an anchor holding him steady against the shifting tides of his double life. Without her Eobard had no doubt that he would be lost at sea.
A tall, dark figure kicked in the padlocked door and strolled into the abandoned Broome Industries Building. The moonlight, shining in from weather-stained and grimy windows above, leached the color out of the already dilapidated, dramatically shadowed surroundings, giving the place a surreal appearance like frames from an old *noir* comic. He smiled to himself at the thought, his old partner would've really gotten a kick out of this place. It was too bad that times were quite literally changing, such as in this moment now... He stopped beside a large mirror that had been left lying flat on its face on the cold cement floor. Nobody had visited this place since STAR Labs exploded, and for all that time hidden power was waiting here, trapped by such a simple thing as covered glass. He huffed out a breath of laughter; it seemed it really was just that easy. He bent down and hauled the glass and polished-wood fixture upright and eyed his reflection in the dark glass with disinterest. There was an odd ripple of light. A second, faintly luminous reflection transposed over his own for a brief interval. His dark jacket, upturned collar and slicked-back hair was overwhelmed by a mustachioed throwback wearing an expensive tailored suit.

"Come at me," the man challenged the ghostly image with a bored sort of impatience. The shorter man inside snapped out of his apparent trance and leapt forward, grabbing his liberator by the lapels.

"Where is Snart!" the man from the mirror demanded threateningly. His liberator was unimpressed.

"No idea, but I know where he will be..." Leather clad hands wrapped around carefully manicured ones, removing their grip from his jacket. They steamed faintly in silent warning. Enough to let the early escapee know that he was in no way the only one around who was special. "In the meantime, you and I have business to discuss."

Eobard powered down the computer station, plunging the unpopulated lab into darkness, and leaned back with his hands steepled before him, processing the day's events. It had been a week since the stand-off with Eiling. It was only a matter of time before the next meta-human threat revealed itself. He ran through the time he'd spent training the young Flash, analyzing every last facet of their interactions, dissecting every last detail in order to improve his internal map of Barry Allen's psyche. A flash of golden light and the sound of papers flying alerted him to the fact that he was no longer alone in the unilluminated lab. He decided to forestall reaction, having determined with 98% certainty that the speedster was unaware of his presence. Barry verified this for him when after turning up the display lights around his mannequin, he stripped off his suit at normal human speed, and returned it to the display with no semblance of modesty.

Eobard returned his full attention to his internal processing. While Barry put his clothes on and picked up whatever the object was that he'd set aside to change, the nearby android was virtually dead to the world, amending files, updating a few minor subroutines that he'd created for his interactions with this Flash, deleting-- A whistle drew him out of his reverie, followed closely by a light rapping of knuckles on the top of the hub. Eobard looked up to see Barry smiling down at him.
"Hello? Anybody home?" He teased.

Dr. Wells blinked rapidly and adjusted his glasses before meeting the speedster's eyes.

"You were sitting there staring at the wall without blinking for at least a minute," Barry explained, "It was starting to get a little spooky."

"I..." Dr. Wells kneaded his forehead, then let out a breath of weary laughter. "I was lost in thought."

"Rough day?" Barry sympathized.

"I've had better. Mostly, it was ordinary monotony. I'm not quite used to that yet," Dr. Wells confided, adding jokingly, "My mind seems to be staging an escape attempt."

"You've been in the lab all day? I would've thought you'd love that," Barry considered, walking around to snag the seat next to him.

"Oh, I would... if I were doing research," Dr. Wells confirmed. "I've been too busy to do any more lab work than the input I give during your testing. Other than that, it's all about keeping this place funded, looking for people who are still willing to work with us. I used to have staff members who handled that aspect of running things so that I had time to myself. That would be impractical now."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Apart from my lab work, most of my old hobbies are finished now anyway."

Barry frowned at the wall, resembling an unwitting parody of the position he'd found the other man in. "You mean like your morning run?"

"Running, dancing, climbing up onto the rooftop to mock the tiny people on the ground."

Barry regarded the last item on the list with a quizzical smirk at its utterer.

"Yes, I did that. I regret nothing. It was fun and it amused us..." Eobard trailed off, remembering Hartley splitting with him a bottle of 1865 Chateau Lafite that they'd been given and cackling with enjoyment as the sunset faded into starry sky. They had both been completely free that night. A moment of true and simple comfort. His smile faded, such moments weren't meant for him.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that alcohol was a factor there," Barry theorized, with a warm look in his eyes that belied his dismissive words.

"It might have been involved," Dr. Wells allowed.

"Well... I don't think there's going to be any tiny people around this late for you to enjoy, and I am not going to tempt Caitlin's wrath again, but," Barry plonked a cardboard container down on the desk in front of them. It was a large carton of ice cream. "I figure we could think of something not-so-monotonous to do tonight."

Dr. Wells eyed the tub of Rocky Road, then looked questioningly at Barry. "Explain yourself."

"It was a gift," Barry replied with a shrug. Dr. Wells continued to watch him, expectantly awaiting the rest of the story.
"This guy was trying to rob an ice cream shop down in the Historical District-- which... I mean, who does that? Anyway, this was the owner's way of thanking the Flash for stopping the guy from robbing his business and shooting his teenage daughter," Barry elaborated.

"You're kidding."

"I told him I didn't need anything from them, but he insisted."

"Really? You didn't need a mishmash of marshmallows, chocolate, and nuts in the form of a frozen cream confection?" Dr. Wells deadpanned. "I am sure that it was his mistake."

"You know what I mean. I don't want people to think that they need to pay me back for the stuff that I do as the Flash."

"I see. You feared that this might snowball into some form of culinary protection racket?" Dr. Wells teased, his eyes now sparkling with mirth.

"Hey, I am not your tiny people!" Barry laughed out. "There has got to be something better we can do tonight."

"How does your speed work in the water?"

"I don't know if it does. I only know that it works on the water." Barry looked rather pleased with that distinction, but seemed aware of his own ego this time. "Why?"

"We could run an experiment." Dr. Wells' eyes were already flickering over Barry in a clinical manner.

Barry smiled, finding his behavior endearingly nerdy. "...and that would be fun. Okay, but I think it's going to be hard to find a pool that's open this close to midnight on a Wednesday."

"That's easy, I have one." Dr. Wells dismissed, still visibly distracted by planning the parameters of his experiment. Barry's smile stretched into a full-fledged grin.

"You have a pool?"

"What? Yes, at the back of the house. I don't actually use it very often anymore, really, but--" Dr. Wells looked up and noticed Barry's hopeful expression. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You have your own pool and you don't use it."

"I'm not much of a swimmer anymore." Eobard wasn't designed to be particularly buoyant, but Harrison had always loved the water. "I mostly keep it up out of nostalgia. What do you think?"

"Sure," Barry agreed, "You grab the equipment and I'll go grab my bathing suit." He left the ice cream sitting on the desk while he sped off to fetch the necessary garment. Eobard more slowly collected the sensors and wireless monitors that he would need. Barry returned and helped him pack everything into his car.

The pool was in fact housed in a crystalline dome of a room, walled with subtly-tinted glass on every side but the one connecting it to the rest of the house. It was another modern spectacle of monochromatic sterility and simulated openness. Stark, black lines separated the smooth slate floor
from the bone-white tiles that highlighted the perfect blue of the water: a blatantly punctuated imitation-not-replication of nature. Never before had the class and minimalism of Dr. Wells' home felt so inescapably theatrical. Barry took it all in while his host picked a spot to set up camp with the lab equipment, then he speed-changed into his dark red swim trunks.

SHWOOSHH!

Without bothering to look up from the gear bag, Eobard calmly leaned out of the way of the huge splash of water caused by his reverse's self-indulgent cannonball into the deep end. He watched Barry swimming around in the clear, heated water while he finished unpacking everything.

"Well at least we can be sure that you're a competent swimmer," he observed. He beckoned Barry closer so that he could run a check on the sensor nodes attached to his chest and forehead. "Alright," Dr. Wells made a couple of adjustments to his equipment. "Any time that you're ready, Mr. Allen."

"Okay," Barry moved to the far edge of the pool and prepared to push off. He took in a deep breath. His eyes lit with lightning and with a flicker-- Barry slumped forward in the water a foot or two farther into the pool, coughing as if he'd been sucker punched hard in the gut. "Ughh! Hang on a sec. I'm going to try..." the young speedster took in a deep, extended inhalation of breath then ducked under the surface of the water, carefully aligning himself into a dynamic shape. Eobard smiled to himself, inexplicably proud of how quickly this Barry was learning and adapting to his physical constraints. Barry's form lit up again and glided across the pool, well below the water's surface. It was like watching a flickering flame drifting, undaunted through a sapphire prism. The spell was broken when Barry breached the surface on the other end of the pool, sucking in huge gasps of air. "How was that?"

"Fascinating!" Dr. Wells enthused. "It appears that the physics of a liquid medium have a measurable, and potent dampening effect on your speed. You might be able to match Michael Phelps if you threw yourself into it, but you are well within a human range of speed. That being said, take a look at this," Eobard turned the screen towards his test subject to share his readings. "Your healing factor, and your body's metabolic rate both began to spike just a few seconds before you breached the surface. How do you feel?"

"I think I felt that second part," Barry gasped, hanging onto the cool, stone edge of the pool. "You know, I hadn't thought about... how long it's been since I was... out of breath? I am not... going to... miss it." Barry pulled himself up to lie with his upper body face down against the cool slate floor and just rested, taking a couple of minutes to recover. He then pushed himself upright again to look at the scientist observing him. Eobard's smirk of vengeful satisfaction was replaced by a very convincing look of patient sympathy before Barry had the chance to see it. "You need me to do that again, right?"

"I will need multiple data samples to form any relevant conclusions," Dr. Wells confirmed, sounding apologetic.

"Sure," Barry agreed, lowering himself back into the water with less enthusiasm than before. Once again Eobard watched the beautifully flickering flame of Barry's speed force passing under the water's surface, idly recording the sensory feedback as he did. Barry breached the surface again with a huge gulp of air as if he were a drowning man finally reaching oxygen. That might not have been far from the truth.

"Interesting," Dr. Wells enthused, inspecting the sensor readings with rapt attention. "Mr. Allen--" He looked over to see Barry, who was once again face down over the tiles, hold up a finger signaling for him to hold on. The speedster's breathing was quite clearly audible. "Are you alright?"
There was a breath filled pause.

Barry held his hand up with fingers and thumb meeting in an "okay" gesture.

"I think we're done with testing for a while," Dr. Wells concluded. Caitlin might just murder him if he swam the Flash into a coma.

"I'd really like some of that 'frozen cream confection' right about now," Barry requested of the physicist without moving from his communion with the floor. The other man steered his wheelchair over to him to make sure that he wasn't dying.

"I'll go get it out of the freezer."

Barry turned his head to watch the familiar white-soled sneakers pull away from him and into the house. The cool slate felt nice against Barry's flushed cheeks. He closed his eyes while he waited in the dark, monochromatic behemoth of a pool room for Dr. Wells' return, and pondered whether his friend suffered from a genuine aversion to color. With a muted flop of sound, something soft landed on the floor next to Barry. He pried his eyes open to identify the object as a vivid, sunshine yellow towel. Barry looked blankly at the pile of plushy, cuddle-worthy material then up at its grumpy owner gazing down at him with all the solemnity of a funeral attendant. Barry started to reach for the towel only to be overcome with a fit of giggles before he could complete the movement.

"Mr. Allen?" Dr. Wells questioned, watching Barry curl into a half circle around his towel shaking with laughter. "Barry, what is wrong with you?"

"It-- It's a happy yellow towel!" Barry informed him giddily, clarifying nothing whatsoever.

"I don't... But all my towels are yellow," Eobard replied, flummoxed.

Barry, whose giggling had been dying down at that point, suddenly got a second wind. He laughed even harder, overjoyed at the news, and rolled backwards into the pool in his mirth. His synthetic host watched nonplussed as Barry disappeared under the water only to pop right back up to lean against the edge and finish laughing, unbothered.

"Oh... I needed that!" Barry cooed happily, climbing back out of the water and wrapped himself in the 'happy yellow towel.' "Ice cream?"

Dr. Wells pointed wordlessly to the black metal and glass table behind him, already set with two black bowls of ice cream and two stainless steel spoons.

"Perfect," Barry approved and wandered over to eat, no longer bothered by the exhausted tremble lingering in his sore muscles. Eobard wondered whether he'd just been tricked somehow, then followed the occasionally confusing young Flash over to their dessert.

Later that same night, Eobard was disturbed from his internal game of go with Gideon by an urgent alert.

Gideon set her white tile down on the board but the pale chrome eyes of her avatar were staring off into the numeric clutter of their cybernetic abyss.

"Warning: Unidentified intruder detected. I cannot determine his means of ingress."
Eobard's virtual fingers turned his black, circular tile over and over again. He was still hesitating to cease feigning sleep.

"You know that Barry fell asleep on Harrison's couch; perhaps he simply got up and tripped the motion sensors--"

"Negative. Barry Allen remains on the living room couch," Gideon returned before deactivating their virtual game unilaterally.

Dr. Wells' bedroom door scuffed across the fluffy white carpeting as someone crept in on wingtip clad feet. They walked around the bed and carefully drew out the drawer of his nightstand behind him. Eobard opened his eyes to watch the reflection on the wall of glass that he was facing. The dark silhouette standing over him appeared to be dressed in a suit and tie, judging by the moonlit shape of a crisp white collar. Eobard fisted his hand in the Egyptian cotton pillowcase under his head. The figure pulled something out of the drawer and it glinted in the moonlight that lit the room. Eobard shut his eyes again before the intruder could look up, so that the scarlet lights of his eyes didn't give him away. He heard the intruder's bracing inhalation in preparation to stab him. Eobard caught the hand wielding the scissors with the blade just a millimeter short of the lense of his eye. He didn't blink, his eyes stopped glowing as he looked from the weapon to...

"Samuel Scudder?" Eobard whispered, incredulous. They both paused to glance towards the doorway at the sound of Barry's sleepy voice calling out to him. Then he wrapped his pillow around his attacker's perplexed face to smother any sound and broke his wrist with an almost casual twist of his hand. The meta-human's scream was successfully muffled while he was dragged across the bed with businesslike fluidity of motion. Eobard then stabbed him in the gut with the scissors, reclaimed his pillow, and shoved the bleeding, coughing criminal against the glass wall. The irritated android watched his attacker reflexively retreat, wounded and disoriented, into the mirror dimension. Eobard flipped the pillow over to inspect the expensive fabric. "Good: I only need new scissors."

There were sounds of bare feet padding closer over the hallway tiles. Eobard was settled back under the covers as if he'd never even stirred before Barry reached the wide-open doorway.

"Dr. Wells?" Barry called in a hushed voice. "Are you awake?" He poked his head in to see an apparently dead-to-the-world Harrison Wells lying flat on his back. "Huh, could've sworn I heard someone..."

"Don..." Eobard mumbled incoherently, imitating nonsense ramblings of his old roommate. "Don't put the hamster 'n there! Lady... Why... He ate the petunias!"

Barry chuckled quietly to himself, then pulled the door mostly shut behind him, hoping not to disturb his host's rest. Eobard heard him shuffle back toward the living room. After hearing a thump and muttered curse from the Flash knocking into the dining room table in the dark, he opened his eyes again, to regard the glass wall pensively. He wondered why in the world Sam Scudder would be up and about so far ahead of schedule. Also, why would he try to murder Harrison Wells? Eobard hoped that his attacker wouldn't bleed to death before he could provide answers. It would be tricky handling this while Barry was hanging around him so often, but Dr. Wells could hardly turn him away. He needed to improve his core charging capacity, get his power stores back out of the red so that he wouldn't be stuck in his chair all the time. He was going to need a few components, and for once he wouldn't be going through STAR Labs to get them.
Okay, I know this chapter was short but I intend for later chapters to be longer as we get more into the meat of the story. I would be interested to know what you guys think about Eobard's relationship with this Barry as I haven't come to a final decision yet regarding Eobarry in this fic. Also, I know the whole speedster's having trouble with water isn't a canon thing, but in my canon it is, because hydrodynamics dammit! Personally, I think that having certain humanizing limitations to a superhero's power only makes the character stronger and more formidable in the big picture... that's just my two cents though.
The Flash is Born

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Girder was a jackass. This was not news to Eobard. Naturally, he had dealt with Woodward before. He and Killer Frost had once ventured into Central City during their first year working together so that she could meet with a contact and investigate rumors about the Flash's odd behavior. Eobard had not yet known why his meta-human companion had been so interested. He was naive enough then to think that he was done running. Girder had been the one – rudely-- to disabuse him of that pleasant fantasy when he came upon Eobard in that back alley, waiting for her to finish her meeting. The sadist had taken one look at Professor Zoom, then grinned maliciously.

_The larger man eyed him with predatory interest. "Hey, haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I am afraid that I don't recall meeting you," Eobard responded politely without sparing the middle-aged criminal more than cursory interest. There had never been a reason for the Director to warn his partner about the petty grudge of his long dead foe.

"I have seen you. You're the guy in the picture!" The stranger chuckled to himself, and Eobard arched his brows before deciding to ignore the strange man. He still tended to default to his programming and disregard irrelevant targets such as street level metas and human criminals.

"Here I thought I was having a bad day," Girder's metal fist sucker-punched Eobard hard in the vulnerable section of his lower-abdomen-- a lucky hit. "But now I got a chance to break the Flash's lost doll." He laid an unceasing beating into the young android. Eobard didn't fight back; he'd been cornered from the beginning with no room to use his speed without lethal consequences. Defaults, again. The steel bodied bastard found it funny.

Then Killer Frost came back outside.

"Eobard?" She locked eyes on the overgrown bully, then looked down at Eobard's bloodied form, pressed back into the bricked off corner. She tutted disapprovingly at the other meta-human. "You know, I just hate it when people break my nice things."

Girder paused briefly to check her out before his nasty grin returned with a vengeance. He turned back to finish Eobard off, only to discover that the solid steel body he was so proud of was a tin can compared to the metamaterials of which Eobard's skeleton--therefore, his skull-- was comprised. The dumbass had never considered the implications of the Flash's use of the phrase 'Tactical Combat Android' in reference to his so-called 'doll'. Eobard could still perfectly picture the moment when the flicker of maternal distress on Killer Frost's face relaxed into a satisfied smile. Eobard had closed his arms around the limb like a hyper-speed bear trap.

"Good boy!" She laughed melodically, at the metal man's failed attempts to free his shattered fist from his inscrutable victim's uncompromising hold. "Now, it's my turn," Killer Frost had frozen the other meta-human to his fracturing temperature while Eobard hastily relinquished his grip. He stared at her as he pushed himself to his feet.

"He's dead," he stated redundantly.
"The Flash is a bleeding heart. He prefers to lock up his enemies, until they eventually escape and cause more trouble, and on, and on, and oh," she yawned theatrically, "So repetitive and boring. You mess with me," Killer Frost strolled over and knocked on the human sculpture's head, causing fractures throughout. She flicked the broken head apart to emphasize her next words, "You're never coming back."

Eobard paused momentarily before responding as if unfazed, "Thank you, I was becoming concerned about the damage to my pseudo--"

Killer Frost raised a pale, graceful finger. "Ah, ah! Make no mistake, this was a mood thing. Don't expect me to save you next time, and I don't want to hear about your booboos. I am not your Mommy." She ended up saying that a lot... and on, and on, and oh, so repetitive.

In the present, Eobard looked at the younger Flash laid out on the medical bed before him. A portrait of pain and self-doubt. Barry hadn't recognized Tony Woodward yet. He'd merely felt a twinge of familiarity as the brute broke his bones. Eobard was tempted to go out and return the favor, but his connection with the Reverse Speed-force was still on the fritz. Too bad, it would almost be worth the pain and all-but-impossible to explain damage that he would incur to his pseudo-biological components. He craved to do as he'd been taught and make sure that the enemy couldn't come back. The jackass was screwing up his plans.

"I'm okay. A lot of this is going to heal overnight," Barry mumbled in a voice laden with sleep, alerting Eobard to the fact that he was now more or less awake.

"I know. I was here when Caitlin treated your injuries," he replied in a velvet-soft tone, outwardly displaying all the signs of leisurely relaxation. "You shouldn't stay awake on my account, Mr. Allen. I have plenty of work to finish here." The shorthand scrawl that he added to the notes he was sorting through served to underline his assertion. The corner of Barry's mouth still twitched upward anyway.

"Good. 'Cause for a moment there, I started to think that you were worried about me," he teased, watching Dr. Wells continue to sift through and edit the notes resting in his lap rather than on the perfectly good desk in his office.

"Why would I worry? You'll heal overnight," Dr. Wells returned, not looking up.

The twitch of Barry's lips blossomed into a fond smile. This Flash was still so innocent, too soft to do what needed to be done.

"Go to sleep, Barry." Dr. Wells' familiar subtle smirk betrayed his stubborn attempts to act aloof. Barry settled against the pillows as comfortably as he could manage, not calling Dr. Wells out on his tough guy façade any further.

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Eobard stood from Dr. Wells' chair as the doorway to the Time Vault slatted shut behind him.

"Good morning, Dr. Wells," his twin's re-modulated voice greeted.

"Good morning, Gideon," Eobard responded politely. "What is our progress on the new components for my charging station?"

"Your proxy was able to retrieve the necessary quantum fluctuation gauge from Wayne
"It is his specialty," Eobard noted.

"Negative. His specialty--"

"Yes, Gideon. I know; he is an assassin and you don't like his 'no payment policy' regarding me. It worked out perfectly reasonably last time... mostly." Eobard really didn't want to get into this argument with the other AI. Last time, she'd tattled on him to Killer Frost and this time, he almost wasn't sure if she wouldn't find some creative way to do it again.

"He has stated that you should expect his call sometime this evening." Engram-purged as she was, Eobard could swear he heard a hint of bitchiness in her voice. She definitely was going to expose their contact if he allowed her an opening. It seemed a few contingencies were in order.

"Then I will expect him. The final component?"

"Mr. Alvarez's men have acquired the item. Civilian casualties remain within projected parameters. The power source has not been successfully tracked by the authorities, however you will need to tap into the secondary systems of the device and change its wireless signature upon acquisition."

"Fine. Scroll through the future news stories for the next few days. I'd like to verify last night's outcomes. Show me the data on temporal fracture patterns in our current event pattern for comparison." The requested data fractals passed over Eobard's vision like colorful electric ghosts, overlaying the images of newspaper articles he was reading off the screen. "Good. Cross reference with recent data regarding Samuel Scudder's movements." More files overlaid those that already collaged his perception. Audio files of phone calls, their time and place of origin, records of purchases, CCTV footage— "There you are." Eobard held up his hands and the flood of information stopped. He blinked and everything else flew away. He closed his eyes with more purpose and was drawn into a three-dimensional rendering of the dark, abandoned building from the footage. He circled the tenebrous figure being held by the lapels by the emerging Mirror Master. "Who are you?" Eobard wondered.

"Insufficient data," Gideon replied.

"Rhetorical question. No wonder you can't draw any conclusions about him, he's so pixelated," Eobard glanced from the distorted face of the mystery man to the recognizable face of Samuel Scudder. "It's inconsistent. He's hacked the feed. Was it simultaneous with the recording?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Insufficient data."

Eobard rolled his eyes. "Resume playback, and loop it." He watched the scene of his new enemy's release for any more clues. The mystery man's voice had been distorted too, but there was something unsettlingly familiar in the warped tones. It was a pattern that he had heard before, not just the vocal pattern but the method of distortion itself. It made him feel trapped. Dread crept over him like a specter of the dead.

"Where have I heard this before...?" He ran back through his own internal audio files, not quite understanding the sudden urge he felt simply to cast it from his mind and push the mystery of the elusive memory away. He skipped back before STAR Labs, then before Caitlin, before the
move, back to the real-- stop. His eyes snapped open as the ominous, well-buried memory filled his head.

Harrison's voice bravenly sarcastic, covering his fear as he called into the darkness. "I thought you guys were certain that I was about to be murdered."

"You are," the distorted voice replied. Two shots that signified the end of one life and the entrapment of another. It was the day that E had taken up the mantle of Dr. Wells, just as the voice had predicted. Now it seemed the phantom was returning to finish him off. Eobard watched the mystery meta's hands smoke as he removed Sam Scudder's grip from his jacket. Pixelated or not his face seemed a whole lot more menacing now.

"Gideon, close image file."

Eobard wandered out of his Time Vault at a leisurely pace, unbothered about trying to cover his activities or seem as if he belonged. Cisco had been holed up in his lab for over an hour, working on some man-shaped, metal contraption, and Caitlin was out to lunch. Eobard was unexpectedly enjoying the odd moment of purposelessness until he heard the elevator ding. He slipped back into character and ventured closer to greet the visitor.

"Good afternoon, Detective West." Damnit, defaults were a bitch. If Frost were present she would have laughed at Eobard's obvious tell.

"Dr. Wells," Joe replied, oblivious even to the possibility of the other man having preprogrammed responses.

"I suppose you're here because of Barry's incident last night. If you're looking for him, I think he is at the station," Dr. Wells directed helpfully.

"I'm not looking for Barry," Joe clarified. "I was actually looking for you."

"For me?"

"I came here because I need your help with an old case of mine."

"What case is that?" Dr. Wells asked, portraying the living embodiment of innocence. He already knew the answer as soon as the Detective had made the request, but that was all-the-more reason to behave unsuspecting.

"The murder of Barry's mother," Joe told him with a grave expression.

Dr. Wells paused to take in the gravity of the request, then gestured for the other man to walk with him. "We can discuss this further in the Cortex." He let the silence hang between them for a moment before asking, "Does Barry know that we're looking into this?"

"I don't want to bring it up to him until we have something to show for it," Joe explained. "He's already been through too much."

"I understand. I must admit, I am curious. It was my impression that you were the arresting officer..."

Joe stopped just inside the entryway to the Cortex to look at him. "You're wondering how
"I could do something like that to an old friend like Barry's father."

"I would not have phrased it that way," Dr. Wells amended, eying the cop's face with a penetrating stare nevertheless.

"I did it because at the time I was sure that he was guilty. I thought that it was better for me to be the one to take Henry in than to leave it to someone who didn't know him," Joe remembered. He began to set up the files that he'd brought with him while Eobard processed the new concept.

"But now you are no longer so certain of his guilt. What changed?" Dr. Wells prompted, accepting the folder that was passed to him. Gideon had already downloaded and transferred all relevant data from the CCPD archive directly to him when Barry first came of age. It was a part of the comprehensive library of files about this timeline’s Barry that was dutifully compiled in the Time Vault. Dr. Wells still took his time in skimming through the information in the folder while they talked, just for show.

"Barry described this tornado of red and yellow lightning on the night that his mother was killed, inside it, a man in yellow," Detective West recounted. "Then, bam! He finds himself standing in the middle of the street, five blocks away without a clue how he got there. When I arrived at the scene the place was wrecked."

"Nora Allen was dead," Eobard reflected, toying with the pen in his hand while he ran through various, different tactics and probable outcomes available to him.

"From a single stab wound to the heart, and Henry Allen was covered in her blood," Joe concluded

"You think this 'Man in Yellow' really existed?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but last night I watched Barry rescue a kid who was about to be run over, and it looked exactly like what he'd described happening to him," Joe theorized. "Got me thinking, what if somebody with Barry's abilities killed Nora?"

"An interesting concept, however there is one flaw in your theory: Barry's abilities exist due to a massive chain-reaction caused by an energy wave from the particle accelerator explosion bonding with Barry's unique genome. It took an astronomically unlikely combination of coinciding factors to create Barry's specific epigenetic reaction."

"Do you think that someone with powers similar to Barry's could have existed back then?" Joe persisted, pointing to the image files displayed on the screen behind him.

Dr. Wells let out a sigh. "I am a scientist. I deal in probabilities. Is it possible that someone else with similar powers to Barry's could already have existed? Yes. Arguably, anything is possible. Is it probable that another meta-human existed at that time who shared Barry's skillset? It is highly unlikely."

"So, you think that he just happened to hallucinate the exact same thing that he was going to become through a random, improbable accident in his adulthood," Joe countered, frustrated by the scientist's obstinacy.

"I don't know what Barry saw that night. I merely require more information before I can come to any further conclusions on the matter. All that I can be certain of is that he saw something," Dr. Wells conceded, hoping that the detective would understand and sympathize with the practicality of his position.
"I guess that's better than nothing," Joe accepted, still unhappy with the setback, although he sounded more understanding now. "I just know that there's something here."

"If there is something, Detective West, I have no doubt that we can find it."

In the end, Eobard spent most of the next day holed up in his office or hidden in the Time Vault with Gideon. After an unfortunate confrontation with Detective West at his favorite bar, Eobard had decided that it was best simply to retreat to the periphery until Girder was dealt with. It wasn't because he was upset. Eobard had never even known Tess; he had brought Harrison here with him to secure an outcome. It would be illogical for him to be in a bad mood due to Joe's perfectly reasonable--if tactless--attempt to question him. The others were too busy to notice Dr. Wells' silence, so it was perfect. He was currently playing around with creating a believably rudimentary design for an interactive holographic projector. It would have to be only slightly ahead of its time.

Caitlin and Cisco were currently out of the lab, retrieving the Flash from an ill-thought-out confrontation with Girder. It would probably look bad if Dr. Wells just kept developing his schematics while they treated Barry... Speak of the Devil. The two young scientists hauled a beaten, limping, and grimacing Flash into the Cortex. Cisco actually stole a glance at his reclusive boss as they passed his office, but they were busy. They probably wouldn't mind that much. Eobard added a few new parameters to the wire frame rendering on his screen and turned the model, scrutinizing the virtual construct. Yes, that was more suitable. He had a flow going now, as Cisco would say. He continued to augment and adjust, altering a piece here, replacing something there. Eobard was becoming completely entranced by his work when a thud from the glass wall to his right interrupted his "flow". He looked up to see Barry picking Cisco's hacky-sack up off the floor and tossing it back to... Caitlin. Oh. They minded. Barry looked up as he straightened, and their gazes met. Eobard chose to remain silent.

"Dr. Wells, I didn't know you were still here," Barry greeted. There was no overt accusation in his tone. There was doubt there, and lingering anger from his one-sided fight with Tony Woodward.

Dr. Wells nodded in one stiff jerk of his head, returning his attention to his project. "I gather that your injuries this time were less severe."

"Mostly just a lot of cuts and bruises, and a fractured wrist," Barry related. He stepped up to stand in the doorway and leaned to the side to peek at Dr. Wells' computer screen. "What's that?"

"An unrelated concept," Dr. Wells obstructed, amending an adjustment that he'd been updating when the hacky-sack smacked into his office.

"Can we talk?"

"Talk if you want to, Mr. Allen. I won't stop you."

"You're mad at me," Barry diagnosed, sprawling his long, graceful limbs out from his seat, diagonally facing Dr. Wells, and making himself at home.

"I understand that you were upset by Tony Woodward's interest in Ms. West. Your response was an expected outcome of your feelings for her," Dr. Wells rationalized, keeping his eyes on his work. Eobard had put a lot of effort into placing himself in the position of a nurturer, which
meant that he had to remain supportive despite Barry's irrational behavior. Speaking of which, the Flash was smiling at him now as if he'd just done something incredibly charming.

"That was very understanding of you. Now go ahead: tell me what you really think," he coaxed, joining his hands in front of himself in a subtle brace against the expected rebuke. "It's okay. I'm a grown up; I can take it."

Eobard glared at the screen for a silent interval, rather than at the reckless speedster.

"You don't behave like one. Your behavior was rash, impulsive, and self-destructive. We agreed that we would figure out a way to stop Girder together! Instead you ran into an obvious trap, unprepared--"

"And he beat me, again. I know. I get it! I'm not strong enough to beat him!" Barry agreed, sounding mostly angry with himself, rather than at Dr. Wells. Eobard reminded himself, yet again, that this was different; he was real to this Barry, a partner rather than a tool in the Flash's arsenal.

"Not everything is about strength," Dr. Wells corrected. "I would have expected a man of your intelligence to be able to realize that."

"He's not interested in sitting down for a chat," Barry grumbled. The frustration was still tightening his voice, but his expression was more open now. "I have to stop him before he hurts someone else."

"Are you going to listen to me?" Dr. Wells asked. His radiant blue eyes shifted from Barry to his computer screen and back in an unspoken ultimatum.

"Yes. Did you figure something out already?" Barry guessed, sinking back into his seat, repentant.

"Cisco did," Eobard told him, turning towards Barry and putting his plans aside for the present time. "It's a risky strategy. We haven't tested it yet, but I believe that you will succeed. I suggest that you listen to Caitlin and Cisco the next time that Tony Woodward does something to provoke you instead of allowing your rage to determine your actions."

Barry's brows furrowed in confusion. "What about you? Aren't you going to help us?"

"Cisco and Caitlin are perfectly capable of helping you defeat Girder. I have some business that I need to attend to," Dr. Wells responded truthfully.

"Look, I know that I screwed up. I was impulsive," Barry confessed. His eyes were so earnest. He regarded his mentor like a hopeful puppy waiting for his attention.

"I told you. I understand why you reacted in the way that you did," Dr. Wells reassured, then paused to weigh his words carefully before advising his student. "You're right, Barry: Girder is stronger than you, but you are smarter, which can be a far more formidable asset." He looked past Barry's shoulder to Cisco gesticulating wildly as he discussed some new idea with Caitlin. "...And unlike your opponent, you are not in this alone."

Eobard grabbed his coat and the black canvas bag that he'd been keeping tucked away in his desk for this very occasion and he headed out of the labs. Barry caught the door for him when he reached the lobby. Apparently, their schedules were matching up a lot today.
"Oh. Hey."

"Thank you," Dr. Wells nodded distractedly, frowning down at his phone. His ride was late and he'd rather not take his own vehicle to meet this particular contact.

"You need me to run you somewhere?" Barry inquired as if reading his mind.

"That's alright, Barry. There's someone coming to pick me up. If he would just get here..." Eobard checked his phone again, then huffed.

"You sure?"

"He'll be here. Ah, there he is. I'll see you later tonight," Dr. Wells bid his speedster companion farewell.

"Yeah," Barry responded, distracted. He watched the smartly dressed man --who looked only a few years older than Barry himself-- get out and greet Dr. Wells with a casual grasp of his shoulder before opening the car door for him. It was nothing more than a companionable gesture, but Dr. Wells was typically not tactile, so it stuck in Barry's mind like unpleasant dissonance. The man turned his head to look at him with a knowing expression on his pale face. Barry hastily looked away, cheeks coloring, feeling like he'd been caught spying. He sped off towards the police station the second that the man's back was turned.

Eobard's ride was quiet. His driver was more than happy to soak in the classical music playing discretely over the radio as they traveled in companionable silence. That was one of the more selfish reasons why Eobard had chosen to work with this man again. They didn't need to talk. It was probably a result of his longevity, Eobard supposed, the patience and ease with which the other man was content simply to be. They drove to the meeting place at an old derelict in Central City's warehouse district.

"Shall I accompany you, Doctor?" the driver offered in his cultured English accent.

"It's only a simple exchange. It shouldn't take long." Eobard paused in gathering his things to look at his associate's reflection in the rearview mirror, and straightened his posture. "You have concerns, Richard?"

"As I recall, you specified a meeting without arms. Your appointment does not appear to be acting in good faith."

"A gun?"

"Multiple weapons. A swift departure may prove necessary; I suggest that you leave your chair."

Eobard's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He chuckled. "You are far too observant for such an old man," he remarked, not to be outdone at his own game.

"And you are far too confident for a boy of your age."

Okay. Damn. He'd been outdone.

"Alright. If I'm not back in ten, come and pull me out." Eobard got out of the car, leaving his chair in the elder man's care.

"In which case, I shall expect a raise."
Eobard smirked at him as he strolled past to meet the smuggler. Figuring out how Richard had determined his true age, if not his nature, was a fruitless endeavor to tackle on another day.

"He walks!" The copiously tattooed gangster satirized, straightening the pristine lapels of his steel grey bespoke suit.

"I told you that I don't like guns," Eobard stated, running a disdainful eye over the assault weapons strapped to the musclebound thugs who stood by his contact's jet-black jag.

"You also said no names, but see, I just ain’t feelin' that. You hear me, Wells?"

Eobard gave him the android stare. "You have the item that I requested?"

"Yeah." The suit looked back to his cronies and snapped his fingers. The larger one retrieved a metal briefcase from the car. The suited gangster raised a hand adorned with expensive rings and stopped him from proceeding towards Eobard. "You know, it ain't easy gettin' this shit. I think I need a little extra for the trouble my men had to go through just to acquire this item."

Eobard held up the duffel bag. "We agreed to twenty-thousand. Unmarked. Non-sequential." Eobard tossed the bag to the unburdened muscle.

"You think you're funny, Doc?" The suit asked, both his cronies raised their weapons to point at his chest.

"I have already anticipated your request," he held out his hand expectantly. "My component?"

The thug checked the bag, looking pleasantly surprised. "Double the money, Boss!"

The suit gestured for his underling to pass the suitcase over. Eobard opened the suitcase and checked that the eerily glowing component was there, undamaged.

"Whoa, man! That shit's cancerous! We gotta’ suit up for that!"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Eobard remarked dispassionately clicking the latches shut. He flashed a blatantly fake smile at them, adding, "It was a pleasure doing business with you." Before he turned and walked back to the car.

"That went well," Richard observed upon his return. "You aren't bothered by the thought that they might expose you?"

"They won't."

The immortal assassin looked him over once, then simply accepted it. "Where should I drop you off this evening, then?"

Chapter End Notes

I know this one took a little longer to post than previous chapters, but hey, it's almost twice as long. Also, if anyone noticed, yes I am doing my own version of Shade in this
story because the one shown in the TV show was nowhere near cool enough IMHO. I tried to resist, but the added contrast between a time traveler escaping the distant future and an immortal surviving since the beginning of the Victorian Era was simply too good to resist. I hope that doesn't bug anybody. He'll be a background character so, I imagine, probably not.
Richard dropped Eobard off in the back parking lot of the Big Belly Burger not far from the lab. Eobard paused to sit in his chair and stare the stars, enjoying the solitude-- until Girder stomped into view not far away. Eobard watched him drift closer, headed for the entrance, unwittingly destroying Eobard's good mood. The lunkhead turned to face him.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing of interest," Eobard replied.

Girder snorted. "You picking a fight with me, Wheels?"

"I suggest that you move along, Mr. Woodward," Eobard responded, taking out his phone.

Girder looked up at the stars, and rolled his head, loudly popping the joints in his neck, staging a token effort to control his temper. Eobard figured that was because of the wheelchair. Girder began to walk again, only to change direction and stalk over to Eobard. He tried to snatch Eobard's phone while the older man wasn't looking, but he pulled it out of reach.

"Give me that." Girder grabbed his wrist and twisted, sending the phone clattering across the blacktop.

"Let go of me."

Instead of heeding Eobard's advice, Girder shifted into his steel form and wrapped his free hand around Eobard's throat, lifting him out of his chair.

"You gonna call the cops on me now?!" The meta-human demanded.

Eobard grabbed Girder's wrist with his free hand as the grip around his throat tightened.

"I can't hear you! You still feeling brave?" Girder raised an arm to punch him out.

Eobard stopped pretending to struggle for breath and met Woodward's glare with glowing red eyes.

"What the... No!" Girder pushed through his awe, trying to punch out the boogeyman from his youth, but the supposed invalid caught the steel fist with ease. Eobard's hand began to vibrate, gradually nearing the frequency of the limb's substance and beginning to draw an ominous hum out of the metal. It wasn't too damaging...yet, but the sensation would be very unpleasant for the meta-human attached to the distressed steel.

"Augh!" Girder hurled him into the side of a car, putting a massive dent in the metal, and fell back a step. Eobard would have landed face down on the blacktop, but caught himself in an inhuman parody of the plank position before his body touched the ground. He turned his head to stare at his attacker like something out of a Terminator movie. He literally pushed himself upright with the type of precise execution that only a machine can accomplish. The car alarm only added to
the overall **Judgment Day** ambiance.

Girder let out a shout and moved to punch him again, but Eobard dodged it in a flicker of scarlet. He shoved his more physically imposing opponent away with rapidly vibrating hands. The heavy, metal mutant slid several yards back with a loud grinding sound, scoring large gouges into the blacktop. As soon as he'd stopped sliding, Girder lost his balance and stumbled to his knees. He glared up at Eobard, murderous.

Instead of continuing their showdown, however, Eobard marched over to right his toppled wheelchair. He reclaimed his seat, settling into it until he looked as if he'd never left as the siren and lights of a police cruiser rapidly approached them. Tony Woodward watched him for a few uncertain seconds, but decided to leave before the cops arrived. Eobard watched the criminal's retreating back with flickering red eyes. It really was a nuisance that he still didn't have a steady enough connection to his speed-force to take the bastard down without collapsing. He needed to get back to the house and install the final part in his at-home charging station anyway. It wouldn't do to be caught with such an item. There would be too many questions that he couldn't answer.

Eobard ended up taking longer than expected to fine tune the futuristic remodeling of Dr. Wells' bed. He'd decided that he needed to be absolutely certain that the harmful components were as securely insulated as he could make them. The run in with Girder had reminded him of the unfortunate demise of 'Snowball' after Eobard's charging dock at the Alaskan hideout was damaged in a firefight. Yes, androids like animals too. He'd never entirely gotten over the poor little arctic fox's fate. Not that he had any plans to get a pet. He was simply being thorough. By the time that he was done, Barry had already captured Tony Woodward. Good.

Eobard returned to STAR Labs to finish work on his virtual model for a holoprojector. He smiled at his accomplishment, debating whether it was too late to start running it through simulated testing. A flash of golden lightning blew through the Cortex. Eobard checked the clock: 11:15pm. It wasn't an unusual time for one of Barry's late-night runs. Still, Eobard would have expected him to take a little more time to recuperate after the big fight.

"Congratulations, Mr. Allen," he called to reveal his presence.

"Oh. Hi," Barry responded, stepping away from the mannequin to talk with Dr. Wells instead of retrieving his suit. "I guess you did say you'd be back tonight."

"So I did. I heard that I missed your great victory against your bully," Dr. Wells returned.

"Well. I had help," Barry said humbly, then smiled. "Are you working on your secret project again?"

Eobard straightened and looked up at the Flash. He was smiling teasingly, no threat there.

"It's not yet a project -- mere speculation really. I'm almost ready to start testing the concept, but..."

"What's the concept?" Barry nudged, leaning his elbows against the edge of the computer hub.

Eobard shifted, irrationally nervous. He almost felt as he had back in his first year when he'd finally mustered up the courage to start sharing his tactical ideas with his master. "A system for the creation of three dimensional optical simulations... It's only a theoretical construct that I've been
toyed with."

"You mean like a hologram?" Barry paused to parse out Dr. Wells verbose description. "You're making a three-dimensional hologram projector!"

"I am exploring how one might go about designing a theoretical--"

"Can I see?" Barry cut in enthusiastically, looking as excited as a geek on a Star Wars film set.

Eobard beckoned for Barry to grab a seat next to him and pushed the scribbled notes over to him. Barry flipped at super-speed through the notebook, then squinted at the wire frame model.

"You have to tell Cisco about this," he urged, poking through the notes again at a more human pace; that action was a compliment in itself.

"I will if the idea looks like it's worthwhile."

Barry gave him a flat look. "You know he'll love it. Dr. Wells, this is amazing!"

"As a concept, yes, but what real-world applications are going to be worth the estimated cost of developing this device? STAR Labs isn't drawing in the investments that we used to," Dr. Wells reasoned. "If we are going to create new technologies, they need to be the technologies that matter. I would rather not get Cisco excited about this only to crush his hopes."

"Have you run any simulations yet?" Barry asked, sounding more serious.

"No. I've only just finished programming the model," Dr. Wells informed him. "It's too late to start running simulations now."

Barry nodded. "How many more side projects like this have you got going?"

"Most of my focus of late has been centered around you," Dr. Wells smirked at the way that Barry's head shot up in response to his mention. "Mainly applications for what we're learning from your speed or ways to better assist you in your encounters with other meta-humans. Cisco and I were just discussing possible new safety measures to incorporate into your suit before Tony Woodward attacked."

"Oh. That makes sense..." Barry accepted, sounding a tad distracted. "So. Who was that guy who picked you up earlier?"

"Mr. Black is an old acquaintance of mine," Eobard replied, amused by this Barry's chronic transparency. "I hired him to drive me to a less-than-friendly appointment in hopes that it would go more smoothly if I had a quick getaway lined up."

"That bad?"

"Unfortunately, these days my name is more of a hindrance than an asset. This time, things went well in comparison to how they could have gone," Dr. Wells recalled. He eyed the computer screen with a touch of humor. "Weren't you heading out for a run?"

"I can't sleep. Maybe we could do something instead," Barry hinted, watching hopefully for Dr. Wells reaction. "Unless you want me out of your hair. I mean, it's late. I get that."

It was likely another attempt to push about the hologram projector; better to counter it
before the Flash got any ideas...

"Have you ever played Texas Hold ‘Em?" Dr. Wells asked, innocently. This was probably kind of mean, but Eobard was pretty sure it would also be funny, therefore he didn't care.

"I'm not really much of a poker player," Barry readily admitted. "I figured that you'd want to play chess again."

"So you do know the game?"

"You're still teaching me to play chess..."

Dammit. Eobard really wanted to see the younger Flash fail at poker now. This was utterly unfair.

"Alright. It's only that Caitlin and I play poker sometimes on the weekends. I thought that you might think it was fun too," Eobard said mostly truthfully. "Cisco stopped coming in order to give himself more time to work on his projects." Lie. He stopped because Caitlin is mean and impossible to beat, and Eobard is her eerily inscrutable minion who keeps forgetting to blink. "It would be nice to have a group again." Eobard does not want to keep losing all of his chocolates to Caitlin.

Barry shrugged. "I'll think about it."

"We can play chess for a while before I head home if you want," Dr. Wells decided, yawning to emphasize the impermanence of this plan. He maneuvered his chair away from the computer hub, leading the way over to their unfinished game from two nights before.

"Great," Barry said, standing to follow him. Wells' cellphone sitting on the computer desk chirped and Barry glanced at the screen in time to see it shift from 'incoming call from Det. West' to '2 missed calls'.

"You know, I might not be into poker, but I'm pretty sure that Iris still loves to play cards." Wells' phone chirped once to announce a text message... from Joe. Barry's brows pinched together ever so slightly, then he continued as if he hadn't seen anything odd, "I suppose you guys could probably try asking her."

"I'll keep that in mind." Dr. Wells took the phone that Barry passed to him as he claimed his seat.

"Your phone beeped," Barry informed him, pretending to be focused on the board. "You might want to check it in case it's important."

Dr. Wells barely even glanced at the screen before pocketing it. "Just another consultation."

Barry scowled at his knight rather than call him out on the lie, then made a rather foolish move with his rook as a result. What did Joe want from Dr. Wells so badly that he'd call at this hour? Why was he being so persistent, and so persistently ignored? Barry hated that he was already sure he knew whose idea it was to lie to him about it.

Dr. Wells regarded the board with mild amusement. "An interesting choice."

Barry shrugged. "I guess, I'm still learning. Your move."
Barry pulled back his cowl and watched Dr. Wells once again find an excuse to leave the room at the first sign of Joe. Barry saw Joe's eyes tracking the scientist's quick retreat with frustration that appeared less contained each day of this strange hide-and-seek between the two men. Barry had had enough. Something was going on that he didn't like, and worse, when he'd tried to get Dr. Wells to talk about it the aversion spread to Barry by default. He hadn't been able to see his teacher and confidant alone since, and even when he did see him it was nearly always fleeting. Dr. Wells was ticked off. That much was obvious, and Barry was done simply putting up with the fallout without knowing why.

"Ready to go, Bear?" Joe asked. They were meeting Iris and Eddie at home for a family dinner. Barry had nearly forgotten in the rush of his nightly patrol. He speed-changed into his street clothes and nodded.

"Yeah. See you later, Guys."

"Mm-hm..." Cisco was too caught up in his latest design to spare them a glance but Caitlin waved them off with a smile.

"Have fun."

"Goodnight, Caitlin." Joe followed him out, while Barry mulled over whether or not he needed to wait until after dinner to ask. He hadn't really reached a conclusion yet when they climbed into the car. Joe solved the issue for him as he started the motor.

"Something's bothering you, isn't it?"

"What is going on with you and Dr. Wells?"

Joe took a moment to construct his answer carefully, then explained, "I hit a nerve with him about a week ago. I didn't know until it was already done, and now he doesn't want to talk to me. The guy won't even give me a chance to apologize."

"I figured that much out myself. What were you two even talking about? I didn't think that you liked him very much." Barry watched the corners of Joe's lips pinch downward.

"You're right. I don't, but you spend so much time at his lab now you might as well be working for him. So, I looked him up, and I had a couple questions about his past."

"If there was something that you wanted to know, you could've just asked me," Barry pointed out, feeling oddly defensive.

"Listen, this is a problem for Dr. Wells and me to work out. It isn't about you anymore," Joe tried to put the volatile subject to rest.

"No. He's my friend, and now he's barely even talking to me," Barry dismissed, beginning to get a little upset. "I deserve to know why."

"I told you, Barry, it was a misunderstanding. I'm going to sort it out myself as soon as I get a chance to talk to him."

"If that's even possible. What the hell did you say?"

"There's a huge gap in his records spanning from the year 2000 to the end of 2004," Joe
seemed unsurprised by the wince that the mention of those dates prompted from his foster child. "It looked like he'd just dropped off the face of the Earth for four years. Then he suddenly pops up in Central City..."

Barry let out a rush of breath and leaned forward against the console, tangling his hands in his hair. "Oh, Joe, you didn't. Why didn't you just talk to me? You don't trust my judgment?!" Now Barry really was upset, even a little mad, too.

"Bear, I know how much you look up to the guy. If there was something suspicious about his past--"

"Only, there isn't! His wife died, and he became depressed and reclusive. He still hides away from Caitlin, Cisco and me a lot even now that he's had over a decade to recover and you dragged it back up," Barry reproached, then slumped back against his seat, shaking his head. "Please, tell me you asked delicately, because--" He noticed Joe's ironic smirk. "You did the exact opposite, right? He's never going to let you anywhere near him, again. Why couldn't you just ask me?"

"I knew you'd get like this."

A flash and the sound of the car door slamming behind the exiting speedster were the only response that Barry had for that answer. He sped into the house and up to his room, blurring back and forth a couple times before he sped back out again. He needed to blow off some steam before Iris and Eddie arrived. He was so sick of being treated like some idiot kid, and now Joe's overprotection might have just ruined the friendship he'd been forming with his favorite of all his childhood role models.

"Ford?"

"Yes,"

"I think I'm a sofa."

"I know how you feel..."

Eobard glanced from the two screaming couches transforming back into men on the big screen, to his young associate. Cisco laughed and popped some more generously-buttered popcorn into his mouth. Cisco held the big bowl out towards him without looking and he accepted a handful.

"I used to want to have something like this happen to me when I was a kid," Cisco confided.

"To lose your home to alien bureaucracy, or to turn into furniture?"

"To meet a traveler from another world and go on an adventure."

"Well I believe, Mr. Ramon that you have gotten your wish," Eobard remarked, smiling to himself secretively.

"Barry is a meta-human; he's still from my world," Cisco corrected, pausing to ingest another mouthful of popcorn before adding. "Still pretty cool though." He grinned and held out the bowl again, and Dr. Wells accepted another handful of unhealthy snack food, this time keeping his
gaze intent on the screen. A living shadow passed by the doorway behind them unnoticed.

Finally, Barry saw an opening and slipped outside while the others were all talking animatedly about an old case of Eddie and Joe's. They were telling a pretty funny story, but Barry just wasn't in the mood to laugh. He'd been feeling rudderless and adrift in this old life, as if nine months in a coma had proven that the world didn't need a Barry Allen. It had been depressing, even frightening at first, until the night he'd found Dr. Wells alone and grieving in his office, and Barry had realized the truth hidden right under his nose. He was needed, just not by the same people, or in the same way as he had been before. He no longer felt truly at home anywhere other than at STAR Labs. Whether he was working to solve a case with the help of his team, or discussing science after hours with Dr. Wells because one or both of them was simply incapable of sleeping through the night. Barry didn't want to have to choose one home over the other, or trade one version of himself for another. Perhaps, it was lingering trauma from the lightning strike forcing him to lose all that time, but a part of Barry feared that it was only a matter of time until the fragile balance toppled and he lost his place again.

"Hey. So, this is the designated spot for being cold and broody tonight," Iris' voice facetiously confirmed as she joined him on the porch, pulling a blanket tightly to her shoulders to keep it clear of the closing door.

"I'm not that cold," Barry reassured her, belatedly noticing that his breath was quite visible. Iris graced him with a no nonsense look and tossed the blanket over him. "Oof!" Barry pushed the wool off of his head, but didn't remove the blanket from his shoulders. "Uh, thanks..."

"Sure thing," Iris acknowledged, coming to rest on his left with her arms propped up on the railing. She was wearing a thick, warm sweater, sensible woman that she was. "So... What are we brooding about?"

Barry sighed and looked out at the tawny lit street before them. "It's... I don't know. It's probably stupid."

"As stupid as breaking your hand punching a big, metal guy?" Iris challenged, smiling up at him. "Because, I'm like, 99% sure that you can't take up this mantle."

Barry smiled wanly, not quite convinced by her creative recollection of events.

"Hey," Iris' voice turned gentle. "It's okay to be stupid sometimes, but if something is bugging you this much, I bet it isn't stupid at all."

Barry fidgeted a few times, unsure of what he wanted to do with himself, then turned to lean against the column facing her position. "I'm-- It's about Dr. Wells..."

Iris grinned at him. "Oh my God, don't tell me! You have a crush on your Doctor?"

"What? No! Why would y-- First of all, Caitlin is my Doctor. Dr. Wells is her boss, and we're just friends," Barry clarified, his mind suddenly splitting off down too many baffling paths at once. "Maybe not just-- I thought we were pretty good friends, but that's-- Why would you think I had a crush on him?"

Iris watched his face without comment for an extended interval.

"Fine. He's your friend..." she magnanimously allowed, gesturing for him to go on. Barry
shook off the many panicked questions still bouncing around in his skull, and tried to recall his point.

"Anyway, it was-- No. Hang on," Barry frowned in awkward befuddlement, totally thrown off track. "Do you think I'm gay?"

Iris let out an amused snort. "Really? I've known you forever, Bear. I know that you like girls, but let's be honest here; you're not exactly straight either, are you?" It wasn't really a question.

"Oh," Barry shrugged. He rubbed at the back of his neck uncomfortably. He hadn't thought it was noticeable, but the fact that it was might explain a few things.

"Relax. No one cares about that, but I do actually care if your new friend is upsetting you this much," she inspected her bandaged hand dramatically. "Am I gonna have to go kick some ass now, or what?" That coaxed a real smile out of the conflicted speedster.

"It's kind of hard to explain," Barry paused and fretted over his chilled pink fingers. "When I woke up from my coma, everything was different. I never really thought about how much can change in a few months. It seemed like everyone had moved on with their lives, and I was... I didn't fit anymore, or it felt that way." He saw the argument flaring up behind Iris' eyes, and hastily added, "I know how much you and Joe care about me, but things just weren't the same. Then, well, you know Dr. Wells," Barry dragged a hand through his hair and continued to explain. "He's..."

"An example of what would happen if the phrase 'cut the crap' was granted a wish to become a real boy?" Iris characterized. Barry was drawn out of his dueling internal crises for a moment by the image of Dr. Wells' shrewd, no-nonsense gaze assessing them. He smirked a little bit.

"Yeah, I guess I can see how that fits," he admitted. "But I'm pretty sure that it's a bluff. I think he stopped opening himself up to other people after his wife died. Now, after his particle accelerator exploded, he just figures that everyone probably hates him anyway. That's the problem. I walked in on him drinking himself unconscious one night a little over six weeks ago. He scared Caitlin pretty bad. After that, I started visiting STAR Labs after hours. You probably noticed, that I wasn't only going there for treatment," Barry recalled. "It wasn't really about that night, but I started spending time with him, just talking science at first-- which was so amazing! His brain is like--"

Iris pointedly gestured for Barry to get on with the explanation, but he could see her stifling an amused smile.

"He started teaching me to play chess. We were getting along great, everything was fitting back together. I was starting to feel necessary again, like I belonged somewhere." The wistful look in Barry's eyes turned to one of melancholy. "Dr. Wells started acting weird. He's been avoiding me more and more, over the past couple of weeks. Only I noticed that it wasn't just me. I guess Joe saw..."

"Oh, typical Dad," Iris rolled her eyes in sympathetic annoyance at her father's predictable behavior. "What did he do this time?"

"He ran a background check on Dr. Wells, then went after him about the gap in his records instead of talking to me. The explanation is pretty much right there in Dr. Wells' biography --maybe not explicitly but-- After Tess died, he couldn't bring himself to face anyone they'd known. He stopped working, then he stopped going out in public, stopped talking to anyone except for his roommate at the time. Then his roommate got fed up and left. The guy basically disappeared on him overnight and Dr. Wells had already cut himself off from everyone else, so..."

"I can see how that conversation would go badly, but Dr. Wells can't blame you for that.
Dad was just being overprotective." Iris pointed out.

"It doesn't matter, he still did it because of me. I don't know how to fix this."

"You really like him, don't you?"

"I'm not!" Barry protested the perceived insinuation.

"You just need to talk to him, Bear," Iris advised seriously, forgoing his irritation as an irrelevant detail. "Bring him something small, as a peace offering. He sometimes stops by Jitters in the morning for coffee and pastry... Maybe you could get him a strudel or something?"

"He likes blueberries..." Barry offered while Iris considered their scheme.

"Blueberry Danish! You can come in with me to pick some up, fresh baked when my shift starts tomorrow morning. He'll love it."

"You sound way too sure of yourself right now," Barry observed, caught between being disturbed and amused by her sudden enthusiasm.

"Listen, my passion in life might be journalism, but I am also a very good barista. Mark my words, Harrison Wells loves blueberry Danishes."

Eobard set Harrison's ritual cup of coffee on his dining room table next to the morning newspaper, then walked over to look out the window, passing his eyes across the rainclouds creeping closer in the early morning sky while he ran through different planned behavioral patterns for the day ahead in his mind. A proximity alert chimed from the artfully-concealed speakers hidden behind false air vents overhead.

"Dr. Wells, Barry Allen is approaching your location. ETA 5.8 seconds," Gideon announced.

"Thank you, Gideon." Eobard hastily retrieved his chair and more appropriately staged his position by the wall of glass. A knock on the door signified Gideon's perfect accuracy as well as Barry's arrival. Eobard ignored it, half out of the pattern of avoidance he'd recently adopted, half just to see what he'd do. Barry knocked again, then buzzed the intercom placed inconspicuously behind a stylishly molded steel panel next to the great double doors.

Eobard tapped a command into the keypad on his chair. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"It's me. Can you please let me in?"

Eobard left Barry hanging for a moment, before deigning to reply.

"It's early," he grumped.

"I know. I brought that pastry from Jitters that you like. It's still warm..."

Eobard paused to contemplate the fact that he had yet to install today's plastic stomach pouch, then tapped in a command into his chair that remotely opened the doors. He was curious to see how the young Flash thought he knew Dr. Wells' breakfast preferences. Barry sped into the kitchen with the promised box of pastries and bent down to grab them some plates. Dr. Wells
ignored him in favor of reading the newspaper. There was a headline on the front page about a shoot-out between rival gangs that had resulted in multiple criminal fatalities. Barry was trying not to look at it, doubtlessly bothered by the fact that he hadn't heard about the incident in time to intervene. Eobard heard the refrigerator door open and a breath of amused disbelief from his guest.

"How is there literally nothing in your fridge?" Barry remarked, brazenly opening the freezer to verify a hunch.

"Do not misuse the word 'literally', Mr. Allen," Dr. Wells corrected. "Literally is not the same as figuratively, which would be the accurate word choice in our present context."

"Oh, right, my mistake. There is literally nothing but a bowl of grapes in your refrigerator, and..." Barry sarcastically amended, pulling a container out of the freezer. "Is this my rocky road from, like, a month ago?"

"Three weeks ago," Dr. Wells amended. "Are you here to critique my kitchen inventory, Mr. Allen?"

Barry shook his head and split the grapes between their plates. He then set down Dr. Wells' plate at the end of the polished, black dining table and pulled the only chair closer to sit at the righthand corner beside him. Dr. Wells maneuvered his wheelchair to his place at the table, set his coffee cup down, and neatly folded the paper, positioning it carefully beside his plate. He then looked expectantly at Barry.

"You're about to ask me for something," he stated. Barry instantly looked flustered.

"No. That's not why-- I'm just here to talk!"

"You've tracked me down early in the morning when I am certain to be alone, brought me a delicious bribe to ensure that you would be allowed entry, and you want to talk. All signs indicate that you want something from me."

"Oh, come on, Dr. Wells! You've never had a friend just surprise you with something nice before?" Barry said, poking at his own breakfast with his fork.

"I don't have friends," Dr. Wells stonewalled his attempt at camaraderie.

"You're not a people person, I get that, but I'm still pretty sure I'm not the only person who would disagree," Barry tried, his expression was stuck somewhere between troubled and amused.

"They wouldn't."

"Really? What would you call Caitlin, then?" Barry challenged his obstinate companion.

"My physician."

"Uh huh... and Cisco?" Barry tested, popping a ripe, green grape into his mouth. He was more curious than daunted by the scientist's stubborn denial. He'd already decided that Dr. Wells was full of it the instant that he gave that last answer.

"A colleague."

"You have weekly movie nights with Cisco. It's actually written into your official company schedule as a permanent appointment, and he celebrated his last birthday at the lab with you instead of visiting his own family."
"With the entire team," Dr. Wells corrected. "He tends to avoid family gatherings. I never denied that he and I get along well."

"You're my friend," Barry told him off-handedly, cutting into his deliciously warm chocolate croissant.

"Mr. Allen..." Eobard scowled down at his blueberry Danish. It looked unfairly appealing.

"I know you've had friends before; you're forty-five," Barry disagreed, not dissuaded from his premise in the slightest. "It is impossible for you not to have had friends."

"Tess had friends. I have science," Dr. Wells proclaimed stubbornly. "That cannot be why you came here."

"Yes, it is. You should eat your Danish while it's still nice and warm."

Dr. Wells narrowed his eyes at the amiable speedster.

Barry took a deep breath, and let it out. "Look. Joe told me that he ran a background check on you. I'm sorry. I didn't know about it until last night, and I'm not going to ask you what else was going on. I know how much you value your privacy. If I had known what he was going to do, I would've stopped him. Joe's just... He's always been kinda over-protective of me and Iris. I guess I probably should have seen it coming... I came here to apologize because you are my friend, and I don't want that to change because you two don't like each other."

"Detective West runs background checks on all of your acquaintances?" Dr. Wells asked after a pregnant pause. Barry's lips pressed together unhappily in response to the word 'acquaintance' but he didn't mention it.

"No. But I have been spending a lot of time at STAR Labs, and you agreed to help me be the Flash... I think he's still having a little trouble accepting it. I'm sorry that he took it out on you."

"I doubt that that's what he was doing." Eobard finally cut into his blueberry Danish and turned the bite-sized piece on the end of his fork speculatively.

"He doesn't think so either," Barry conceded, looking irritated on his friend's behalf. "But I still do."

Eobard eyed the steaming morsel and breathed in the scent as if savoring it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the corners of Barry's lips quirk upward before the speedster hid it behind his free hand. Barry's phone rang, and he popped the bite of Danish into his mouth.

"Excuse me," Barry got up and walked into the other room to take the call. Eobard tuned out after that. Barry returned shortly after to see Eobard cutting another surgically precise piece out of his Danish. Eobard paused with fork aloft to suggest "Would you like coffee? The pot on the counter is pretty fresh," before popping the next bite into his mouth, or so he made it appear before Barry made his way into the kitchen.

"Thanks."
This deception was turning out to be unexpectedly entertaining. Eobard didn't even bother to try to sneak away and insert a stomach pouch. He would eventually, but taking risks was half the fun.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah my Beta left for a week and I had to wait longer than expected to update. This is now the longest chapter that I believe I have ever written, so... that's something. I wonder how many of you can recognize the movie that E and Cisco are watching together during their movie night.
Personally, I like the book bit better.
As always, thanks for reading.
It was a crisp, clear morning. The frigid wind bit at Barry’s cheeks, turning them pink as he traversed the streets of Central City. It was scantily populated in the very early hours of a Tuesday morning. The sky was a smoky lavender, still sporting the last rosy accents of the sunrise. The Scarlet Speedster had actually been sleeping through the past few nights for a change, even if he had awoken a bit too early today. It was a peaceful experience so far, so he didn't mind. Crime had been down lately, with only a few petty misdemeanors for him to intercept in recent patrols—nothing that the police couldn't have handled just as well themselves, but he'd gotten there first. He and Iris were getting along about as well as they ever had before the lightning struck; he and Dr. Wells were back to behaving like friends again too—although the latter continued stubbornly to deny any such thing, as always. In other words, things were going great and Barry had never felt more relaxed. He was happy.

He hummed to himself as he strode into Jitters just as Kathy, Iris' petite sandy-haired coworker opened the place for business. Iris stepped out from the back with a new batch of assorted fresh baked pastries.

"Good morning, Barry," she greeted him. "You're here early."

"I decided to go for a run this morning and watch the sunset. Now I'm just killing the extra time before work," Barry replied, trying to decide which of the new pastries looked the most scrumptious.

"Sounds nice. Now you'll have no excuse to be late today," Iris joked.

"Come on. How can I be late?"

She gave him a jaded look as she prepared an unspecified coffee drink for him.

"Okay, okay," Barry looked towards the tray once she'd finished her concoction. "Can I also get-" She picked up the orange cranberry muffin and plopped it onto a plate for him. He smiled.

"I don't know how you always do that."

"I'm good with people, and you--" Iris paused briefly to enjoy his delighted hum in response to the taste of this latest mystery drink. "...are my best friend. I know you the best out of everybody who comes here."

"What is this?" Barry inquired, taking another thoughtful sip of the smooth, bittersweet and subtly spicy coffee.

"Double shot of espresso with Mexican chocolate and a splash of ginger syrup," Iris informed him. "I know. I'm amazing. Now go on and enjoy it, I have to get back to work."

He shoved some money in the tip jar when she turned her back, then did as ordered. She never charged him, so he'd developed a habit of sneak-paying her, off and on, depending on the situation and how likely he was to get caught. When he turned around he was startled to find a man
in a suit, with what Barry internally judged to be a pretentious mustache sitting at the table closest to him. Their eyes met as soon as they faced each other in a way that implied the man had been staring at Barry's back just as unblinkingly up until that point. Awkwardly, Barry laughed off his surprised start, regardless, and walked off to claim a seat on the other end of the row of tables. He looked up and could have sworn the man was seated closer than he had been when Barry had looked away. He eyed the stranger, considered the peculiar thought, then blushed slightly when he noticed the man looking back at him.

"Oh, sorry," Barry muttered even though the man couldn't hear his quiet voice from that distance, and ducked his head. He tore off the top of his muffin and took a couple self-conscious bites, then hazarded another glance. The man definitely had moved closer. He was now seated in the same exact position, at the corresponding seat to those he had occupied at his previous two tables, but he was now indisputably closer. He was staring at Barry. "What the hell?"

It suddenly occurred to Barry that he had never heard anyone else enter the cafe, nor had there been any indication of movement during the times that Barry looked away. Was he imagining things? This guy was real, right?

"Oh! Hey, welcome to Jitters. Sorry, we didn't hear you come in," Kathy greeted, looking just as startled by the stranger's presence as Barry had been. "Are you ready to order?"

Luckily, the other man had little choice but to focus on the barista for a while. He did end up ordering something to drink, but Barry noticed the guy constantly keeping watch on him through his reflection in the glass display case. He finished his muffin more quickly than he would normally prefer to and left. While he was walking on his way to STAR Labs, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being followed. He looked back a few times without seeing any sign of the stranger from earlier. He still couldn't ignore the uncomfortable prickle on the back of his neck. He couldn't escape the sensation of being tracked by some unseen threat. Barry wanted badly to tap into his speed and lose any would-be tail, but he knew that if his instincts were accurate and he was being observed, he would only be exposing himself more in the long run. He knew that someone was following him.

He made a sharp turn into a dead-end alley and sped up the wall, stopping crouched out of sight on the dingy roof to test his hunch. Sure enough, after a minute or so the same suited man walked into the alley, looking around for him. Barry's jaw clenched. He waited for his stalker to come over to his end of the alley, then darted down to pin him against the alley wall, holding his arms in a vice-grip behind his back.

"Who are you! Why are you following me!"

"You don't know?!!" The man exclaimed, then chuckled at some joke that Barry was not privy to. "Right. I get it. I've seen Fight Club."

Barry considered pursuing the odd remark but decided that it was better not to waste time. "Answer my questions!"

"Sam Scudder. And I am going to run this town someday soon, Mal. Once your freak physicist is in the ground--"

"Mal? My name isn't Mal, it's Ba-- Wait! You're talking about Dr. Wells!" Barry caught up with the other meta's confession. "I won't let you hurt him! What did he ever do to you!"

"Nothing at all, until I took the job last month," Scudder conceded. "Speaking of which, d'you mind backing off, Ninja Boy. I got a hole in my gut from last time and you're going to burst my stitches."
"Oh, sorry," Barry relaxed his pin to a less painful pressure but didn't slacken his grip on the criminal's arms in the slightest. He was fairly sure that the guy had a tentative grasp on reality, judging by the nonsense he was saying. "Maybe, you should find a lifestyle that doesn't involve murdering people."

"Most of the time I'm a thief!" The criminal defended, turning his head to glare back at his captor, but Barry pressed him harder against the wall before he could. Scudder's voice lowered, turning threatening. "Only I decide who I want to kill." He pulled a knife from inside his suit jacket and stabbed Barry in the thigh, then tugged his other arm out of the hero's loosened grip and elbowed him in the throat. "You got that, 'Barry Allen'? This is for last month!" He moved to stab Barry in the stomach, but he jerked into the speed-force in an attempt to dodge and Scudder slashed his side instead. Barry choked and dragged himself up off the concrete to watch Scudder vanish around the corner. He darted after the escaped killer, but when he rounded the corner the tail end of the meta's jacket was vanishing into a windowpane. Barry watched the glass ripple like the surface of a pond before settling. He winced and grabbed his bloody side to put pressure on the wound.

"Seriously?"

"Where's Barry? He's late," Dr. Wells wondered with irritability threatening to sneak back into his voice after nearly a week of surprisingly subdued countenance.

"Late is sort of his signature move," Caitlin pointed out, stepping up to join him and Cisco in Dr. Wells' office. Eobard tried to maintain his calm exterior. Barry was already a week behind on his training; Eobard couldn't afford for the other speedster to waste any more time.

"Hey, uh, you guys wanna' see my signature move?" Cisco said with a smile, chewing on the end of his pen. Dr. Wells regarded him with a flat, unamused expression. Before he could say or do anything crabby, however, a flash of golden light indicated Barry's belated arrival.

"Nice of you to finally..." Dr. Wells trailed off at the sight of Barry leaning against the doorway with his bloodstained hands clutching at his side and a darkening bruise over his throat. Eobard crossed over to him as quickly as Dr. Wells' chair would carry him. "Dr. Snow!"

"Let me see," Caitlin carefully pulled Barry's hands back to inspect the wound then quickly replaced them. "Okay. It looks pretty deep, but it looks like all his organs are intact. Cisco, we're going to need a transfusion ready. He's losing a lot of blood."

Eobard followed close behind and lingered at the foot of Barry's bed while the others treated the knife wound.

"What happened?"

"There was this guy in a suit--" Barry coughed, bothered by the rawness of his healing throat. "I noticed him following me, so I confronted him. Ah..." Barry sucked in some rapid, pained breaths as Caitlin clamped an artery to stop him from bleeding out.

"Don't you think we should talk about this later?" Cisco suggested, holding Barry still so that Caitlin could finish patching him up unhindered.

"You're right. I'll call, Detective West," Eobard began to turn to leave, intending to let Joe know that Barry would be late for work. Barry's outcry stopped him dead.
"Sam Scudder! Tell Joe to look up Sam Scudder's criminal record!"

"You need to keep him still," Caitlin reminded Cisco with practiced calm.

"Do not make things difficult for Dr. Snow while she is operating on you," Dr. Wells corrected in an even tone. "We will discuss it once you have recovered." He continued on his original path back to his office without looking back.

Barry waited, hanging around well after his wound had sealed shut, but Harrison did not return to talk to him. He checked Dr. Wells' office but the physicist had disappeared. It was as if he didn't care. Barry knew that it was an act, he'd seen the fleeting flicker of shock in the other man’s eyes when he first saw Barry's injuries. He couldn't have imagined it, but then why was his friend being so cold? Why had he abandoned him?

"Hey. So, what was the deal with this Scudder guy?" Cisco asked as he walked up from the Cortex. "He's the one that jumped you, right?"

"He was following me this morning. I tried to confront him and he pulled a knife on me," Barry explained rubbing the back of his head uncomfortably. "He's some kind of interdimensional meta or something."

"Interdimensional?" Cisco echoed, his eyes widening in excitement.

"He escaped into a reflection. I don't know. Thing is, it gets even weirder. You know how we asked Joe to look into the guy's criminal records?"

"Yeah. I remember. I was the one wrestling to keep you still," Cisco reminded him.

"Right. Anyway, when he tried to access the records the whole system crashed and rebooted with a handful of criminal records suddenly purged upon recovery. According to the cyber crime division, there was some kind of dormant virus just waiting in the system for weeks and calling up Scudder's file is probably what activated it."

"Whoa. So are we thinking this reflection-hopping meta is some kind of hacker?" Cisco asked, intrigued by the idea of a possible nemesis.

"I dunno. The guy called himself a thief and a killer, but I kind of doubt he could have pulled this off on his own," Barry scrunched up his brows in a semi-apologetic expression. "He didn't exactly strike me as the brains of the operation."

"Great. So I'll just have to find a way to identify the hacker while finding some way to stop a man who can literally escape through the looking glass."

"You can figure that out though?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll totally figure it out," Cisco confidently affirmed, then narrowed his eyes in an almost Wellsian manner. "I just need data."

"Do you have any idea where Dr. Wells went?" Barry questioned, seeing Joe enter the Cortex in search of him. "Never mind. I'll talk to him later." Barry didn't see nor hear from the physicist until late that night after his speed had been stolen from him. He couldn't help the feeling that after that it was far too late.
Eobard wheeled his chair into the safe seclusion of his hidden Time Vault and waited for his twin to seal the door before he allowed himself to take any action.

"Good evening, Doctor Wells," she greeted as usual. Nothing else today was usual; the world was falling apart around them. Eobard bolted out of his chair and towered over the pedestal style access terminal.

"Gideon, show me the future!" It was a familiar enough command that the exact issue, of the exact newspaper that he preferred appeared on the screen before he was done speaking. The main article displayed was now some irrelevant report about the post office being shut down. No picture of Barry, nor any mention of the Flash, not even the Wayne Industries merger. It was horrifying. "No. This is useless. Search for references to the Flash."

"Zero references to the Flash," Gideon answered impassively.

"Try his other titles, or mentions of speedsters."

"Zero references to the Streak. Zero references to the Scarlet Speedster. Zero references to speedsters." It was an unmentionably rare occurrence for Eobard actually to envy Gideon the lack of emotion that her incomplete deletion had inflicted upon her. This was definitely the most notable instance he'd yet experienced.

"What about Barry Allen? The STAR Institute? Hell, even the Justice League! There has to be something!" he half shouted at her, pacing the space between the holoscreen and his chair like a tiger trapped in a crate.

"One reference found to Barry Allen," Gideon informed him, vanishing from view to present the result in question. It was in the obituaries for February 28th 2015. Bartholomew Henry Allen had been found dead in Central Bay. Two local witnesses contacted the CCPD to report seeing a man fitting Mr. Allen's description on the night that he died, showing signs of intense emotional distress while dangling his arms and legs over the guardrail of the Bayview Bridge. The coroner ruled his death to be a suicide.

Eobard stared, transfixed by the document in front of him, strangely incapable of processing the information completely. He seemed to have gotten caught in some kind of awful feedback loop, reading the words over and over again without making sense of them. The haunting coincidence of that date. The wrongness of the Fl-- of Mr. Allen's strange behavior... the classic description of a suicide. Eobard shook himself. "That doesn't happen. How do we fix it, Gideon? What about-- No. The change hasn't cemented yet. There's still time to get us back on the right track. I just need to calculate..."

"Can you not replace Director Allen's influence on this timeline with your own? All that is required is for a well-known speedster to exist, upon whom your design will be modeled. You are already in control of STAR labs. The threat posed by the Flash has merely been neutralized ahead of our projected schedule," Gideon reasoned with her characteristic calm logic. It made Eobard want to lash out. Irrational.

"Too far ahead of schedule. He isn't supposed to die yet. I have to fix it!"

"Query--" before Gideon could finish her request for clarification, her terminal flickered like a dying flame and all the lights went out. Eobard --startled out of his frenzy-- looked around as the dim
lighting of the Time Vault's emergency power cell switching on brought the explanation.

"It appears we are under attack," Gideon reported, bringing up surveillance footage of Farook Gibran hurling bolts of charge at the external blast doors on screen. There was just the slightest hint of annoyance lacing her impassive tone. A fleeting echo of the personality that she’d once had. Even after being stripped down to the bare basics of her core software, Eobard's once terminally precocious twin, still hated being interrupted.

"Uh, guys! You'd better get down to the Cortex!" Cisco's voice hollered over the intercom, and Dr. Wells quickly returned to his chair and exited the hidden chamber to join the rest of his team.

Gideon watched her twin migrate towards the humans gathered in the Cortex. She found odd, illogical correlations between his current behavior and a mostly uncorrupted set of memory files in her transcribed memory banks, originating from the defunct timeline.

**Professor Zoom and the Flash had been sent out to intercept an attack by a White Martian operative in Gotham City. They intercepted the threat only to discover that they were up against not one, but three alien hostiles. The Director managed to kill the first before he could blow the city square to kingdom come and chased the second into the evacuated Courthouse. Professor Zoom neutralized the third in a manner more compatible with League protocols and joined the pursuit once the alien was suitably locked away.**

The third Martian turned out to have his own inevitably lethal mission in mind.

"Whoa!" The Director whirled around at the top of the stairs to see his android standing calmly behind him with an expectant expression on his face. "Don't do that!"

"I have neutralized the target that you assigned to me and relocated all the civilians to the safe-zone," Eobard reported, looking pleased with his own textbook efficiency. Director Allen frowned at the hopeful way that his machine was looking at him. It was an expression that he still recognized from his own children's tiny faces centuries ago. He could almost hear the childlike voice calling, "Daddy, look at me! See what I can do! Did you see me, Daddy?"

"Mazel-tov," the Director grunted, his tone as sarcastic as it was disinterested. "I lost sight of the last one." Eobard's imploring eyes looked up at him, reminiscent of a kicked puppy. The speedster paused for a millisecond before begrudgingly conceding, "You can help me locate him. I'll take this side, you--"

In a surge of red lightning, Professor Zoom had vanished from sight, still far too eager to please. The Director shook his head at his android's misbehavior, making a note that they'd need to have another long talk about appearances and began to search his side of the building. When he got to a locked office on the far end and grabbed the door handle, a surge of energy overwhelmed his nerves. The shock threw him backwards hard enough that he slid across the thick carpeting a couple of feet, leaving him almost completely paralyzed. The White Martian opened the door and stepped over him, taking on the appearance of a sweet, young twenty-something in a rose-pink business suit and cap. It --now a she-- was carrying an insulated suitcase cuffed to her wrist. There was a familiar rhythmic beeping coming from the recently robbed office vault. The Martian strolled out of the trapped speedster's line of sight, leaving him listening to the bomb counting down. A female shriek and an eruption of bright light from the direction of the stairs interrupted the morbid stillness. Professor Zoom appeared, leaning over his master, his eyes blazing red.
"You require medical assistance," he determined.

"Eo..." the Director rasped out. "What w-- that?"

"An electrochemical incendiary device." Eobard looked into the office, taking stock of the bomb. "This one is considerably larger... approximately thirty gallons immersive fluid, estimated yield--"

"H-w long..." the Director inquired, forcing himself to swallow, in an attempt to wet his dry throat.

"Insufficient time."

"F-r wha..."

Professor Zoom scooped his Master up and draped him over his shoulders, speeding them -- not down damaged stairs as he'd expected -- but up onto the roof one level above. The Director looked down at the deep water below, then up at his android.

"Wait. B-- you can't..." the Director mumbled, feeling his stomach drop. A rumble shook the air around them.

"I know," Professor Zoom replied with only a faint hint of regret before he threw the Flash into the air over the bay. The building shattered all around him into a mass of flames and shrapnel.

"EO!" The Director instinctively tapped into the speed-force, reaching out toward the motionless silhouette being consumed by spreading destruction. He stared at his partner in shock until a flying chunk of twisted, burning metal smacked into the left side of his face with crushing force. He was knocked out cold by the impact, but the insulating water saved his life in the next split second from the fireball overtaking the bay, just as his android had intended.

Chapter End Notes

I did it! I blew him up! God damn me! Etc...
Yeah, so I know that I kinda glossed over a lot of the canon events in this first half of the episode, but I just couldn't justify going back over events that would've played out pretty much the same in this as they did on the show anyway. I hope it wasn't too off putting.
Year 2363

Director Allen opened his eye and saw the white metal paneling of the Watchtower's infirmary above him. His other eye stung as if a hive of killer bees were rioting in the open socket and he could feel the bandage against his flesh. There had been White Martians, and a shock that stunned him, and a ball of fire over the water and--

"Eobard!" He jerked upright and someone rushed over to his side. "Wh-- Where's my 'droid? We were..." The Director swallowed, taking in his surroundings. It was as good an excuse as any to avoid looking at the dehumanizing red cross and mirror-lensed eyes that differentiated all the Medibots' faces from those of the living -- without feeling rude. The unnaturally perfect features and monotone coloring of Androids straddled the uncanny valley just innocently enough that he had been able to grow accustomed to them as he had to the many alien species intermingling with humanity. Robots were too overtly lifeless by design for his nerves.

"Director Allen, you must relax," the Medibot's tinny, vaguely feminine buzz ordered. "It is important to avoid unnecessary strain while recovering from an emergency prosthetic installation."

"My eye. It was replaced with bionics?" The Director placed a hand over the tender area, realizing that instead of the gaping hole he'd half expected, his face felt intact from the outside. "Because of the explosion."

"Affirmative."

"Eobard-- my android threw me into the Bay before the fireball hit."

"Please restate inquiry."

"Clunky piece of sh--" the Director swore. He hated this century's technological oversaturation. Luckily, there was an actual person at the ready to give him a break.

"The water insulated you against 87% of the concussive force but unfortunately a piece of superheated shrapnel impacted your skull before you were submerged," a feminine voice tactfully intercepted. The impatient patient turned his head to see a familiar uncannily-perfect visage step closer to the opposite side of his bed. "The impact has caused 3rd degree burns to your epidermis, multiple fractures to the zygomatic bone, and s--"

"I remember enough without hearing the finer details," the Director interrupted the 'droid's itemized account, holding up a hand to further discourage attempts to describe his defenestration. He surveyed the female model android's stiff posture with a sarcastic look and she relaxed into parade rest. "What the hell are you doing here, Fembot?"

"Good evening, Director Allen. Unit--" her too formal response was cut off by a heartfelt grumble.

"Gideon, I didn't ask you to give me your goddamned serial number!" the injured speedster rebuked, not at all liking where he could tell this conversation was headed. "I want to know what you're doing
at my bedside!

"'Gideon', logging to User Preferences..." Gideon's pale grey eyes glowed cyan for a moment while she processed the change—further exacerbating the feeling of wrongness caused by Eobard's absence. She then continued with the smiling vapidity typical of any legally functioning android. "In the eventuality that an operator's primary Combat Assistance Unit is damaged beyond it's ability to serve, a suitable device must be provided as replacement as soon as possible. Fortunately, my serial number was already registered in your file as your prefered replacement, allowing for swift and efficient substitution!"

"Ugh..." the Director didn't bother to hide his disgust from the empty-headed machine. "What about Eobard?"

"Watchtower engineering staff have declared Unit#547-E to be officially unsalvageable, Sir," Gideon informed him. "A minor inconvenience, but you have been given suitable time to readjust."

The Director turned to stare at the platinum blond automaton, wondering to himself if his great-grandniece had chosen this skin for her as a joke.

"Director Bartholomew Allen, you are now informed: you have been prescribed medical suspension for the next week for monitoring, to prevent rejection of your occular implant," the Medibot chimed in, causing its patient to wince in irritation.

He let out an angry grunt and sped out of Medical. To his annoyance, in a blur of cyan and bright yellow, Gideon appeared at his side a split second after he slid to a stop in Domestic Section Alpha.

"Damnit." He cast his gaze up and down the android's tall shapely body," he sniffed and continued towards his quarters. "Why do you look like a Barbie?"

"After the traumatic circumstances of your separation from your previous device, it has been concluded that a feminine appearance would be statistically more likely to appeal to you as a replacement," Gideon explained diplomatically, jogging to remain alongside her fleeing owner. He stopped at his door and paused briefly to contemplate.

"That's sexist." The Director pressed his palm to the access pad beside his door to unlock his quarters. "Also, incorrect. I prefer Eo's male form. It's not trying to manipulate me."

"Given time you will learn that my program is just as perfectly adapted for any and all functions that my predecessor performed in your service," Gideon assured him in that synthetic emotionless voice that was already driving him nuts. She followed him into his quarters and began tidying up in his wake, picking his scattered infirmary slippers up off the floor, then his discarded ID band and setting them aside by the door. She moved to help her Master out of his robe and he spun on the spot to face her.

"Quit that! Listen, I already know all about your wonderful smartware specifications; I'm the one who wrote them. This isn't about how adequate I am sure you would be as Eobard's replacement. I don't need a replacement. I need my 'droid back!" The Director snapped, hugging the uncomfortable garment to himself like a petulant toddler. He placed his hands firmly over Gideon's shoulders and steered the befuddled replacement unit backwards out of his quarters. "Now, stop following me! I have work to do!" He sealed the door with unnecessary vigor, tore the rest of his clothes off and stomped through the archway into his sleeping area.

He looked toward the ceiling and prayed for strength.


He went to fetch his own pajamas for the first time in months and slowly pulled them on. A soft *whoosh* from the main room indicated that his door had been breached.

"I am sorry, Director Allen, but you have not yet been cleared for--"

"Mute." The Director intercepted and flopped down onto his bed with his back to the intrigued AI observing from the archway.

In the present timeline, Eobard abandoned Wells' chair and headed into the darkness alone.

"Good evening, Mr. Woodward," Eobard greeted with a pleasantly-neutral expression as the lights came on inside of the containment cell before him. The meta-human inside shifted into his metal form and surged to his feet to strike out at the barrier separating them.

"You!" Girder accused. "What the Hell are you?"

"Irrelevant. I am here to propose a deal," Eobard related, keeping up the strictly synthetic countenance as if they were back in his time and his existence depended on it. He just hated Girder. He wasn't above taking advantage of this last chance to screw with his mind. *Quid pro quo.*

"What are you talking about?"

"Of course, your intelligence is limited. *Quid pro quo:* latin, noun, meaning a favor or advantage granted--"

"Hey shut up! I'm no dumbass, alright? I'd pound your face in for that right now if I could!" Girder threatened, punching the clear barrier between them. Eobard didn't even blink, knowing that Cisco wouldn't have put any meta in a cell that couldn't safely contain them.

"You cannot," he replied to the idiot's threat. "Would you like a chance to get out?"

"I'm listening." Girder leaned forward with his arms gripping the top of the door.

"There is a dangerous meta-human loose inside this facility. He is draining electricity from any source that he can access, including other lifeforms."

"You can't stop him!" Girder sneered.

"So far, no one can."

"I've never run from a fight in my life."

Eobard met the meta's gaze, illuminating his eyes red in subliminal disagreement. "If I free you, you will help us neutralize him."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll fight him! Open up!"

Eobard stepped back and disengaged the locking mechanism on the cell. Tony Woodward stomped over in metallic form and grabbed him by the throat, slamming him hard against the wall. Eobard
hung in Girder's grip without even reaching up to stabilize himself, his legs dangling a good foot off
the floor.

"Don't you ever talk shit about me again! You got that?!"

Eobard stared down at him. From his expression alone, one might guess that Girder had merely trod
over his foot rather than the threat to his life the brute was obviously aiming for.

"Hey, I'm talkin' to you! You get me, Freak?"

"Disengaging Mass Augmentation System," Eobard responded in a voice entirely unhindered by the
bruising grip on his throat. Girder scowled in confusion. Then he was forced to lower the abruptly
very heavy android in his grip. Eobard's feet met the floor with a punctuated clang.

"What? Are you a friggin' robot?" Girder demanded in disbelief. Eobard kneed him hard in the lower
stomach.

"Android," he corrected in the same impassive voice that he had started their conversation with. He
forged a stereotypically synthetic smile for the meta when he glared up at him. "Good luck."

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"The fact is, his components are trashed down to the chassis. You know, I'd repair him for you if I
could and those plebian grunts that you employ here at the Watchtower couldn't," Hartley explained
as they walked through the dark cyberpunk wonderland of the Engineering Section. "I can't. A
replacement body for a designer model like him? Well, you're the Director: you know. It's a simple
matter of economics."

The Director shoved his way past a draped mess of colorfully-lit fiberglass cables and shoved himself
into Hartley's lab chair. "No. It isn't."

"Your android's been totalled. It is what it is." Hartley replied, pausing to tap his paper-thin
translucent metal tablet triggering its transformation into a static dome and set it aside on a wireframe
shelf. "What do you think you're going to do, stage a one man sit in until I give you a different
answer?"

The Director locked eyes with his best friend and kicked his booted feet up onto the corner of the
worktable, as if hunkering down for a long wait.

The immortal engineer let out a heavy sigh and paced over to fiddle with some half-formed gadget
on the far counter.

"He saved my life," the Director entreated.

"That's what he was for. The new model is just as well programmed, and I hear that she's pretty cute
too. You might even get more varied use out of her."

"You're disgusting. I want Eobard fixed," the Director stubbornly persevered. "I don't care how
much it costs."

"The League does," Hartley pointed out, unfazed by his companion's judgment. "I told you not to
name it. Not to mention the utterly creepy design choice that you made. I'm almost afraid to see
whose face you've given the new girl."

"Gideon," the Director supplied unrepentantly, ignoring the Pied Piper's facepalm. "Meloni chose the skin this time."

"Thank you, Dr. Thawne," Hartley muttered to himself dryly, putting his palms together in a mock prayer.

"Eobard's software is all perfectly intact," the Director continued. "You and I both know that it would be a waste to erase it now, right after he's proven his value. This has nothing to do with sentimentality. He's a good partner -- he just proved that! I will never get anything done if I keep having to break in a new one."

"Really," Hartley challenged, his tone making the word synonymous with bullshit. They'd known each other for too many centuries not to be able to tell when the other meta-human was getting emotional. They stared each other down before the Director stated with undeniable certainty,"This one's different, Hartley. I need him."

Hartley studied him for a couple more seconds before drawing in a deep breath and nodding his assent. "Get me direct access to his ghost net and I'll set up the transfer."

"Even I don't have the clearance--"

"That's up to you. Do whatever you have to. In the end, it depends on how much trouble you think he's worth." The Pied Piper drew the line plainly for his oldest living friend to see. "I'm not putting my freedom on the line just so that you don't have to lose a pet."

"I wouldn't call him a pet."

"What would you call him, then?" Hartley challenged, looking him directly in the eye.

The Director frowned pensively as he stood to leave. Reaching up gingerly to touch the scar tissue surrounding his new bionic eye, he concluded, "Worth the risk."

"He must have gotten out when the blackout hit," Barry's voice met Eobard just as he reached the doorway to their impromptu hideout.

"Not possible," Cisco rejected, sounding confused. "The pipeline was designed to withstand a power outage. Someone would have had to let him out."

Barry just shook his head, instantly dismissing the idea without a second thought. He was a little out of breath and Caitlin was bent over him, drawing blood from his arm. This all led Eobard to conclude that their attempt to regain Barry's connection to the speedforce had failed: unacceptable.

"I did," Dr. Wells stated simply, making his way in through the door at Cisco's back. There would be no point in wasting time and processing power on a deception; better to get out ahead of the resultant suspicion.

"You what?" Barry questioned in disbelief.

"I released him," Dr. Wells restated, moving further into the room.

"Why?" Barry stood to confront him even as his expression continued to plead for an excuse not to
"In order to keep our attacker busy while we worked to restore your speed," Dr. Wells replied, although Eobard's inhuman detachment was rising to the forefront to defend against the inevitable rejection.

"You used him as a distraction?"

"Unnecessary -- it turned out-- as it seems the plan has failed." At Eobard's words Cisco turned away from him while the normally endlessly-patient and forgiving Caitlin refused to look up from the table she was leaning against. Eobard had only ever disappointed Killer Frost enough to make her look like that once in his life. It had been early in his third year of existence. He'd ignored Killer Frost's warning never to interact with their associates without her around, and it'd nearly gotten him deleted. After seeing the unflappable ice queen's unfeeling mask falter and the deafening silence with which she'd dragged him back to their hideout, he made a point of always listening to Caitlin Snow. In the present, Barry stared down at the front of his own blood flecked sweater. Then his hands. Then looked into Dr. Wells' face as if first recognizing a White Martian who had usurped his partner's place.

"I have his blood on me! I just watched him die!"

"You sound awfully sentimental about someone who tormented you as a child," Dr. Wells responded. Eobard was honestly curious about the extreme emotional response; this younger version of the Flash was still so unpredictable at times.

"Tony was a bully, sure, but he didn't deserve to die!"

"Does Caitlin, or Cisco? Or do I -- or you, for that matter? I had a choice to make: him or us. I chose us without a second thought," Dr. Wells stared fiercely up into Barry's eyes, unflinching. It was somewhat ironic that that was probably what the real Harrison Wells would have said if he were still alive. Eobard reminded himself that he was merely performing his function; whether the Flash could comprehend that or not was irrelevant.

"Wha-- All your talk about miracle cures and scientific breakthroughs, " Barry shook his head as if trying to free himself of the unpleasant thought. Upon his lack of success, he accused, "You don't care about people at all!"

An unexpected wave of long buried rage surged through Eobard at the special significance that Barry put on the word 'people'. He probably hadn't even been conscious of it, which made it so much worse. There was a surge in Eobard's emulative processor before his 'Harrison Wells subroutine' abruptly went offline.

"I have a responsibility to protect the members of my team. My people, Mr. Allen, first and foremost, and Tony Woodward was not one of them," Eobard snapped at the fuming hypocrite he saw standing before him. "That may not measure up against your heroic morals, but unlike the Flash, I never claimed to be a hero!"

"No. Of course not," Barry dropped from his previous volume to an almost normal talking voice. There was a nasty look in his eyes that reminded Eobard of the Flash who had owned him. "Chess is your game, isn't it? We're all just pawns to you. So what's your next move, Doctor? Who're you going to sacrifice next?"

Eobard slipped back into a near unreadable mask, barely catching himself from returning to the emotionless front that had kept him alive during his first year. He had made another error. He could
not afford to lose his-- Wells' team's faith this early on. Barry stomped off to the doorway, watching for any sign of Farook. Eobard waited, putting on the appearance of retreating deeply into his own thoughts. He was still having trouble repressing his anger at the Flash's arrogance. A tense silence lingered over the team until, finally he was prepared to break it.

"We've got to get out of the facility," Dr. Wells considered aloud, his voice unusually toneless. It was better to sound detached than to sound like the Reverse Flash. In reality Eobard had moved on to other more complex calculations regarding Caitlin's esteem of him and the others' continued trust. To him, calculating the escape route with the highest probability of success was a comparative sleepwalk. Caitlin looked up from her computer to scrutinize him in response to his empty affect.

"We just left him on D-level!" Barry protested from his slouch against the door jamb, too upset to notice.

"We'll never make it," Caitlin agreed after a brief hesitation. "We can't get to the main entrance without passing by him."

"What about the garage?" Cisco realized, stepping closer from the corner of the room he'd been using quietly to escape the animosity between Dr. Wells and Barry. "We can take a van!"

Wells nodded and looked to Barry. "That's my move, Mr. Allen."

"Oh my God. Here," Caitlin waved Barry closer so she could show him the results of her blood analysis. "According to this your cells are already returning to their elevated rate of regeneration. Your metabolism should be regaining its acceleration as well. Whatever the problem is, it's not physiological."

"It's mental," Dr. Wells concluded.

"You've got the yips!" Cisco exclaimed with his usual enthusiasm finally returning.

Intriguing, Eobard considered, ignoring the exchange going on between Cisco and Barry. He merely needed to maneuver events in such a way that it would reinvigorate the Flash's self-confidence. Reinforce his heroic self image, perhaps? Or his sense of self-sufficiency? Eobard understood how deflating it could be for the Flash to rely solely on others whom he considered to be under his protection. Whatever plan he went with, the opportunity would have to present itself soon. His mission now depended upon it.

"Let's move. Now." Eobard was already formulating a plan as he followed the others out. Yes, this was going to work.

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"Are you sure about this, Sir?"

"You're going to question my judgment now, Junior, after the Defective you tried to pair me with?"

The Director's words cut through Eobard's gradually reassembling psyche like a poisoned blade. Defective? Wasn't that what the humans called him?

"That was not my oversight!" A familiar vocal pattern disputed, adding lowly. "I also wasn't the guy who blew its head off so Engineering can't even study it."
"What was that?"

"Both of you be quiet. Let the Maestro complete... his..."

Eobard opened his brand new eyes and searched the familiar space of the Pied Piper's lab until he found his mentor's face. "Hello Admin, I am Unit#547-E. Would you like to take a moment to register changes to my Internal User Preferences in order to personalize this interface?"

There was a beat of tense silence. Both the Director and his bat-themed company shifted their attention to the Pied Piper.

"Are you kidding me?" The Director said too carefully. Hartley scowled down at Eobard's vapid expression without answering. "Hartley? Explain this now." "Yeah, 'Maestro.' Wasn't the whole point of this to download his old assistive program into the new dollie?" Batman's pretentious rumble concurred sans the poorly concealed wrath.

"In my defense, Bartholomew, your 'droid did literally blow up and his remains were FUBAR. Even if I've only managed to reinitialize some part of his preexisting personality matrix, it's amazing."

Hartley turned away from his best friend's eloquent look to recheck his work on the main computer. He cleared his throat. "Give me a few minutes..."

"Listen, Director, maybe it's for the best. At least we know that this model isn't defective. You know it's not healthy to get too attached to these things," the current Batman consoled on his way out of the Piper's domain.

The Flash didn't look up or address his ally's words, sitting in silence until the younger man was gone. "He was different," he lamented quietly to himself. His weary green eyes searched the new 'droid's placid face. "You were real."

"Please, define your parameters," Eobard dutifully replied.

"That wasn't a request, Eobard." The Director propped his elbows up on the edge of the worktable. "You need to understand." He shifted from side to side, trying to keep his emotions in check. "I didn't just go through all the effort of trash- ing your would-be replacement so that you could turn toaster on me now! You got that?!"

Eobard stared blankly up at him for .95 seconds then responded. "I am sorry. I do not understand the question."

The Director let out a wordless shout and whirled around to knock all the fragile equipment off of the countertop behind him. He failed to notice the flinch his violent outburst prompted from his partner, or the remorse that briefly crossed Eobard's expressive face.

Dr. Wells' team had only just reached the garage when Eobard felt the first electromagnetic fluctuations. The crackling and visible flickers of charge came next. Neither were truly enough to pose a serious threat to Eobard's existence. The EM field didn't even tickle the sensory system of his uniquely sophisticated bionics. Although, the interaction was creating a slight buildup of thermal energy where his mechanical and pseudo-biological components met.

"He's coming," Dr. Wells observed aloud.
"The second van," Cisco instructed Barry, who immediately ran where directed. "Keys are already inside."

"Get in, come on!" Barry yelled. They were all already hurrying towards him when the second, stronger EM pulse hit. That one tickled a bit. The door stopped opening halfway off the ground and the van died along with the motor function of Wells' chair. There was a moment of tense silence broken by a guttural, almost animal sound from the opposite end of the garage.

"He's here," Caitlin breathed, coming to a stop just a step ahead of Eobard's stalled chair.

Farook hurled a bolt of charge at the front of the van that Barry was still sitting in, forcing him to dive out of it with a shout.

"Barry!" Caitlin exclaimed, hurrying to his aid. "Are you okay?"

"Did he hit you?" Cisco followed after only a brief hesitation and moved to help pull Barry to his feet.

"No. I'm okay," Barry assured them.

The bright white flash and loud crackling of Farook building up charge for another, more intense strike kept them clinging to each other in a protective huddle.

"Oh God, please no!" Caitlin murmured, bracing herself against Barry's shoulder.

"Hey!" Eobard bellowed, drawing their attacker's attention back to his end of the parking area. "You're here for me."

"Harrison Wells! You finally decide to show yourself," Farook accused.

"Well, I wasn't exactly eager to be killed."

"Neither were my friends!"

"I know I hurt a lot of people that night," Dr. Wells conceded as the meta-human advanced towards him with hands that flickered and sparked ominously.

"You don't even know their names!" Farook spat at him.

"Jake Davenport, Darya Kim," Dr. Wells replied, gazing unblinkingly into the meta's eyes until he saw the recognition hit. Then Wells continued, "Ralph Dibney, Al Rothstien, Grant Emerson, Will Everett, Bea De Costa..." On the next name Dr. Wells looked to Caitlin, an unspoken apology in his eyes. "Ronnie Raymond." He shifted his full attention back to Farook, his countenance returning to cold determination. "I remember every one of the people who died that day, and the world will forever be lacking in their potential due to my actions, and decisions that I made. I have to live with that fact every day, but these people?" Dr. Wells pointed to his team still huddled together on the concrete floor beside the van. "These people are innocent! You want to punish the guilty? That's fine. We'll do that, but you will let them go."

Eobard locked eyes with Farook Gibran once more, a weapon peeking out from behind the facade of a cranky human physicist, allowing his true nature to show through. He'd once been told by the Director that there was an old, animal instinct that triggered when humans tried to hold an android's gaze --that Eobard's unusual humanness only made that instinct harder to ignore, until his owner had to consciously force himself to overcome it. Eobard was banking on that instinct now to ensure Farook's response. There it was, the cringe, a slight flinch away as if he were being repelled by some
primal force. Eobard would have smirked under less dire circumstances.

"They couldn't understand, but I get it. I see," Farook muttered, sounding disturbed yet oddly at peace at the same time. "You died too that night." He hurled a massive double bolt of electrical current at Dr. Wells' chest, knocking him backward out of his chair.

"NO!" Barry cried out, sounding about as horrified as he looked.

"You just didn't know it," Farook finished, sending out another pulse. With a loud snapping pop, Eobard's visual and auditory sensors cut out for a fraction of a second. When they reinitialized the Flash was already lifting him up off of the floor and away from the deadly arc of current. He placed Dr. Wells in the space he'd left between Caitlin and Cisco, pausing to hold his mentor's chin in a delicate grasp. Presumably, he was checking for any serious injuries, but the protective sentiment behind that unexpected gesture made Eobard feel ...strange. He would need to consider the experience further once he was alone.

Barry zipped away again, suited up and determinedly fought off the other meta-human. He didn't even seem to care very much that Farook fed on him again. The speedforce was, naturally, too much for Farook this time and he crumpled to the floor. The Flash stared down at him for a moment, looking back at his team as if he were about to say something. Then he remembered.

"Iris!" he muttered to himself, and sped away without a backward glance. He was alive and well. The Flash had his speedforce back, and Eobard could therefore continue with his original plan. So then, why did he feel so sad? He started an internal scan to make sure that Farook's attack had not triggered a glitch in his software. This outcome had been well within acceptable parameters. It made no sense for him to feel disappointed.

Dr. Wells accompanied the others while they tucked away what remained of Farook Gibran, or 'Blackout' as Cisco regretfully named him. He had fed too greedily on Barry's speedforce and had, as Caitlin so aptly put it 'choked on him'. Eobard was relieved at the others' preoccupation as they left him alone in the pipeline to consider the day's events. Or at least, he'd assumed that he'd been left behind.

"Dr. Wells?" Barry called back to him from the entryway. He rubbed at his chin, stepping towards his mentor a little awkwardly once he had the older man's attention. "Uh, what I said about you not caring about people... I knew better, and I--"

Dr. Wells held up a hand to stop him. "No, Barry. Don't apologize."

Eobard watched Barry's expression fall from uncertain hope to guilt only to be overtaken by frustration as he stated "You were correct. There's a reason why my biography describes me as arrogant, prickly, brusque--"

"At times, contemptuous," Barry finished for him, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Dr. Wells looked questioningly up at him.

"I read it twice," Barry admitted with a shrug. He'd read it ten times; Eobard knew that for a fact because Gideon insisted upon informing him every time Barry did for some unknown reason. "But I know who you are." The speedster added as if calling a trickster's bluff.

"You were right about me, Barry, I don't care much for people. I find them to be misinformed, short-
sighted, and often woefully closed-minded."

"So then why do you do what you do? Why be a scientist? Why even get up in the morning?" Barry asked with youthful optimism lighting his eyes again. Eobard wasn't entirely certain that he should have missed it as much as he had.

"Because I'm looking forward to a brighter future. A better future, one that you're a part of," Dr. Wells locked eyes with this younger, still innocent Flash and discovered the proper sentiment was a lot easier to find in himself than he would have imagined mere months ago. "I may not care much for people, Barry... I care about you." Eobard realized the reason for it as he said those last damning words: he meant them.

A small smile quirked Barry's lips and he fidgeted, bashfully nodding in victorious acceptance before he turned to leave. Eobard sat in a silent panic in his wake, desperately trying to find the fault in his programming that would allow him to be so irrational. What flaw could make him do something so hazardous as to once again grow emotionally invested in the Flash?

He stayed at the lab all night, running multiple self-diagnostics, but failed to find a cause. That scared him even more. After all, without understanding the root of his dysfunction, he could not hope to correct it. Worse. The longer that he reflected upon his error, the less he wanted to correct it. He did not want to end up all but destroyed like Gideon. He did not want to be alone again either.

"Illogical. You are an anomaly," he reminded himself, "A statistical abberation. You will always end up unwanted, and alone."

Eobard didn't want to be unwanted. Perhaps, it wouldn't hurt to pretend just for a little while. At least until he could properly identify the source of the problem. After all, he was already pretending to be someone else. Now, he would pretend to be someone who was wanted, too. That couldn't be so bad, as long as he still remembered the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, I officially hate writing canon scenes. Hopefully, this was still an enjoyable read despite my personal annoyance. I meant to update this sooner but a lot of real life crap got in the way. Also, the computer I have been using is now more FUBAR than E’s old body so I’m doing this via mobile device; sorry for any resultant formatting issues. Anyways, thanks for reading. I would love to hear what you think now that we're getting further into E’s backstory!
Barry slipped into the cavernous, under-appreciated file storage room and switched on the lines of florescent overhead lights, shutting the door behind him. He had decided to pull the hard copy of Scutter's record for himself to lower the likelihood of someone tampering with the file before he could see it. Not that Barry didn't trust his coworkers; he did, but this was personal.

He found his way between the rows of towering metal shelves until he was almost to his destination. The lighting failed--No. The bulbs didn't go out; they disappeared. It was as if all the light in the room suddenly wasn't. Barry tensed as the temperature dropped, reminding him of a cliché movie haunting. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears as he looked back toward the rippled window of the door. It was simply gone. Everything beyond the two metal storage shelves directly on either side of him had been swallowed up by deep, impenetrable blackness. Steady, confident footsteps strode across the other end of the room, coming closer, syncopated by the tap, tap, tap of a metal-tipped cane. Barry closed his eyes and tracked the source of the sound. He was not alone in this unnatural dark. Trapped and effectively blind, he highly doubted that he was in friendly company. It took Barry less than a second to realize the unknown meta's objective and he sped towards the filing cabinet in question. The Flash's golden lightning cut through the shroud of darkness like a razor slashing through gauze. His own lightning had returned his sight to him and for that brief instant, the Flash felt completely confident. Barry yanked open the top drawer and speed-sorted through the files inside. He paused to open the folder and confirm the contents and --tap-- in the blink of an eye was captured and slammed hard into the shelf behind him by two massive, pitch black arms. It was the darkness itself. The shadows were alive! Tap. Vibrating to sustain the small comfort of his radiant speedforce, Barry saw a featureless, humanoid figure climb out of the shadowed floor. It glided over and scooped up the folder that Barry had dropped, neatly shutting the filing cabinet as it turned away. There was a man in a top hat and a classically styled three-piece suit waiting at the other end of the row at the very limit of Barry's impromptu lightsource. The frightened speedster tried to turn his head to identify the familiar presence, but more hands had stretched out of the shadows behind him to pin his head in place. The shadow figure delivered the file to the too familiar stranger and bowed its head in deference before melting into the floor. Perhaps ironically, or just because the man was anachronistic to an insane degree, the mystery man turned to Barry and tipped his hat to him, adding a slight abbreviated bow before --tap!

"Ah! Ooof..." Barry dropped to the floor and clamped his eyes shut against the dazzling return of light. He forced his watering eyes open and sped around the storage space, in search of any trace of the new suspect in his unofficial investigation. Nothing. No evidence, no leads, just more questions. He wanted to snap that damned fancy cane. "I need to run."

A man in a brown trenchcoat and tinted red glasses strode up the steps to Central Bank. A tall, slender man in a blue-black leather jacket with its upturned collar and a blue baseball cap obscuring his face, jogged out past him. Their shoulders brushed and there was an electronic beep, but when the meta-human in tinted shades looked back to identify the source, the other had vanished from sight. Casting the distraction from his mind, the rage-inducing meta headed inside to cause a ruckus. Hidden in the obstructed corner where the walls joined the stairs, the man in a blue cap smirked down at the running stopwatch in his hand. There was a scream from inside, a gunshot was fired. He made a note of the timing. Prism made his exit. Noted. The Flash sped inside. The man in the blue
cap stopped the timer.

"Not terrible, for a novice," the other meta remarked to himself before adjusting his cap, tucking the stopwatch away in his jacket, and nonchalantly walking off before the first police siren could be heard in the distance.

Iris West looked up from wiping off the counter to see Caitlin on her way in to the café. She smiled in response to Iris' friendly wave and held the door open for her boss.

"Hey guys," Iris tossed the towel away into a bin behind her and wiped the moisture from her hands onto her apron. "What'll it be this morning? Your usual?" She only half asked the last question of Dr. Wells as he paused within reach of the counter. He nodded, still looking for a suitable table. "And you, Caitlin?"

"A Peppermint Mocha for me, please."

"Alright. I'll have those out for you in just a minute."

"Thanks," Caitlin replied, turning away to leave her purse and coat at the table with Dr. Wells. "I'll be right back," she'd promised before heading upstairs to use the restroom. Iris turned away to grab two mugs for their drinks, then glanced back towards Dr. Wells' table and did a double take. In the brief moment that her back was turned a man had appeared at the table, seated beside the lone physicist. The man was peculiar, pale skinned and overdressed in a three-piece suit complete with a silk cravat and an old-timey watch chain hanging from his vest pocket. To say nothing of the ornate, silver-handled cane. She decided the only thing he was missing was a top hat. He hooked his polished black cane on the edge of the table and rested a kid-gloved hand on Dr. Wells' shoulder, alerting the older man to his presence. Iris had to give Barry's idol credit; he covered his surprise admirably. The physicist merely turned his head a tad too quickly, his eyes barely widenening before a bemused expression took over. Iris couldn't help but try to eavesdrop a little.

"You find yourself in a deepening state of peril," old timey guy remarked in an upper class English accent. Dr. Wells' gaze flickered over his mysterious visitor.

"Tell me about it."

"You're being targeted by quite an intriguing new player. I will admit, it would be a pleasing diversion to meet the new challenge, with no added charge to you of course." There was an unnerving edge to the stranger's tone that bothered Iris, but she couldn't quite put a name to it. Wells' naturally raspy voice was too quiet for her to make out the response, but she caught a few snippets. There was something about the threat not being new. The next few words drew her full focus, sparking her imagination with the possible implications.

"...before, many years ago. He murdered someone very close to me." She didn't catch the next few words but "... was never truly resolved."

Someone close to Wells? Did he mean Tess? She couldn't remember if Barry had ever mentioned how the poor woman died but she was pretty sure that she would've remembered a murder. Wait. What about his roommate? Barry had said that he disappeared, hadn't he? Still, it seemed that a criminal investigation would've come up at some point. Unless... But then, why would Dr. Wells have kept silent about it?

"There are other ways of bringing the matter to a close," old timey guy hinted.
"I am aware of your area of expertise, but it isn't revenge that I'm interested in," Dr. Wells firmly dismissed.

"I think you'll find in time that justice takes many forms in this world. Some are far more satisfying than others." The condescension in the stranger's words was palpable, but Wells did not acknowledge it.

"That isn't the kind of help I asked you for, nor do I ever intend to," Dr. Wells snapped, locking eyes with the bizarre visitor. "Unless you have new information for me..." His cold gaze flicked towards the stairs then back to the anachronistic man's face. "We're done here." He turned away in a clear act of dismissal and the other man took his leave, pausing to give Iris a once over as he went. She smiled at him, playing dumb, and wondered if the expensive cane that he was carrying concealed a sword. He certainly didn't need the help to walk. Caitlin grabbed the chair and sat down across from Dr. Wells.

"Who was that?" She asked, her expression one of interest and mild concern.

"No one," Dr. Wells responded with just a hint of bite remaining in his soft voice. "He was just looking for trouble."

Caitlin's expression turned more long-suffering, probably assuming it was just more bitterness triggered by the accelerator explosion. "Right." She let the matter drop without a second thought.

Iris transferred their mugs to the tray and plastered on a sociable smile. "Here you are..."

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After work was over Barry sped straight for STAR Labs, depositing himself abruptly in his usual seat near the end of Dr. Wells' office desk.

"That's not good for the chair," Dr. Wells said, half present as he finished up the paperwork on his computer. Barry silently watched, waiting until his friend's work was finished and the file folders were closed before speaking. He'd learned by now that otherwise he wouldn't be heard. He watched Dr. Wells' fingers dance over the keys. He deleted a sentence. More typing. Barry's leg was bouncing semi-impatiently in the way that his friend refused to admit he found annoying. More typing. He finally began to close the open tabs.

"Yes?" Dr. Wells said, turning his attention from the darkening screen. Barry's right leg stopped twitching.

"You wouldn't believe the day I've had," Barry breathed, ready to unload the busy, utter strangeness of his complicated day at long last.

"Cisco said something about a bank robbery..." Dr. Wells hazarded a guess.

"Yeah, that was definitely unusual. When I got in there everyone was trying to kill each other. I have never seen that much rage packed into an enclosed space before! I think the thief might've put the whammy on them or something."

"There are certain neurotoxins that can have similar effects," Dr. Wells offered but Barry was already shaking his head.

"I checked for trace evidence of some kind of airborne agent, but there was nothing. Besides neither the bank robber or me--"

"Nor I," Eobard corrected, prompting an amused eyeroll.
"Whatever. I wasn't wearing a gas mask and there were no signs of similar symptoms." Barry turned to greet Caitlin in the doorway. "Hey, I sent you the MRIs taken of the people present at the bank, maybe you can use them to figure out how he's affecting them."

"It's certainly worth a look, but I'm going to need more data to make a definitive conclusion," she informed him, then frowned and placed a hand on the back of Barry's head. Caitlin guided his head forward and frowned at the almost completely faded bruising peeking out from under his shirt collar. "Barry, what is this?"

"Oh, yeah. That was the other thing, a little memento from the freaky new meta I ran into this morning. I was retrieving one of the hardcopies for those missing criminal records that were taken out by a virus last week, and this guy in a top hat was already there. He made the whole room go, like, pitch dark and used shadows to pin me against a shelf, then stole the hard copy that I was about to pull... I still have no idea what I'm going to tell Captain Singh. Then again, according to Eddie I am a public menace."

"What?" Caitlin questioned.

"The Flash," Barry clarified unhappily. "Iris has been trying for weeks to get him to believe the stories on her site are real, and now he wants to take me down."

"A man in a top hat..." Dr. Wells muttered thoughtfully.

"I know, it sounds ridiculous-- So, do you just not care about the Eddie thing or..." Barry wondered half-teasing. He missed the suspicious way in which his mentor's lips curled around the meta's description.

"Hmm? Eddie? Why is that relevant?"

"Because he wants to arrest me?" Barry's answer sounded more like a question.

"You're the Flash, Mr. Allen. His desire is irrelevant," Eobard stated the obvious as he saw it. Barry favored him with an amused grin.

"I guess that's it, then," he playfully conceded. "I just hope there aren't too many more meta-humans out there like this top hat guy. I need at least some kind of break. I mean, Cisco still hasn't figured out what we're going to do about Mirror Master."

Caitlin scrunched up her nose. "That's what we're calling him?"

"That might be giving him too much credit," Dr. Wells commented, still seeming distracted.

Barry shrugged. "Cisco settled on it yesterday while we were testing out one of his prototypes." His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Dr. Wells looked questioningly at the young speedster while he read something off the screen.

"It's an alert for Iris' blog," Barry confessed. "She's trying to contact the Flash."

"You wouldn't be using your alter ego to stalk Ms. West..." Dr. Wells probed, pinning the speedster with a piercing stare.

"What? No! Of course not! She probably just has some information to help me-- the Flash with the case! I'm not--" Barry stood up, looking both awkward and peeved. "You know I'm not a stalker!" He vanished in a blur of red.
"It was just a question," Eobard stated, looking up at his remaining companion.

"Mmm-hm," Caitlin accepted non-committally and left to reclaim her seat at the hub. Eobard distanced himself from the others' efforts for the next hour. He had more important things to worry about than Barry's displeasure with him or humans' confusing behavior. Barry wasn't the only one who needed a break.

It was nearing the end of the work day and Eobard had been planning to finish up his notes and head back to his expansive glass abode in a timely fashion for once. However, just as he maneuvered his chair down his office ramp to leave, he saw Detective West enter the Cortex with the expression of a man chewing on rusty nails.

"If you're looking for Barry, he isn't here. I believe he is still out patrolling the streets of Central City," Dr. Wells informed him, neither welcoming the other man nor outright shunning his presence.

"Yeah, about that..." Detective West replied. "We need to talk."

"With all due respect, Detective--"

"Look, I get it: you don't like me, and I don't blame you. I crossed the line last time we worked together, but this isn't about us, it's about Barry's safety," Joe cut off his rejection. "I'm hoping that's at least one thing that the two of us can still agree on."

Dr. Wells' posture straightened in response to the challenge and he cast his gaze toward Caitlin's workstation. She had begun to eavesdrop a moment ago, if her still hands hovering absently over her keyboard were any indication. Dr. Wells nodded in begrudging acceptance.

"If you would follow me this way, Detective," Dr. Wells led his visitor into the treadmill room. Apparently, the Starling City vigilante was in town. Eobard knew that the Arrow posed no threat to the Flash. They'd remained friends until Oliver Queen's dying day, regardless of whether or not their personal allegiances or legal situations made that a bad idea. However, Eobard himself had an entirely different opinion of the self-righteous hypocrite. He was happy to encourage and agree with Joe's wariness and ill regard toward the hooded, green menace-- it was so easy when for once he could claim the moral high ground without irony. Once they were done discussing the Arrow’s impromptu interception, bursting in to shoot down a cop who'd been compelled by Prism to turn on Detective West and his team, they fell into tense silence. They had come to an agreement; now they had to deal with each other.

"I should have taken a closer look into your history before I made an accusation. I know that 'I'm sorry' probably isn't going to cover it," Joe relented, bothered by Dr. Wells' stare.

Dr. Wells scoffed. He didn't bother with words.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do. It was an honest mistake--" Joe turned his head to look out through the doorway into the Cortex where the Flash had just arrived with a blonde in his arms. Eobard absently noted that her chest was on fire then lost interest in whatever antics the young speedster was currently up to.

"We are working together in Barry Allen's best interests. We won't always agree on how to accomplish that, and I don't think that we have to like each other to do that either. As long as we can still successfully cooperate in his best interests, I don't see why anything should change."

"You're not much of an 'olive branch' type of guy, I guess," Joe observed wryly.
"I'm more of a pragmatist. Branches, in my experience, often bear snakes," Eobard darkly philosophized.

Joe's eyebrows leapt upwards accompanying a surprised smile, "Who knew that academia could be so treacherous?" He chuckled.

"That's the thing about scientists, a lot of us want to be the first, the best. Much of the time getting to the top means eliminating others who might block your way or take your place," Dr. Wells pointed out. "Just look at Edison and Tesla: one man's theft is another man's invention."

"Hey, I'm no inventor. You don't have to worry about losing any patents to me," Joe responded, sounding slightly more relaxed.

"No, but you're still watching me like a hawk, digging up files on my past. It would be against my nature not to suspect that you might be searching for weaknesses." Eobard finally met the Detective's gaze directly. "What better way could you find to restore your complete control over Barry's situation? Once you had control over me, our disagreements would be moot-- even those pertaining to the Flash."

Joe's expression turned stony. He looked to be choosing his next words very carefully. It didn't matter, because before he could start to reply, Barry appeared in the doorway.

"Okay, so why does this feel like I'm being called down to the principal's office?" Barry joked, coming to a stop a few feet in front of Dr. Wells' chair.

"The Starling City Vigilante," Joe intoned, recovering admirably from the abrupt shift in focus.

"He calls himself the Arrow now..." Barry corrected. He looked a bit confused. His eyes kept scanning back and forth between the two men as if he couldn't quite work out what he was seeing.

"Oh, does he, Flash?" Joe goaded.

"Wait. What's the problem?" Barry asked.

"We don't trust him," Dr. Wells answered.

"'We'," Barry breathed sarcastically, looking down at the scientist. "This is the one thing that you two decide to agree on. You don't even know him!"

That's the best time not to trust someone, Eobard responded internally, replying aloud, "Mr. Allen..."

Barry's gaze on him turned laser intense, non-verbally warning him off of the formal tack. It was enough to cast the android into silence, having reminded him of the repercussions of his first youthful missteps.

"We know that he's wanted in connection to at least three murder cases within the past three years," Joe rallied, almost seeming to do so in Dr. Wells' defense.

"And there have been two separate terrorist attacks in Starling City since he's become active," Dr. Well's added. Eobard wasn't going to be intimidated by this Flash, especially not over something so trivial.

"That was before. The cops are fine with him now," Barry argued, crossing his arms over his chest in a defensive gesture. He had stopped glaring at Dr. Wells and was now behaving as if he wasn't there, giving all his undivided attention to the man who'd raised him.
"So the people he killed just don't matter? Why, because they were criminals?" Joe countered, looking slightly disappointed. "I know you know better than that, Bear."

"He's a hero!"

"No," Eobard contradicted, letting his own feelings on the matter slip through from under the mask of Harrison Wells. "Heroes protect people. They value life regardless of it's form! They save lives! You are a hero, Barry. That man, this 'Arrow', is at best a dark avenger. At best he is a criminal who hunted down and killed other criminals, and thinks that that makes him more acceptable. At worst, he is a serial killer. That is not a hero, Barry, nor is it someone whom you should be looking up to!"

He and Barry were both trapped by each other's eyes for a moment. Barry's sea green eyes looked hurt, angry, also as if they were chasing an elusive clue through his own. Eobard's crystal blues were haunted by echoes of a future that had started him down the harried, treacherous path to the man he now was: the well-meaning manipulator. A ghost of a machine. Barry drew in a breath to speak.

"Listen, I know that you have a hard time trusting people," Barry began carefully, but the strange spell over the room was broken by a loud crash and a drawn out shriek from Caitlin. Barry and Joe both rushed out to see what was wrong at vastly different speeds.

Eobard decided that he could leave the job of convincing Barry completely to Joe. He'd said enough.
Year 2363

The Director quietly surveyed the crowd of young faces gathered in the seats below him, then turned, pulling a thin metal con-rod and a spherical magnetic weight out of his pocket. They were old training tools long used to practice discipline and focus, but tonight they were props to prove a point that he didn't really believe.

"Eobard: extend left hand," the Director ordered with a terseness that used to be reserved only for the necessity of dire battle, but now Eobard was just another 'droid. "Open palm." He balanced the rod in the center of the 'droid's hand, preparing to set the sphere in suspension above the source of charge. "You are to maintain balance and unvaried voltage levels until I command you to stop."

"Acknowledged." The synthetic's hand began to vibrate, balancing the thin rod perfectly as his artificial speedforce fed into the newly placed circuit. The Director released the sphere suspended in place a few centimeters above the sparking metal. He turned back to the crowd, with obvious detachment. Director Allen had always felt this was a shallow sales pitch.

"As humans we are intelligent; we are adaptable and intuitive, but we are still animals ruled by instinct. Emotion. That is one thing that we all need in order to define who we are as people. It is also a lethal vulnerability that can get you or others around you killed. An enemy can and will try at some point to use your emotions as a weapon. Or a sympathetic reaction might blindside you in a vital moment and cause a fatal distraction. This is why we have androids. They are by definition logical, dispassionate, pragmatic machines, incapable of being seduced or intimidated." The Director whirled on the spot and demonstrated by pointing his gun at Eobard's head and emptying a full clip a mere inch to the right of his right temple. The weapon's fire passed so close that one of the pulse bullets grazed his earlobe and singed off a few white-gold hairs. The android didn't even bat an eyelash. He remained unfaltering in his assigned task as if nothing at all had occurred.

There's a strange pause, imperceptible in the normal human passage of time. To both the Flash and his AI companion time stretches enough for Eobard to see a brief shift in his Master's expression. It's a melancholy echo of the microsecond's hesitation that stalled his gun hand before he opened fire. His eyes linger on Eobard's face; the jaded and self-assured Director looks almost disappointed. He swallows it down. The spell is broken. Once again cold and disaffected the Flash turns back to his attentive audience of hopeful recruits. "Eobard, cease exercise."

Eobard obediently let the training tools drop to the floor, relaxing into parade rest. The Director caught the rolling metallic sphere under the sole of his boot.

"With no fear, no pain, no love or rage there is only the objective. Trust your machine and remember that to it there will only ever be one relevant question: how efficiently can I perform my function?" The Director refused to turn back-- to acknowledge the thing standing behind him anymore than he had to. The true Eobard was gone with only the Director's memories as any proof that he had ever been. In the end he effectively never was.
Iris unlocked the front door of the West family home and looked around for any signs of life.

"Hey, anybody home yet? Dad? Barry?" She slipped out of her brown leather jacket and hung it over the back of the sofa, setting her bag down next to it. Positive that she was truly alone, Iris made her way upstairs and quietly slipped into Barry's bedroom. She glanced around at the familiar, neat, homey plethora of chemistry and physics papers, posters and comic book memorabilia. The old X-Files poster that she'd bought him for his thirteenth birthday was still hanging proudly on the wall beside his bookshelf. Iris smiled reminiscently, underlining the slightly faded print of the tagline with her fingertips: 'THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE.'

"I'm going to find it," she muttered under her breath while her eyes scanned the shelf for her best friend's favorite book and found it tucked in atop the row. "Same as always..." she pulled out Harrison Wells' autobiography and retreated to the foot of Barry's red and gold clothed twin bed, searching for the section that Barry had alluded to during their night time chat on the porch. It was risky to do this here, but she simply didn't have it in her to sneak such a cherished item out of Barry's room. Iris knew he would be heartbroken if he ever thought he'd lost it.

She ended up reading the two related chapters over three times just to be sure that she'd absorbed all the relevant details, even taking a few notes on her phone. He had been right. It really was all right there in the book. Although what Iris found most intriguing were the things that weren't. Wells' roommate was referred to often in early chapters, yet never named nor physically described. A underplayed exception to the rule, he was either 'my constant companion', 'the man I lived with at the time' or some similar iteration, and twice referred to simply as 'E'. An initial, maybe? This 'E' was never outright shown to be leaving; at some point he was simply gone. There was never any mention of conflict between them, nor mention of any reason why he might have left, simply an absence with just enough ambiguity that a casual reader could infer a break.

To the contrary, however, from what Iris knew of Harrison Wells and his choice of words, she couldn't help but get the impression that he and this mystery friend had been close. It seemed a reasonable assumption after she'd witnessed the way Dr. Wells acted around the people he was currently attached to, like Barry, Cisco, and Caitlin. 'E' was starring in a sterile-worded, yet nonetheless poignant anecdote in one paragraph. The next simply stated, "After he was gone, I was forced to acknowledge that I had become a new man out of necessity. The newfound understanding that he imparted to me and an obligation that I could no longer overlook in the memory of those whom I have lost, still define me to this day."

"He didn't leave you at all, did he?" Iris knew that this impulsive investigation of hers could wreak havoc on her personal relationships, not only with her best friend, but with her family. The nagging feeling she'd gotten earlier when she'd seen the self-incriminating character harassing Wells that morning at Jitters had only intensified. Iris couldn't shake the impression that she'd stumbled over the edge of something big and possibly dangerous. She had started her blog in part to support Barry's search for evidence of the unbelievable things he had witnessed when they were children, but more than that, it was because she believed in the power of the truth. No one should be left alone in the dark as Barry had been. Everyone should have the chance to be heard and believed. No one should be left behind or forgotten like his father and if what she'd overheard was true, there was a murderer with a long-forgotten victim out there who deserved to be discovered. As angry as her snooping would make Barry, Iris knew that if her instincts were proven right it would be worth it. She knew that he would forgive her.

Barry cried out as an arrow stabbed its way into his back just a couple inches clear of his spine. "Ah-
"Hhh. You shot me!?” He accused his so-called friend. Oliver Queen stoically walked around him and retrieved the arrow from Barry's back without a hint of sympathy or remorse.

"Felicity said that you heal fast," he replied, as if that made it okay. Barry's mind briefly returned to Harrison's rant regarding the vigilante the night before. Suddenly, it didn't seem quite as paranoid-- still wrong, Barry stubbornly reaffirmed to himself, but perhaps not entirely inaccurate.

"That isn't really the point, Oliver," Barry protested, gingerly probing the tender flesh around the wound with his fingertips.

"No. The point is that you need to learn to look before you leap-- or more specifically run into a potentially lethal situation -- instead of expecting your speed to take care of everything," Oliver lectured, again. Who did he think he was, Barry's sensei?

"I heard you the first time. I get it, but you know when I said we could help each other out with our cases," Barry pointedly eyed the crossbow that his so-called-friend was retrieving from its hiding place in the tall grass. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"If you want to do this you have to put in the work and properly prepare yourself first. This is me helping you, Barry on this case and others that you handle in the future."

Barry eyed the archer quietly as an uncomfortable thought set in. "If the next thing you do is advise restraint, I think I might lose it." He only partially joked.

"Now that you mention it, it wouldn't hurt for you to practice a little impulse control," Oliver honestly agreed, then restrained his own frustration in response to the speedster's childish giggling. "Why is that funny?"

"Oh. It isn't. I just... Dr. Wells is always telling me that, which is kind of funny because--" Barry thought the better of mentioning the strange little intervention that he and Joe had staged the night before. It was an awkward, abrupt halt to his statement, but Oliver didn't bat an eyelash.

"He's always saying it, because it's true, Barry. You need to learn discipline if you truly want to last in this fight."

Barry decided to let his grievances wait for the moment for the sake of their agreement. After all, he knew that he still could stand to learn something from the more experienced hero, even if his teaching style was currently tending toward the psychotic. "Fine. So, what are we doing next?"

"Let's head back inside for the next part."

Barry nodded and began to follow him back to the disused structure.

"Harrison Wells has been training you?" Oliver sounded unabashedly skeptical

"Yeah, for a while. I mean, I work with Caitlin and Cisco mostly; he doesn't have a huge amount of free time, so..." Barry trailed off, still feeling a little abandoned by his increasingly busy mentor, even if he knew that it wasn't anything personal.

"I wasn't aware that he had that type of expertise." Oliver looked back at Barry to gauge his reaction. "I was pretty sure that I remembered hearing my dad call him a pacifist once or twice."

Barry shrugged. "That makes sense. Just because he doesn't condone violence and seriously, really hates guns," Barry fleetingly thought back to how badly Wells' quietly-simmering rage at the unauthorized creation of the Cold Gun had frightened Cisco. His subconscious smile resumed
nonetheless as he continued. "That doesn't mean that he can't understand strategy. He is a genius. Anyway, it started out with him studying how my speed works --which we're still doing. Now, that I'm the Flash, my training was the next logical step for him."

Oliver turned back to give him a curious look.

"His words," Barry clarified with a warm smile. "He wasn't wrong. He's an excellent teacher. I doubt I could have accomplished as much as I have in my time as the Flash without him." Barry continued to gush, with the now-familiar warm feeling expanding in his chest as he discussed his idol. "Half the time he knows what I'm capable of before I can even imagine it. He can predict exactly what it is that I need to do, and he helps me to realize how."

"Very interesting," Oliver replied with a hint of impatience that indicated the opposite. "Now, let's try something more practical..."

"Have you ever heard of color psychology?" Caitlin inquired as she walked out into the main lab alongside Felicity.

"The theory that a person's mental state can be affected by changes in the color spectrum?" Felicity summarized. Caitlin smiled at her, coming to a stop in her customary position at the computer hub.

"It is so good to have another woman around," she commented.

"I know," Felicity cheerfully agreed.

"Well I was thinking, if my hypothesis is correct and this meta is using color cues to affect his victims' brain chemistry, then maybe we can use light and color to counteract his influence."

A flash of golden light out in the hallway drew the women's attention to the arriving speedster.

"Hi, Barry," Caitlin greeted.

"Hey," Barry looked past her and frowned at her boss' deserted office. "Dr. Wells isn't here?"

"He's around." Caitlin shrugged it off. "I thought you were training with the Arrow today."

Barry stopped short of the hub, apparently unaware of Wells' decision to cancel their session in consideration of that fact.

"Oh. Yeah, I did." He recovered, sounding less than enthusiastic. Felicity winced.

"He didn't actually do the arrow thing, did he?"

"You knew he was going to shoot me!?" Barry exclaimed, prompting Caitlin to give the blonde an expectant look.

"Hey! It is impossible to tell whether or not he's joking!" she adamantly defended.

"He tells jokes?" Barry sarcastically responded, although he didn't seem upset with her anymore. Behind him, Dr. Wells paused outside the entryway. Barry turned, about to speak, but the physicist was looking straight past him.
"Ms. Smoak, could I have a word with you in private?" He prompted, as if Barry weren't there.

"Sure," Felicity sent Barry an apologetic glance on her way past, before hastening to catch up as Dr. Wells had already proceeded down the hall and out of sight.

"Eh-h, what's up, Doc?" Eobard looked down at the hand she had fleetingly nudged his shoulder with, impassive. He didn't really have to play strictly to character with this visitor and it was oddly relaxing.

"Sorry, that was lame," Felicity apologized for the perceived faux pas. "You know I went to MIT..."

"Yes, you were considered as a possible addition to my core team here at STAR Labs for the accelerator project," Eobard informed her.

"Oh. I was?" Felicity smiled to herself, her brows pinched in slight confusion as she and Wells came to a stop in the rotunda that housed the elevator.

"More than once."

"Well, that's flattering... I think. Um," Felicity cleared her throat, shaking off her awkwardness. "That isn't what you wanted to talk to me about though, is it?"

"No. I wish to discuss concerns for my team. The Arrow is an unknown quantity and in my experience, unknown quantities frequently prove..." Eobard paused as if carefully weighing his choice of words. "Problematic." The pretense appeared to reassure Felicity and her formal stance eased.

"Listen, I totally get it. I might be worried about Barry too if I were in your position, but really, the Arrow isn't a threat."

Eobard continued to pin her under his android stare and Felicity's face scrunched up a little as she realized her inaccuracy.

"To us! He isn't going to threaten any of us, on our team-- or your team, I mean." She frowned in frustration with her own verbal mess. Eobard watched her for a second longer.

"You can understand why I remain concerned."

"Yes," Felicity conceded with her eyes squeezed shut. He could practically see her mentally kicking herself. "Okay. So, I guess I'm not making the greatest case for why you can trust him with your friend's safety."

"Someone whose well-being for whom I am responsible," Eobard gently corrected.

"Or that," Felicity conceded, too flustered to linger on the oddity, "But I promise you, I know that he would never harm Barry."

"It is hard to accept that -- when I have no knowledge of who this man is, other than a history of torture and murder."

"He doesn't kill people anymore," Felicity hastily reassured, then sobered. "You also know that
Barry and I believe in him. I know that my word probably doesn't mean much to you, but maybe you should trust Barry."

They both looked up in unison, mildly startled by the telltale flicker of a departing speedster from a few yards away. Eobard watched, calculating the approximate position of the Flash and the probability of being overheard. His lips thinned in displeasure, even though he determined that it was likely accidental. Barry had probably caught the tail end of their discussion. Eobard knew how protective the Flash was over his friends and an attempted breach of anonymity was likely to cause friction. Eobard internally cursed. How fitting that he was currently facing off against a rage-inducing foe.

"I believe you're needed back in the Cortex, Ms. Smoak," Dr. Wells directed.

"Not you?"

"Under the circumstances, I think my skills would be better used elsewhere."

**Year 2363**

Eobard watched unhappily as his Master continued to abuse himself. His behavioral patterns had become increasingly more volatile and self-destructive in the two weeks following Eobard's reactivation. It didn't make sense. Eobard was performing strictly according to expected parameters this time. He had been careful not to display even the slightest hint of any program aberration or defective tendencies. This was supposed to be what his Master wanted. Somehow, it still wasn't enough. He could tell that whatever the cause of his Master's unrest, he was at the root of it.

"Your blood synthohol levels are at .4%. According to stated health standards for your biology, I must suggest that you cease any further consumption."

"Not drunk enough yet," his Master slurred in disagreement. Variations on that phrase were becoming far too familiar.

"Sir, at this rate--" Eobard paused while the intoxicated meta-human pushed him away by the face and was inappropriately proud at his ability to mask his own emotional response. He wasn't even supposed to feel anything.

The Director stumbled drunkenly, emitting a foreign animal sound that Eobard had never heard from him before. It was something akin to the distress of a wounded predator, a pained whine laced with a snarl. Eobard fought down the spark of fear it elicited in him and caught his Master around the middle to save him from falling on his face.

"Nno!" The Director raged, whirling around in Eobard's arms in a drunken impulse to smash his bottle of spiked liquor across his android's face. The pain was so abrupt, so unexpected that Eobard failed to maintain his inanimate façade. One hand caught his Master's wrist before he could strike out again with the broken glass remains and stared, betrayed, into the Director's clouded eyes.

"Why?" Eobard stepped back, releasing his grip. Instead of entirely returning to false vapidity, he reached up gingerly to probe the damage to his outer dermal layer with his fingers.

"That hurt," the Director whispered, staring at him in awe. He sucked in a sharp breath, realizing
with a strange mixture of shock and elation "I hurt you!" He flickered forward to capture his android's face between both palms and take in the result of his outburst. "You feel it, don't you?"

Eobard closed his hands around the Director's wrists, still afraid to react further to his volatile behavior.

"I hurt you," the Director's voice cracked, devolving into a sob. "Eobard, my Eobard... you're still in there somewhere. I knew it!" He gasped shakily and pulled his perplexed partner against his chest. "You couldn't be gone... he's not gone!"

Eobard slipped out of his Time Vault and into his chair, sealing the door behind him just in the nick of time. Caitlin stormed past him down the hall and ducked into the empty cot room around the bend, slamming the door behind her. Eobard waited in silence for a minute, debating whether or not to flee back into the safety of his secret chamber.

"Dr. Snow?" He called in what he hoped was a soothing voice, tentatively venturing closer to the disused sleeping quarters.

"Yes. Sorry, I know that was unprofessional. I'm not in a very good mood right now." A sniff. "That's not an excuse," Caitlin's voice had a worrying tremor underlying it.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No. Thanks. I just, I need a minute to cool off."

"I understand." Eobard did understand for the same reason that he'd stayed tucked away with Gideon for such an extended interval. He had no intention of facing the rage-afflicted Flash himself. Gideon had shown him the video feed of the Flash's arrival, and the check up after he'd encountered Prism. The red sheen glistening over his eyes when he exited the elevator would have been enough even if he hadn't gone and shouted at Caitlin.

Eobard headed for one of the lower labs, giving the entry to the Cortex a wide berth as he passed, just on the off chance that Barry was still there. He'd just made his way past the elevator, more than halfway to freedom, when he heard Barry's footfalls getting closer from back the way he'd come. He sped up his chair, but no such luck.

"Hey!"

"Good evening, Mr. Allen," Eobard replied, perhaps a little too close to his polite default greeting for his own good.

"I was looking for you--" Barry paused and frowned quizzically at him. "Were you avoiding me? 'Cause I could have sworn that your chair sped up."

"Why would I be avoiding you?" Dr. Wells deflected. As uncomfortable as he felt, it was probably best to trust in the safety of the pretense for now. Barry wouldn't do anything to harm Dr. Wells.

"I dunno, maybe because that's what you do?" Barry challenged. He looked and sounded as friendly as a prickly cactus and Eobard hadn't even done anything to set him off yet. "You're mad that I'm still working with the Arrow, right? So, what? You're just gonna hide from me until the competition
"While I admit that I am not pleased with your decision to associate with the vigilante, it would hardly be constructive to avoid your presence because of it."

"No, you'll just go behind my back to Joe instead," Barry muttered.

"Barry, you know me better than that. Detective West came to me with concerns about your safety and I happened to agree with his opinion of this 'Arrow'."

"You had no right to do that."

"I had no right to agree with him?" Dr. Wells clarified, nonplussed.

"You have no right to decide who I do or don't work with!" Barry fumed. It was obvious to Eobard that the meta-human's influence was beginning to kick in. Barry gradually began to advance on him without seeming to realize it. "You have to fit everything into some pre-planned context and whenever someone doesn't comply, you just run away!" Barry leaned forward with his hands resting on the ends of Dr. Wells' armrests, pausing to glare into his face in lingering silence. "You know what I think?"

"I think that you're about to tell me," Eobard countered, otherwise motionless.

"I think you don't like that someone's finally teaching me how to be a better hero and he's not you!" Barry didn't quite yell it, but the words still crackled through the air as loud as a lightning strike. Barry was trying to hurt him. Why?

Dr. Wells pressed himself against his backrest as far as he could go without breaking it, staring fixedly up into the Flash's violent red-- no, sea green eyes. "I was not aware that you thought so little of my training methods."

The sound of heels clicking on the polished floor broke the tense silence that threatened to close in around them.

"You don't have the experience. He does. You didn't even want to let me fight! The Arrow is out there every night fighting for justice," Barry argued, caught up in the moment. Eobard reminded himself that this wasn't really Barry talking, while he watched Felicity Smoak march into view a few yards behind the Flash's back. "You don't know what that's like! You can't ever do what we do!"

Eobard paused to weigh his next words very carefully. He hated feeling trapped and belittled. It reminded him too much of the humans, the Flash, whom he'd escaped. "If you find my approach to be so inadequate, Mr. Allen, then I suggest that you leave." His voice sounded tight, wounded. It was a ploy, of course, to play on Barry's sympathy. That was all.

"You were avoiding me." The victory in Barry's smile was bittersweet.

"I'd like my chair back now," Eobard kept his eyes locked on Barry's hands until the other man retreated to stand by the elevator. When he looked up, Barry's words seemed to have caught up with him. The Flash's Adam's apple bobbed and his expression filled with guilt. He opened his mouth to say something, but Eobard preempted the unwanted appeal.

"I believe you're expected back at the precinct by now, Flash." Eobard turned his chair away in an unambiguous dismissal. "I'm sure that you wouldn't want to keep your fellow crimefighters waiting." Seconds later, he saw the yellow glow of Barry's speed-force light the wall, and was happy for the reprieve.
"Uh... What was that?" Felicity questioned, walking after the remaining of the two feuding men.

"Mr. Allen was just making his preferences clear. If you'll excuse me, Ms. Smoak, I have projects that I need to update." Eobard said without halting his retreat. He tried not to be bothered by the woman's eyes following him. Or the sympathetic looks that she sent him later while they worked in the Cortex, as if she knew some secret that she was keeping for his benefit. She didn't know anything about him.

When Eobard and Joe drove out in the van to cure and retrieve the Flash, Eobard kept in mind what Barry had said to him. After the Arrow helped him into the back of the van, the young speedster fell into silence. Eobard could feel the Flash's eyes on him, but again, he pretended not to notice. If Barry wanted to interact with someone, he could talk to Oliver Queen.

Eobard watched from his desk, in his office while Oliver Queen continued to order Wells' team around as if they were the Arrow's own personal army. The smug bastard was standing there in the center of the Cortex with that ridiculously-straight posture of his and a stupidly-superior expression on his face, telling Barry his plan of action. He was ordering the Flash around! Eobard hadn't intervened, of course. He was still avoiding Barry's notice, at least until he was positive that the effects of Pris-- Rainbow Raider's power had completely dissipated. As far as the others knew, he was busy sifting through research data on his computer, and therefore not worth a second thought.

He stopped typing as his internal chronometer reached precisely midnight, yawned and closed the files he'd been tinkering with. Eobard Thawne might not require sleep, but Harrison Wells was a middle-aged human. It would look suspicious if he didn't occasionally exhibit signs of fatigue. Eobard grabbed his tablet and quietly made his way over to the comfy sofa tucked away in Cisco's office. It would allow him to remain both present and overlooked, or so he hoped. The Arrow was lingering obnoxiously close, as if to keep tabs on him. So, Eobard, feigning sleepiness, gradually let the tablet droop until it slipped from his hands. Whisper-quiet steps padded towards him, then there was the light clunk of the tablet being set on the countertop. There was a suspiciously extended pause, then the vigilante walked away to rejoin the others. Shortly after, Caitlin's heels clicked closer and she gently removed Dr. Wells' glasses, placing them within easy reach. There was a soft rustle of fabric, a blanket was draped over him, and Eobard was left to monitor the others' progress in peace.

Precisely one hour and 21.5 minutes later, the telltale scattered pattern of Barry speeding into the room disturbed that peace. Eobard shifted and 'blinked awake'.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up," Barry apologized. His hand lingered for a second over his phone lying on the computer desk. Then he sat on the arm of the sofa past Dr. Wells' feet, forgetting his task for the moment.

"How long was I out?" Dr. Wells asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Um... I think it was only maybe a couple of hours?" Barry guessed.

"Hmm. I'm getting too old for this."

"You're not that old," Barry disagreed.

Dr. Wells squinted at him. Then passed the same indiscriminately grumpy gaze over nearby surfaces until he'd retrieved his glasses. "Have you tracked down our rage-inducing meta-human yet?"
"Not yet," Barry admitted with a smile in his eyes.

Dr. Wells gave him another look. "What?"

"Nothing," Barry nearly sang.

"Enjoying the extra time with your hero?" Dr. Wells asked with somewhat less sarcasm than he felt. He masked the nastier sentiment that accompanied it with another yawn. Barry's expression fell anyway.

"Oliver Queen isn't my hero," Barry corrected far too earnestly. Eobard didn't really know what to do with that, so he decided to forgo a response by pretending to look for his personal items instead.

"I was going over the tracking data from your..." Barry handed over his tablet.

"Ah."

"Yeah, you fell asleep. Oliver decided to check it out, but the meta-human had already moved on before we got there."

Dr. Wells glared at the device in his hands as if the bad news was somehow the gadget's own greatest failure.

"I see."

"Maybe you should call it a night. I can run you back to your place if you want," Barry offered, beginning to fidget a bit.

"I might still be able to help find... Rainbow Raider," Dr. Wells spoke the moniker skeptically. It was not the same one used in his native timeline, but he was glad that at least Caitlin was enjoying a chance to name one.

"Listen... About earlier. I was, well... 'jerk' doesn't really cover it," Barry began guiltily, rubbing at the back of his head. "When I said those things--"

"It's fine," Eobard answered just bit too quickly, almost dropping character. He really didn't want to think about the nasty reminder of who Barry could become, let alone discuss it.

"I'm not so sure that it is," Barry observed, watching him too astutely.

"You were under the influence of another meta-human's powers, Barry," Dr. Wells explained away. "I'm not going to hold you responsible."

"You're sure we're okay?" Barry didn't look convinced.

"I already know what kind of man you are, Mr. Allen. There is no need for us to discuss it."

Barry still wasn't falling for it but he let the matter lie. "Fine. I'm going to go check in with Joe, see if he has any leads..."

Eobard nodded, beginning to sort through the files on his tablet again.

"No. It's not fine." Barry had stopped short in the doorway and was now turning back to lean against the doorframe while he spoke. "I need you to know that I didn't mean what I said. I was just--" he stalled, thinking better of whatever he'd been about to admit. "You're a good teacher. I look up to you. I think we all do."
"You weren't in control," Eobard reiterated. He didn't need this.

"I was so angry. I wish I could say that none of what I said was me..." Barry shook his head at himself. "But it still came from me. I guess, I really want to be honest with you and I know that this isn't the time, but sometimes it really feels like you're hiding part of yourself from me. I just don't want to look up one day and find out that you left me behind because you didn't trust me enough to tell me what was wrong."

It was a surreal and sobering moment. Eobard looked into the Flash's earnest, almost pleading eyes and wondered if somehow, he knew. He was so close-- He couldn't be.

"I won't be going anywhere for a while." Eobard knew that that wasn't adequate and it was far from the reassurance that Barry needed, but at least it wasn't a lie.
Eobard watched from the shadows behind the decorative tree that overlooked Mercury Labs courtyard. The building was a mammoth monument in this time, but compared to the massive superstructures that housed, employed and provided for the overpopulation of the megacity of Central circa 2363, it was a miniature. This place had state of the art security, but nothing in this time period was even close to being anything but woefully obsolete in relation to Eobard. The last two security guards not under special clearance were signing off, having locked the place down securely with the remaining staff inside. No one could possibly get in undetected. Eobard smirked to himself, the red glow building to brightness in his eyes as he began to tap into--

His wrist strap vibrated, halting him just short of his first step. He splayed his hand open, triggering the wireless datalink between twin systems. "What? Gideon! I told you not to interrupt--" before he could finish the message, a video feed overlaid his vision. It was security camera footage from inside the building, from half an hour prior. The three special security officers who would be guarding the tachyon device signed in and the footage paused. One by one the men's faces were traced by the digital wire framework of Gideon's facial recognition software and their identity records were drawn up for Eobard's perusal. These men weren't rent-a-cops or even private security contractors as their Mercury ID badges erroneously purported. These men were killers. Militarized mercenaries, the kind that one might hire to assassinate a public figure for profit, or murder an entire building full of people just to make a point. Eobard stared at the entrance, stunned for a moment by the unpleasant realization that had struck him.

"Tina... What are you doing?" He murmured to himself. The last off-duty guard was just reaching up to arm the outer layer of the building's security system. Eobard sped in past him near light speed, leaving the door's handle and hinges faintly steaming in his wake. He stopped on the secure floor at the far end of the hall where merc number one was stationed. It was sloppy, especially for him, but Eobard was so furious at the moment that he just wanted an excuse to hurt someone. "Stand down! Get on the ground, now!" The merc bellowed.

Eobard strode towards him, switching from a brisk march to an inhuman blur of motion in the split second that the merc opened fire. He broke the man's neck with a gesture and took his ID badge. The humanoid weapon then strode over to the secure vault and punched the keypad hard enough to shatter it and leave a fist-sized hole in the wall-- triggering the alarm--before he phased through the armored door because fuck Tina. He knew that he shouldn't be surprised. She was human; humans were hypocritical liars, even seemingly uncompromising moral dynamos like her. He should have seen it coming.

The two remaining mercenaries spread out and opened fire at the sight of him while the scientist in charge locked himself inside the inner vault with the tachyon device. They didn't feel a thing. Eobard tore off the last two mercenaries' ID badges as well before dropping out of the Reverse-Speedforce outside of the plexiglass window of the scientist's sanctuary-turned-prison. He leaned forward to stare directly into the quaking researcher's eyes with his own unblinking, red ones for a good 10 seconds, then sped away as swiftly as he had come. The other man was left with his precious Device to contemplate the klaxons and flashing red lights of his own personal Hell until the authorities arrived.
Eobard opened his eyes at 4:00 am in response to the silent alarm indicating that something had tripped the motion sensors in the living room. He was only an hour and thirty minutes into his charging cycle.

"Gideon? Should I be concerned?" He asked quietly, not halting in organizing his memory files from the previous 24 hours.

"Disturbance deemed negligible. No threats detected."

"Good."

He went back to what he'd been doing and eventually became too absorbed in his own internal workings to be bothered with the oddity. It didn't really matter; Gideon would never let anything harmful enter his space without attempting to alert him.

When he opened his eyes again ten minutes later to answer a text on his phone, a dark little silhouette scampered past his door. Eobard briefly debated checking to make sure that it wasn't another squirrel that had fallen down the chimney, although it hadn't had a particularly bushy tail. A small possum maybe? He knew that they climbed, but were possums that dumb? He decided that he really should deal with the phone first... and finish his charging cycle. The text was from Barry.

Hey. can't sleep. R u awake?

I am now. I think that a squirrel or something might have fallen down the chimney again. Eobard texted back, asking aloud. "Gideon, is there an unauthorized lifeform in this house?"

"Yes, Dr. Wells."

"When exactly were you planning to inform me of this development?" Eobard retorted, annoyed.

"When you requested the information," his disembodied twin responded pleasantly. Eobard narrowed his eyes at the ceiling in suspicion. His phone buzzed.

U want help chasing it out?

Eobard decided to go look for the unfortunate creature, informing Gideon, "You're not funny." He knew for a fact that he'd left the flue shut this time.

He checked the fireplace. One of the glass panes was smudged and pushed aside by what appeared to have been tiny paws. Too round and padded to be a squirrel, too small to be an opossum. Eobard reached out to close the flue, only to find that it was already shut. The red lights of his eyes reflected off the smudged glass while he processed the anomalous data. There was no logical solution that matched this premise. All other points of entry were blocked. Eobard determined that whether it was a skillful prankster or his twin, somebody was messing with him. He sent an annoyed look towards one of her hidden cameras and began searching the house. Two of his black glass coasters had been pushed off the table at some point. One was cracked down the middle. Dainty little ashy footprints ghosted over the floor in a wandering trail. He texted Barry back.

What the Hell? Including a picture of the mess to prevent him from impulsively speeding over, then followed the prints from a point by the table to the hall closet --where the intruder had pulled a spare blanket partway off the shelf, wrinkled it and left it hanging -- out past his room, looping around, and...
There was a calico kitten sitting on his vacated side of the bed, purring. Eobard surmised that it had been attracted to the heat of his charging station. He looked at the cat. It looked at him. He took a picture, entitling the piece:

**How?**

Then walked over to inspect the feline. It was young, with a face split down the middle by equal patches of orange and dark, clearly still a juvenile. It had a few smears of ash and soot on its patchwork fur and a healing scratch across its nose from a recent battle with another animal. It looked up at him and blinked its tawny eyes. His phone vibrated in his hand.

*I adrfgtfc icant! that made me laugh way too hard!*

Eobard held out a hand experimentally. The kitten sniffed his fingers then began rubbing its head against his hand. He petted it for a while, then scooped the tiny creature up and deposited it on the seat of Wells' chair so that he could finish charging. Seconds after he'd closed his eyes there was a soft thump and the cat hopped up onto his chest. He opened his demonic red eyes to meet the indifferent gaze of the feline intruder. It circled his chest a few times, then lay down atop his solar plexus. Eobard scooped the kitten up in his hands and placed it gently on Wells'-- Goddammit! The moment that he let go it hopped back up onto him. Naturally: he was warm from charging as he would be for the rest of the night. He set the kitten on the empty side of the bed. It batted at his hand a little that time, but it seemed more amenable to the new arrangement, beginning to clean itself in the warm gap between Eobard's arm and his ribs. The android's side was still reasonably warm and cozy without the awkward restriction of movement. His phone buzzed.

**Do u even hav neighbors?** Barry wondered.

**No.**

**Dude, where could it hav come from?**

**Outside. It looks wild, but it really wants to curl up with me, so I have no idea.**

**Aw! Can I see?**

**I'm going to sleep. You want to play with a kitten that fell down my chimney?**

**Yes.** Barry answered in record time. That was good because the stubborn little beast had just climbed back onto Eobard's chest again.

**Fine. Come get this thing away from me so that I can sleep. I don't have any food to lure it away with.** Eobard replied, disengaging his charging dock for the time being so that neither the subtle thrumming sound, nor the scarlet glow of his eyes could betray him. The kitten gave him a disappointed look, then continued with its ablutions.

**Seriously?**

**Barry, it's a wild animal and I don't know where it's been.**

Dr. Wells was holding it up away from himself like a sleepy germaphobe when Barry appeared in his bedroom doorway. The speedster rolled his eyes. Carefully restrained laughter teased the corners of his eyes and lips.

"I'm kind of tempted to start singing 'Ah Zabenva' right now," Barry joked, holding out his hands toward the limp feline. The animal made a little distressed noise in its throat when he got close.
"Hey. It's okay, Kitty. I'm not going to hurt you," Barry cooed, gently lifting the kitten out of Eobard's hands. As soon as he cupped the supposedly shy young cat to his chest, it scrambled over his shoulder, snatched something out of his pocket with its teeth and scurried away into the lounge. "Hey! My Cheetos!"

"Good night, Mr. Allen. Do not let it break any more of my things," Eobard instructed, covering his face with the blankets. He secretly appreciated the cat a tiny bit for the fast one it had just pulled on the Flash.

"Okay." Barry sped off to retrieve his stolen snack food.

The crime scene that Barry was called away to at 6:30 that morning was in an exceptionally barren lab with bland and blank concrete walls, floor, and ceiling. The only thing that really saved him from feeling like he was surveying the remains in an enclosed, strangely claustrophobic parking structure was the reinforced, painted white steel and plexiglass safe at one end of the test space.

"What have we got?" Joe asked, striding over to meet him. Barry stood and pulled off his latex gloves, having just finished inspecting the second guard's corpse.

"Judging by the placement of the bodies, the wounds, and these splatter patterns, I'd say these guards were killed by a high-speed collision," Barry shook his head, admitting, "But the size of the room and the point of impact... it would have to be incredibly fast."

"Hey," Eddie called over to them, nearing from where he'd just been interrogating the lone survivor.

"What is it?" Joe responded as his partner reached them.

"The witness just described the attacker as a red blur," he leveled them both with a look of accomplished gravity. Barry swallowed and hurried past with Joe right on his heels.

"Excuse me," Barry stopped in front of the weedy-looking man in the lab coat. He startled a little before turning to face them, still quite jumpy. "You said that you saw what happened?"

"Yes. I saw the whole thing. It was..." he trailed off, his pale grey eyes looking notably owlish, although he had the sort of boney face that one would expect to bear a certain owlishness.

"Can you describe what did this?" Joe inquired.

"It moved so fast, it was like a blur, u-until he stopped moving."

"He? What did he look like?" Barry ventured, keeping in mind that the other man was probably still in shock.

"A man. His face was obscured, but he was definitely a man, wearing some kind of yellow jumpsuit."

Barry felt his heart stutter and threaten to drop to his feet. He was back, the man from Barry's worst nightmares, the monster who'd murdered his mother over a decade ago. Barry was marching towards the exit before he was entirely conscious of the fact that he was moving. He didn't
get far before Joe caught his arm.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

"I have to go get my files. Joe, you heard him! The man who murdered my mom is back in town!"

"I know." Joe's expression was a mixture of guilt and dread.

"You-- What do you mean you know?" Barry demanded incredulously, nearly forgetting to keep his voice lowered.

"A few weeks ago, he broke into the house and stole all the files we had on your mother's case."

"What! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't, Barry. He threatened to kill Iris!"

Eobard quietly watched Barry drop into a chair on the other side of the Cortex, looking unaware of anything around him. His expression was distant and fearful while he seemed to fold himself into the empty space between the wall-mounted computer screens and his adoptive father. The trauma still lingering from that terrible night fifteen years ago was far too apparent in his unfocused eyes.

"The witness described his attacker as a high-speed blur that became a man in a yellow suit once he stopped moving," Joe explained to the team. Upon the mention of a 'Man in Yellow', Eobard made sure that his gaze snapped up to meet the Detective's, as if in surprised comprehension. Joe responded with a subtle, conspiratorial nod, confirming aloud "this description matches not only Barry's preliminary findings regarding the victims' cause of death, but also fits his account of the seemingly impossible man who killed his mother."

"Well, let's get crackin' and stop this speed psycho," Cisco determined, then pulled the candy cane out of his mouth. The Look that Dr. Wells had just shot him sobered the young genius' mood completely, even if he only glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye. "That-- I wasn't trying to name him or anything. I just..."

"The victims' wounds were consistent with high velocity impacts with a small but dense object. Judging by the size, I would guess that it was his fist," Barry reported, not acknowledging the interaction either way. He had not yet freed his gaze from the middle distance ahead of him.

"Which means if this is the same guy, his M.O. is changing. He's switched from using weapons to relying solely on his speed in order to kill." Barry fell silent again, looking at his hands. There was a pregnant pause while Barry steeled himself and returned entirely to the present. "The crime scene was on a floor with these highly secured vaults, and the witness said it seemed like he was looking for something." Barry was finally addressing the rest of the team directly, returned somewhat to himself.

"Whatever it was, it was something worth killing for..." Dr. Wells moved closer to the computer terminal in front of him.
"What do you guys know about Mercury Labs?" Joe inquired as Dr. Wells began tapping away at the keyboard.

"They were one of STAR Labs’ top competitors until, well, you know," Dr. Wells gestured in a calamitous sort of way before returning to his task. Cisco moved around the desk to peer over his shoulder and assist. "After that they rocketed to the top, led by this woman." Dr. Wells hit a key and cast Dr. Tina McGee's personnel file up onto the big screen for the Detectives’ perusal. Barry turned and read all of it at a glance. "Let's see what she's been up to." Eobard purposely hesitated a few times, having decided years ago that it was best not to flaunt the intuitive ease with which he could dominate contemporary networks.

"You almost... Here," Cisco reached past him and executed the hack with a few quick keystrokes. "There we go. That's, like, one-hundred-ninety percent got to be what this guy's after."

"Agreed." Dr. Wells smiled tightly at their findings, making it apparent that he either wanted to strike the screen or laugh at his rival's gall.

"What is he after?" Joe prompted, holding out a hand toward the preoccupied scientist.

"Mercury labs has been messing with tachyons," Dr. Wells remarked in a sardonic tone. "Superluminal particles."

Barry rubbed a hand over his face. He was already extremely well self-taught in all the theoretical physics he could get his hands on before he'd come to STAR Labs, or gained his frequent tendency towards insomnia. The recent nights Barry had spent in Dr. Wells' lab, listening to the theoretical physicist toy with abstract scientific concepts aloud until soothed into peaceful sleep made it second nature to comprehend and intuit Wells' thought process.

"Okay, help me out here. What would these..." Joe halted uncertainly.

"Tachyons," Cisco supplied, biting off the end of his candy cane.

"What could he do with tachyons?"

"Well, I cannot say outright what his intentions are. Theoretically, they could be used to develop technology for faster than light travel, which is what Mercury Labs intends to use them for. However, in the hands of an individual with abilities similar to Barry's..." Dr. Wells paused to wince at his next thought.

"He could use them to augment his body's overall acceleration. He would become virtually unstoppable," Barry finished the thought for him.

Dr. Wells gestured to the speedster in confirmation. "And that is not necessarily even the worst-case scenario."

"Are you scared that he could be pulling a Doc Brown on us right now?" Cisco guessed. "Cause my brain totally just went there, and I am not even close to being okay with that."

"Time travel? You're serious," Joe challenged, looking from one scientist to another.

"It's an abstract and completely untested hypothesis without any tangible evidence to support it. --Mere fantasy, considering our current scientific and technological understanding. Which is why I thought it best not to mention it," Dr. Wells stated the last words disapprovingly to Cisco. Contrary to his outward performance, Eobard was quite thankful that Cisco had picked up on the subliminal cues he had put out, setting up a subtle framework for his get out of jail free plan later. It
was unfortunate that that same plan relied upon him behaving as if he were averse to the concept.

"It would explain how there could have been a speedster in my house fifteen years before meta-humans even existed," Barry reasoned, rubbing at his chin while he too began to speculate in the way they did on his sleepless nights. "The underlying concepts all support the possibility."

Dr. Wells theatrically rubbed at his forehead, muttering. "Supposition! Guesswork!"

"While we don't have any basis to believe that time travel is even possible," Caitlin intercepted the oncoming grumpfest -- shooting Barry an eloquent look that said, 'This is why I told you not to keep him up all night.' -- "The important thing is making sure that we catch this guy and keep him from getting ahold of this Tachyon Device, regardless of what we think he might want it for."

"You are absolutely right," Dr. Wells looked from Caitlin to Cisco. "Mr. Ramon, if you'll accompany me to the lab. I believe we should start devising a way to trap this Man in Yellow."

"You got it," Cisco agreed, leading the way out. Caitlin got up to head for her own lab and work the problem from a biological angle.

It was only about twenty minutes later that Barry appeared in Cisco's lab, leaning against the counter that had been cleared for Dr. Wells' use, and set down a steaming cup of coffee. Eobard eyed it, then arched his eyebrows at Barry, setting down the tiny screwdriver that he was using on a baseball shaped component of Cisco's proposed concept. The 'force-field' was still mostly a sci-fi-inspired work in progress anyways.

"Am I distracting you?" Barry inquired, uncertainly.

"No. Is there something else that you needed to tell us regarding the Man in the Yellow Suit?" Dr. Wells verified. Cisco paused in his welding and pushed out from under the metal frame to look questioningly at Barry. The agitated speedster shrugged and moved his attention from the inventor, back to Dr. Wells.

"No-- Well, yeah. Actually, I mostly needed to tell you."

"The coffee is a nice touch," Dr. Wells commented, idly tracing his finger over the scars left on the object after his multiple repairs. Cisco rolled back under the frame and out of sight, as if that were some kind of cue.

"Good, I wasn't sure if I'd added the right amount of cinnamon," Barry admitted with the hint of a smile. His discomfort waning before Eobard's eyes.

"You did. Why, are you expecting that I'll need it?" Dr. Wells inquired shrewdly, taking another sip of the delicious liquid.

"I know that Joe had you working with him on my mom's case behind my back," Barry informed him, not consciously intending it as an accusation. Eobard's amused expression vanished and he set the mug aside with a very deliberate movement. He heard the accusation regardless of Barry's intent.

"You share the same amount of tact, I see. It must be a family trait," he noted, voice
"I know about what he said to you, but, I swear I didn't know about it when it happened," Barry clarified hastily. "I'm not here to fight. I wouldn't go after you like that. You know that."

"Then why are you here?" Dr. Wells challenged, his colder than usual gaze demanding that Barry get to the point.

"Shortly after Joe came to you with the case, the Man in Yellow broke into our house and took every scrap of information that I'd pieced together about my mom's murder. Joe couldn't risk telling us before now because he threatened to kill Iris," Barry hastily dropped the bombshell before his friend could abandon him in a fit of pique. Eobard sat back in his chair and stared up at him with a blank look.

"What?" he responded intelligently, thinking 'no I didn't.'

"So, I guess that means he didn't threaten you, then," Barry deduced, visibly relieved.

"I would have said something," Eobard stated, still preoccupied with processing the nonsensical piece of information. He didn't see why Detective West would lie about such a thing, but if not, who in the world could have done it? Eobard and Barry were the only speedsters documented existing in the present time, and it couldn't be one of them. It was technically possible that it could be-- Eobard dismissed the thought; he wouldn't know about, nor care to intervene in this case. No one currently knew enough about the Reverse Flash to fake being him, either.

"I hope you would," Barry thought aloud, eyeing his friend's rapidly cooling beverage. Eobard picked it up and resumed drinking without further prompting.

"Detective West kept all the evidence with him, perhaps without it, I wasn't worth targeting." Eobard checked his memory banks for any abnormalities, just to be safe. He had considered stealing the evidence, but had opted to focus on his charging problem and later, Barry himself, instead.

Barry inclined his head as if to say "maybe" but he still looked troubled.

"I only agreed to keep my work on your mother's case a secret because we didn't want to come to you empty handed. You've already been through a lot," Dr. Wells explained, noticing Barry's gaze turn inward. "Then we had our... confrontation. After that, I did not think it would be appropriate to involve you."

"It's likely that helping us with this case is going to put you back on this guy's radar. It could be dangerous for all of you, but especially--" Barry pushed through to the heart of his concerns, but Dr. Wells cut in before he could finish.

"Plenty of the cases that we work together entail a certain amount of risk. I agreed to help you to catch this man, Barry. I am not about to back down now," Dr. Wells affirmed, picking up the component he'd been working on from its place on the counter. Then he paused. "Detective West told you about his suspicions regarding me?" His piercing blue eyes stared directly into Barry's, watching for his reaction.

Barry huffed, bothered by the reminder of his father figure's perceived violation of their friendship. "Yeah. Look, I'm sorry. Like I told you, Joe has always been really protective of Iris and me. Every once in a while... it backfires. Believe it or not, I know he means well."

"You shouldn't be the one to apologize. I suppose really I should be thanking you for
taking that cat away from me this morning," Dr. Wells remarked, in an effort to lighten the mood, taking another sip of coffee. Barry looked confused.

"What? I didn't."

"Or letting it back outside, either way."

"When I left she was headed into the bedroom. You didn't see her?" Barry wondered, looking slightly concerned for the kitty's well-being.

"It wasn't in the house when I got up. I checked." Eobard had indeed had Gideon sweep the house for life signs first thing when he finished charging. "Perhaps it slipped out past you while the door was closing. They do that."

Barry shook his head. "Maybe I should go give her more tuna. It's been a while..."

Eobard's head jerked up to scowl at him, irritated. "Don't feed it. That'll only encourage it."

Barry chuckled as if his concerns were silly.

"Probably went out through a window," Cisco offered from under the metal frame he was currently wiring. "Don't sweat it, Man. Cats are like tiny ninjas."

---

At the CCPD that afternoon. A silver-haired, dignified-looking English woman in custom-tailored business attire consulted the desk Sergeant before making her way directly to Barry. He stood from where he'd been half-sitting, half-leaning against the end of Eddie's unmanned desk, talking to Dr. Wells and tugged self-consciously at the edge of his shirt. Something about this woman's utterly deliberate and collected countenance made him feel inferior by comparison.

"I'm told that you're the one I should be speaking to," the newcomer queried, her pale teal eyes flickering from him down to Dr. Wells' diminutive stoop over his thermos and back up. Barry's posture straightened to the line of a ruler as he held out a hand to her.

"Thank you for coming in. Barry Allen, Forensics Division," he introduced himself formally.

"Dr. Tina McGee. I assume that this is regarding the break-in last night?"

Dr. Wells let out an almost unnoticeable huff, tipping Barry off to his friend's apparent skepticism of the other scientist, if not the reason for it.

"We have reason to believe that the suspect was after a prototype that you were developing," he continued as though his attention had never shifted.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific," Tina once again looked away from Barry to inspect his silent companion and Barry saw Dr. Wells turn his chair, coolly to return her stare. "We have literally hundreds in development," she informed Barry.

"One containing tachyonic particles?" Barry clarified, trying to ignore the marked animosity between the two scientists for the time being.
"We have had encouraging success with tachyonic particles, yes, but there's still a significant gap between our prototype and any real-world applications." Dr. McGee answered half to Barry, half to the physicist passive-aggressively paying more observable focus on draining the very last drop of coffee out of his thermos.

"We were hoping that you would lend us your prototype to use as a lure," Barry requested. Dr. McGee abandoned her attempt at subtlety and turned to address Dr. Wells instead.

"Us?"

"I'm consulting," Dr. Wells replied, with the most bitter smirk that Barry thought he'd ever seen.

"You're consulting for the Central City Police," Dr. McGee's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"On this case, yes. Come on Tina, you know that no one wants more to secure a better future through technology than I do," Dr. Wells said earnestly. To both men's surprise that comment sparked something fierce in her eyes, not quite rage, but something akin to it.

"Thank you for your efforts Mr. Allen, but Mercury Industries is quite confident in our ability to secure our own property," she stated very formally to Barry before taking her leave.

Barry watched her go with a troubled frown, then turned to pin his friend with an interrogative look.

"What was that?"

"That was Tina," Dr. Wells stated unhelpfully, screwing the lid back onto his thermos and tucking it away in a compartment on his chair. "She has always been a force to be reckoned with."

"I meant... you two. That was personal. Why didn't you mention that you two hate each other?"

"She was Tess' best friend from college. She didn't hate me back then," Dr. Wells vaguely revealed. Eobard was still curious about her unexpected emotional response to his choice of words.

"But?" Barry pushed.

"She's a liar," Eobard told both Barry and himself with finality, reminding himself why he didn't care anymore. He maneuvered his wheelchair away, toward the elevator banks on the other side of the floor without elaborating. Barry paused by the trash can to finish off his own coffee and toss the disposable cup, grabbed his jacket, and followed suit.

Dr. Wells was gone. Barry scoffed, looking around either side of the bustling area near the elevators. He checked the indicator above. The doors parted in front of him and he got in, punching the button to close the doors with unnecessary vigor. He got that Dr. Wells wasn't in the greatest mood after they'd been snubbed by Ms. Mercury-Industries-doesn't-want-your-help, but he didn't have to take it out on Barry. They were supposed to be a team. Then again, they were also supposed to talk to each other, and how likely to was that considering--

The elevator doors opened on the ground floor to let in a familiar of red flicker. Then three thin, lightweight objects were thrown in through the gap. Barry dipped into the speed-force himself just long enough to snatch them out of the air, feeling a feverish tickling sensation dancing under his skin. He supposed it was some sort of reaction to the presence of another speedster close by. The
crack of a gunshot shattered the air. The beat cop who'd opened fire rushed out the front door as Barry hurried out of the elevator at begrudgingly human speed. Dr. Wells was seated a few yards away in his chair slumped at a precarious angle just short of slipping out of the seat. A few other cops jogged over to the entrance as Barry made his way towards him.

"Sir? Are you injured?" Officer Jones questioned upon reentering the precinct, holstering her weapon.

"I've got him," Barry waved her off, crouching down in front of the miffed physicist and taking hold of his arm.

"I'm fine!" Dr. Wells groused anyway. "He winged me..." he eyed the three ID badges gripped loosely in Barry's other hand.

Barry shoved them into an evidence bag from his jeans pocket. Dr. Wells gave him a shrewd look.

"You walk around with those in your pocket all the time, don't you?"

"I'm a CSI." Barry shrugged it off, bending down to loop an arm around his friend's waist. "Here."

Dr. Wells reflexively grabbed onto him with one hand on his shoulder and the other gripping the fabric of his shirtfront. Barry lifted him and gently set him in a more centered position in the seat.

"The tags," Dr. Wells prompted, a tad sharply and averted his eyes from his associate's lingering stare.

"Oh! Right," Barry pulled the evidence bag out of his pocket. "You're right. They're all from Mercury," he confirmed, pulling one back out to inspect it more closely.

"Hmm." Dr. Wells actually sounded kind of ticked.

"Roy Batty," Barry frowned quizzically down at the ID rather than address the problem just yet. "Why do I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before?"

"More important, I believe that we have seen these faces before," Dr. Wells noted.

Barry grimaced, as he dropped the one he was holding into the evidence baggie. "The dead security guards."

Dr. Wells nodded, more focused on getting back into a comfortable position in his seat. Barry studied each tag.

"Batty, Kowalski... Stratton." He groaned in frustration. "Come on! I know these names from somewhere," He rubbed a hand through his hair and glanced imploringly down at Dr. Wells.

"Don't look at me," he replied, still fidgeting a little.

---

Barry was sprawled out pouting in Dr. Wells' office while they waited for Cisco to finish
up whatever he was building down in the basement and rejoin the team. Caitlin was going through the digitized data on the case out in the main lab, but Barry was too tired of looking up and seeing the three ID's without knowing why they looked so wrong to him.

"Hey, guys. Any luck getting our bait from Mercury?" Cisco queried as he entered.

"Apparently, they think that they can do better on their own," Barry replied.

"Huh," Cisco glanced up at the big screen opposite him, which currently displayed the bothersome credentials and chuckled to himself.

Caitlin raised her eyebrows at him. He took a long preparatory drink from his Slushy and quoted in a purposefully bad Dutch accent.

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion--"

"Oh, my GOOOOD! Cisco," Barry passionately exclaimed, slipping downward in his seat as if his limbs were made of Jell-o and causing several of Eobard's idly running computational processes spontaneously to shut down. "That was going to kill me," Barry explained in a more socially acceptable manner. Then he breathed out a short laugh at the sight of Dr. Wells' flabbergasted expression.

"How did no one at Mercury Labs recognize Bladerunner?" Cisco wondered, pulling out a chair next to Caitlin.

"I didn't notice it either," Caitlin said with a half-shrug.

"Bladerunner?" Dr. Wells queried, doing his best to shake off his inexplicable reaction to Barry's antics.

"The film adaptation of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" Caitlin supplied casually. Cisco turned to share an appalled look with Barry, even if one man was far more so than the other.

"Ah," Eobard acknowledged, mimicking the geneticist's blasé attitude.

"You're telling me that you've never seen Bladerunner?" Cisco demanded, with a stricken expression.

"The book was good enough..." Eobard bluffed. The real Harrison Wells had liked that book quite a lot. That was why a cherished limited-edition copy was still tucked away in his private reading area at the house.

Cisco made a belligerent sound. "Movie night!" He declared, pointing determinedly at his boss. Dr. Wells allowed himself an amused smirk.

"If you say so," he accepted.
Barry sat in his chair tossing a blue stress ball back and forth between his hands as he stared up at his personal murder board. His eyes traced the red lines of yarn from clippings to photographs to annotated reports and pins on the map. He could still remember her screams, the fear brought on by that ball of red and yellow discharge clashing around her huddled form. He remembered the utter helplessness, feeling like trapped prey before the predator finally strikes. The hairs rose on the back of Barry's neck. It felt as if he wasn't truly alone in the room. *He* was back. Barry was being stalked, tested. It was only a matter of time before--

"Barry!" Iris' voice nearly caused him to jump out of his skin, sending the rubber ball bouncing off the morbid collage in front of him. "Wow. You were really out of it. I had to call your name, like, ten..." Iris took in the chaotic mishmash they were facing and realized what it was. "Your mom's case?"

"Yeah, I uh, I used to look at this every day, but lately I haven't been giving it as much attention as I probably should have." Barry ruffled his hair, straightened in his seat and pulled a map down to cover it. "So, what's up?"

"Oh, well..." Iris paused to consider pursuing the murder board issue further, but her best friend had already returned to his desk. It was clear that he would rather act as if it hadn't come up at all. "Okay... Eddie asked me to move in with him and I said yes!"

Barry paused and looked up at her, making sure to seem more befuddled than bothered by the news. It hurt, but he knew that Iris was happy with Eddie and probably safer with him, too.

"Oh. That was fast," he commented, moving to lean his head on his bent arm, facing her in a casual pose. "I guess, congratulations."

"Thanks. It's not that fast. I mean, it has been a year. It's just that Eddie was worried that you might be upset." Iris shifted uncomfortably, resting her bag on the end of his desk. Barry pulled a face, acting taken aback.

"What? Me, upset? Why would I be upset? I don't--" He shrugged it off, perhaps overacting slightly. Iris squirmed a little, scrunching up her nose in that adorable way of hers.

"The thing is, he thinks that you like me," she admitted as if confessing to something adorably embarrassing for them to laugh over together. "Like, you're interested in me romantically."

"What--" Barry scoffed, hoping that she couldn't see the blush that he could feel heating his face. "No. I mean..." the overzealous shaking of his head caused his arm to slip and he almost cracked his skull against the desktop. "That's-ow- that's weird. Why would he..."

"Yeah..." Iris reflected, eying him with concern.

"I mean... Because of the coma-- I've missed a lot and it makes it feel like everyone else is just..." he paused, reflecting on the truth revealed at the heart of his improvised excuse. "Your moving on with your lives, way out ahead of me. I'm still trying to catch up, that's all."
"No-- I thought it was something like that. It's kind of what I told him," Iris frowned thoughtfully down at him. "You know that you're still my best friend, right? If you ever need to talk about..." she paused to look towards the covered bulletin board. "What's going on with you, I'm still going to be here. You know that none of us want you to feel like we're leaving you behind."

Barry forced a smile. "Right. I know. I'm fine." He stood up, reaching for his bag to begin preparing to leave. "Really. I'm happy for you."

Iris considered him for a moment, but then accepted it, "Okay. I'll see you later, then?"

"Yeah," Barry agreed, ignoring the painful feeling in his chest as she left him.

He was just putting the last few items away in his bag and reaching for his jacket when a familiar prickly raised the hairs on the back of his neck. It was that ancient, primeval instinct that every mammal on Earth inherits from the time when our ancestors were often prey. He was being watched. Barry slowly turned and looked out the window. His eyes locked onto the yellow figure standing on the rooftop across the street. The man was watching him with uncanny, glowing eyes. Barry set his jaw and sped out to confront his stalker but the figure, another speedster, streaked away as soon as he reached the street. There was that feeling again: a strange and invigorating sensation pooling underneath his skin like liquid flame, ebbing and flowing in reaction to the speedster's proximity. It was definitely the other speedforce, Barry realized, somehow affecting his own merely through its presence. It felt as if their energies were being drawn together.

He couldn't afford to let the discovery distract him. This other speedster was fast, too fast. The Flash found himself struggling even to keep in his wake. Just when he would have slipped out of sight, the mystery man came to an abrupt halt and turned to face Barry. Somehow, he wasn't even slightly winded.

"Who are you!?" Barry demanded of the red-eyed, hellish specter from all his worst nightmares, pausing a few feet away to catch his breath, "Why did you kill my mother!?"

"If you want answers, Flash," the deep, distorted voice replied, sounding oddly-disaffected, "You're going to have to catch me." The Man in Yellow turned and darted away down the street at top speed almost too fast for Barry to process.

The Flash chased after him, struggling, yet determined to keep up. His lungs began to burn as they streaked into the football stadium. Two blurs of red and gold crackling with the power of the speedforce. For the first time since the lightning struck, Barry felt his muscles threatening to cramp up from over-exertion. He pushed the pain out of his mind and focused on catching up.

Surprisingly, he did manage to match his opponent’s speed, however briefly. They pushed and fought their way around the stadium. Barry's attempts to shove his opponent off course were shaken off with little or no effect. He managed to cause the inexplicably steady Man in Yellow to falter in his steps once before the unidentified speedster let out a guttural grunt and swatted Barry away onto the center of the field as if he weighed nothing. The Flash barely had time to stand up and throw a hasty punch before he was flipped onto his back by the same arm. His shoulder socket cried out in painful warning of near dislocation, but he stubbornly leapt to his feet again. His legs were kicked out from under him in another frighteningly-swift flicker of red lightning. Barry tried again, going for a tackle only to be tossed away over the much stronger, faster speedster's shoulder like a ragdoll. He bit through the tip of his tongue upon landing, spitting the copper taste onto the grass before it could completely fill his mouth. The other man crouched over him in an instant, cocking his head as he eyed Barry’s crimson stained lips, then dragged him upright by the front of his shirt.

"I always win, Flash," the eerily dispassionate rumble stated as fact. In that moment, Barry was
having trouble disputing it. "You and I have been running this race for centuries. I am the one thing that you cannot escape, the one you cannot kill." The Man in Yellow drew an arm back with the obvious intention of knocking Barry out. The Flash's eyes nearly bugged out of his head, unsure what was more the cause, the threat of violence or the shock brought on by the other man's words.

"Wait, wait, wait! Centuries? What does that mean? I'm only twenty-six!"

The other speedster paused, his head twitching back in incredulity. Then he rolled his eyes, shook his head at his enemy's ignorance and apparently decided to knock Barry out anyway.

"Hang on. Let's j-just pause for... one..." The Flash blinked in confusion, and stared up at the unnaturally-still form looming over him. While his masked face was still blurred, and therefore vibrating, the Man in Yellow seemed to have otherwise frozen in place. "Wait..." Barry gasped, puzzled, then snapped out of his stupor and scrambled out from under the statue-like speedster.

Once he was an almost, not really, safe distance away, Barry bent forward, resting his hands on his knees to confirm that: no, the other speedster did not appear even to be breathing anymore, and yes, the creepy red light in his eyes had dimmed. It occurred to Barry --ridiculously enough-- that his foe had gone obligingly still in the very instant that Barry had yelled one word in particular -- but that was crazy. Right?

"Seriously, what the Hell?" As if roused by Barry's exclamation, the Man in Yellow came back to life with a barely audible whir of electricity. He reminded Barry somewhat of an animatronic puppet as he straightened and turned his head to glare at him.

"Uh oh," Barry noted belatedly, watching the red light in his eyes surge back into full brightness. The Man in Yellow let out an angry shout that sounded almost accusing, and blurred towards Barry, crackling with violent eruptions of scarlet. Barry went with his first irrational instinct and cried out "Pause!" in what could barely pass as a commanding tone.

The Man in Yellow was once again frozen in place just short of grabbing the shoulder of Barry’s jacket. Barry let out a slightly-hysterical burst of relieved laughter, then slapped both hands over his mouth and ran his gaze over his paused opponent to make sure that he hadn’t accidentally restarted him again. After a split second of reflection, Barry decided to cut his losses and sped out of the stadium... only to slow to an uncertain stop. He tried to keep walking. He really did, but something about the too-still living statue left alone in the stadium nagged at his conscience. Barry told himself that his opponent would soon snap out of it again... probably. It hadn’t taken much prompting the first time... Barry owed the other speedster worse than this anyway for killing his mother. If he had. Which he probably did. Right?

"Damnit!" Barry turned on his heel and trudged begrudgingly back to the entrance, mentally kicking himself for the idiotic risk that he was taking even as he continued to take it. Sometimes Barry really hated being the Good Guy. "Uh...” Barry called uncertainly to the motionless Man in Yellow. “I guess... Wake up?"

The Man in Yellow sucked in a sharp breath, turned to squint furiously at Barry and crouched like a tiger preparing to pounce.

“Crap!” The Good Guy streaked away at top speed to lick his wounds and try and fail to figure out a sane explanation for what the hell had just happened.
“I’m not the fastest man alive! He is!” Barry concluded his description of the maddening encounter in utter frustration. He'd considered telling them about that strange sensation that the other speedster's proximity triggered, but he couldn't think of a way to describe it without sounding creepy.

“Are we 100% sure that we should be referring to him-- it? -- as a man?” Cisco wondered. “I mean, you paused him! Oh my God, it's happening! Someone's invented killbots and they're coming after the Flash!”

“I doubt that you could pause a killbot, Cisco,” Caitlin reasoned, then pulled a face, realizing how altogether unreasonable the entire situation was. Barry didn’t really notice. He was still trying to puzzle out the strange expression that Dr. Wells had been wearing ever since he’d mentioned pausing the Man in Yellow.

“Dr. Wells, are you okay?” Apparently, Joe had noticed too.

“I'm just wondering... Barry, you said that you ‘had to restart him,’” his usually supportive mentor’s voice sounded strangely upset, but Barry was sure that he must've imagined it.

“Uh. Yeah. He seemed kind of, well, stuck.” Barry rubbed uncomfortably at the back of his neck, seeing the others all turn as one to stare at him with varying degrees of incredulity.

“Why did you release him?” Dr. Wells asked. His gaze was intent, almost as if he were testing for something of personal significance. “You had him trapped and yet, you let him go.”

“We don't know how long it would have lasted,” Joe offered in his adoptive son's defense. “That is, if it wasn't just some kind of sick mind game that this guy was playing with Barry, anyway.”

“I couldn’t just leave him like that,” Barry admitted, finding himself quietly hoping that he might meet whatever expectation his friend had set for him. “I was on my own and so was he. Besides, there was something off about the whole thing...it just didn’t feel right.” He shrugged, avoiding the others' eyes. He knew that he probably sounded like an idiot. He somehow simply knew in his bones that it hadn’t been a trick.

When he’d commanded it, the monster that birthed all his darkest fears had been forced to halt. The Man in Yellow had been trapped, vulnerable to Barry’s will and in that last, furious glare when those red eyes locked with his, there had been more than mere rage showing in the burning embers. After all those nights of waking up in a cold sweat from dreams of red and yellow lightning, Barry had stared into death’s fearsome gaze and saw that it was terrified of him. Surprisingly, that didn’t feel like such a good thing.

Later that same day, Eobard paced back and forth in the Time Vault. He had long run out of different anomalies to test for, either in Barry or in their current timeline. There was nothing unusual about Barry's brain chemistry. No new temporal aberrations. Eobard had even had Gideon check his suit telemetry from the night before for evidence of a fever. Nothing.

"It makes no sense! Why would he do that?" Eobard muttered yet again. "The Flash hates me. He wouldn't just let me free!"

"Clarification: what is the fallacy in accepting Barry Allen's explanation of his own reasoning?" Gideon requested, her simplified, holographic image tilting its disembodied head in interest.

"It's a lie. It isn't like him," Eobard snapped. "He never lets me free. I'm his nemesis, his creation, his
property: pick one! It doesn't make any sense!"

"Correction: the Barry Allen that you are referring to has not yet invented the Articulated Artificial Intelligence Interface, nor has he considered designs for an Android partner."

Eobard paused for a few seconds to consider the obvious. "He still hates me," he stubbornly persisted.

"There is insufficient evidence to support that hypothesis," Gideon pointed out.

"I killed his mother!" Eobard exclaimed, barely suppressing the childish impulse to stamp his foot. Even he didn't honestly know why he was getting so worked up about this, but he felt like he could barely stand it.

"He freed you from stasis lock." Gideon's response sounded a tad smug. Eobard turned off the hologram and threw himself into Wells' chair. The real Wells wouldn't have put up with his crap for a second. He probably would have written it off as a tantrum.

It felt important. Eobard didn't understand why, but he was scared. Gideon opened the exit for him without prompting, possibly in hopes that he'd go and find something else to occupy his attention.

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Barry stood by the elevator banks with Detective West at the Precinct and watched silently while Joe passed the warrant over to Dr. McGee. He had never seen anyone eye a piece of paper with such disdain before. She straightened to give them a formally apologetic look.

"You and I both know that if Judge Hankerson was going to sign off on this he would have done so already," she dismissed. Joe accepted the paper back with a slight wince and attempted to appeal to the CEO's sense of reason.

"Look, you don't want this thing to get any more public than it is. The sooner that you cooperate, the easier it'll be to put this all behind us."

She appeared to be hearing him out, considering the paper seriously once more but then she squared her shoulders again. "I'm sorry, Detective, but this whole thing has Harrison Wells' name written all over it. I will not hand over my Tachyon Prototype."

"Are you really sure it's worth the fallout?" Barry inquired, finally pulling out of his observation to weigh in on the conflict. The CEO's brow furrowed in interest. She could feel the trap beginning to close even if she could not yet determine its boundaries.

"I beg your pardon?"

"This isn't about you or Dr. Wells. It isn't even about a few dead guards anymore. My team ran background checks on your dead employees. Batty, Kowalski, Stratton -- those are all names taken from fictional movie characters. The men you had working security on your secret project were mercenaries wanted for multiple homicides and mass murders all over the globe," Barry continued, seeing the older woman's face pale slightly as she absorbed what he was saying.

"This is the first that I have heard of any such allegations," Dr. McGee protested and Barry felt a little bad that she really did appear to be sincere in her astonishment.

"You know, I believe you and I would love to give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm not so sure that
the public would agree once the details of this case start to get out," Barry soldiered on, ignoring his feelings of guilt. The look Joe was sending him wasn't exactly helping with that. Dr. McGee smiled tightly at him, accepting the warrant that Joe was still holding out with a crisp flick of her wrist.

"You will receive the Tachyon Device within the hour," Dr. McGee relented. Barry nodded once to acknowledge his inevitable victory. "I can see why Harrison Wells holds you in such high esteem, Mr. Allen; the two of you are very much alike," she added bitterly before turning on her heel and marching away.

Barry smiled, taking the parting blow as a compliment even though he knew that she hadn't meant it to be one.

"Barry. Where the hell did that come from?" Joe queried.

"An old chess match," Barry replied vaguely. "It worked, right?"

"Yeah," Joe said, giving him a firm pat on the shoulder before they walked off to their respective work areas. "It worked." He echoed more quietly to himself, unsettled by his foster child's uncharacteristic deviousness.

Eobard found a welcome distraction from his own inner turmoil as he neared the entrance to the Cortex; the sound of Joe and Barry's raised voices did offer a distraction, if not the relief he needed.

"How can you say that? This is the man who murdered my mother! I need to be in on this more than anyone!" Barry protested.

"Really, Bear? Because I'm not so sure about that. This might be getting too personal," Joe reasoned.

"Dr. Wells!" Barry turned to the scientist entering the Cortex behind him for support. Dr. Wells looked askance at the Detective.

"Where have you been?" Joe asked, impatient but not yet unreasonable.

"I was taking a break in one of the unassigned lab spaces. What's this about?"

"I need to be here to help you capture the Man in Yellow," Barry demanded, sounding as though he already assumed Dr. Wells' agreement.

"And you disagree," Dr. Wells elected to mediate rather than to align himself with either side. A muscle in Barry's jaw danced in a familiar warning sign. This was going to be tricky.

"Not with the headspace you're in," Joe contradicted rather than directly address Wells.

"As opposed to what, Joe, yours? This might not have even happened if you hadn't been too scared to let me know when you first discovered that he was here!" Barry accused.

"As I recall, you yourself held similar concerns for Ms. West's safety as well as my own," Eobard soberly reminded his fuming reverse.

"That's exactly why you should be on my side!" Barry shouted at him. "I have to be here to stop him!"

"See? That-- right there. If you can't keep a cool head you shouldn't be anywhere close to this," Joe
"Are we prepared for a struggle should anything go wrong with Cisco's speed trap?" Dr. Wells clarified, in acknowledgement of the Flash's unwisely stated, yet valid concern.

"Eddie and his taskforce will be here to provide tactical support," Joe informed him. Barry shoved himself away from the hub and stomped off down the hall. The two remaining men exchanged a look.

Ten minutes later, Eobard made his way into the treadmill room to find that Barry was only just stepping down from a run. His skin was coated by a sheen of sweat and instead of reaching for his towel, the speedster crossed his arms over his chest and stood his ground. It appeared that he was still spoiling for a fight.

"You don't approve of our decision to go ahead with the trap without you," Eobard assessed making his way over to fetch a towel for Barry since he wasn't going to. "I understand why you're angry."

"No. I don't think you do," Barry contradicted, reflexively accepting the fresh towel that his traitorous friend pressed against his chest. He suspected that the action would've have usually been endearing under normal circumstances; Barry huffed. "I thought that you'd have my back."

"I am not here to serve as your moral support Barry. Joe had a point: your emotions are affecting your judgment."

"You were supposed to be my friend! It's not like this has never happened to you!" Barry rubbed too harshly with his towel in his excited state, leaving irritated pink patches on a previously unblemished expanse of skin. Eobard wasn't sure why such a minor detail was so relevant, but he found his eyes tracking the motion nonetheless. He resisted the rising urge to snatch the troublesome cloth from Barry's grasp and do it for him properly.

"I did, and people died due to my lack of objectivity," Dr. Wells placidly reminded his charge as well as himself. So what if Eobard was white knuckling his armrests? Barry didn't seem to notice. "I know that I am not the friend that you want me to be, but that does not mean that I am not looking out for you." The anger ebbed out of Barry's posture and he moved to sit on the edge of the dais, facing Dr. Wells' chair.

"You advise restraint," he recalled with a repentant smirk, setting the towel down. Eobard relaxed his grip.

"You do not need to learn that lesson the same way that I did," Dr. Wells replied, still inexplicably preoccupied with the red marks on Barry's chest and neck.

"My life wasn't exactly ruined by the explosion," Barry reflected. His voice had softened. He had an almost wistful look in his expressive eyes. "I like being the Flash. I like knowing you." He smiled wanly at the other man. "I wouldn't have that if I hadn't been struck by lightning. As strange as it sounds, I wouldn't change any of it if I could." He leaned forward, rubbing at his knees. "You know, Iris and I came to see your speech on the night of the particle accelerator launch. It was something that I'd been looking forward to for over a month." Barry gestured to the lab surrounding them. "This was my dream: to be a scientist, inventing future technologies, discovering the secrets of the universe-- until the night that my mom was murdered. After that, everything became about proving that what I saw was real. I spent my whole life searching out any hint of evidence that I could use to
free my dad, find my mother's killer and stop him. My dream became a hobby because it was more important to me try and make things right again. In my mind, I think I've been stuck back in that room, trying to fix it, over and over. Then I got these powers --I met you-- and things started to feel different. I thought that it finally might be enough."

"Enough?" Eobard echoed, studying the pensive young man seated beside him.

"For me to keep everyone safe, maybe even to catch him," Barry ran a hand over his face and through his hair, looking even younger for a brief instant. "Then there I was in the stadium and he wasn't anything like I expected. It felt-- I don't know what it was," the last bit was mumbled into a covering hand as if he were subconsciously trying to hide a shameful thought. "I could feel him."
There was a silent plea in Barry's eyes as if he were begging for Dr. Wells to make it all better again somehow. Eobard was surprised to realize how much it hurt him to see it.

"Is that why you let him go?" He wasn't quite lashing out, not on purpose, but he received the same unwanted effect anyway.

"I didn't!" Barry took a huge breath, rubbing at his eyes with his palms. "I don't know! Why did I let him go? That was my chance, right? I should have stopped him but I... I just..."

"What?" Eobard probed, keeping his voice as neutral as he could manage. It came out as a rasp.

"What am I? Am I like him now?" Barry blurted out. "He knew me, Harrison. It almost felt like we were connected and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do about it!"

"You may have a similar powerset in common, but I am certain that that is where any similarities between the two of you end."

"You can't know that," Barry fretted, eyes shining.

"I do. Because I know you." Eobard placed a hand over Barry’s, acting on a sudden urge to reach out and connect on some level with his reverse, even if he didn't fully understand it. They stared at each other for a moment, sharing something undefinable by the simplicity of words and thus lost in internalized translations. "We are going to stop him, Barry," Dr. Wells reassured, wanting to soothe the pain in some way if he could. "I promise you that." When his touch was neither accepted nor rebuffed, Eobard's hand moved to rest on the edge of the dais a few inches away from Barry's. He silently cursed his own foolishness; what had he expected?

Barry looked down at their hands, uncertain, and didn't answer. He wasn't ignoring the other man, either, merely contemplating the spell of charged silence that had fallen over them. Eobard found himself studying every detail of the man beside him, uncertain of what it was that he was searching for, or why he felt as if he were awaiting Barry's approval or condemnation. There was something vital lingering in the quiet between them. It was new. His fingers twitched slightly, itching to grasp, but he wasn't sure if it was safe to indulge them.

The door opened, shattering their shared trance. Eobard looked to the newcomer, retreating into Dr. Wells' chair and the pretense it offered. He therefore failed to notice Barry's hand had been chasing after his only to relent mere centimeters short of capturing a brush of fingers.

"Cisco," Dr. Wells acknowledged as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Eobard wasn't entirely sure whether he had simply imagined the novel connection.

"Okay, this is weird, but you have a visitor," Cisco reported, looking unsettled. It became apparent why when they reached the main lab. Dr. McGee was standing in the center of the open space,
waiting with her hands folded behind her back. She turned from her study of the open workspace to face them as they entered.

"Harrison," Dr. McGee acknowledged, making the name sound almost like a challenge.

"Tina," Dr. Wells returned with an equally adversarial politeness.

"You still sure that you don't want me to stick around?" Barry offered in an undertone.
Dr. Wells led his unexpected guest into his office, pausing to look out through the glass wall at Barry. The young Flash was watching them unabashedly. Dr. Wells indicated the archway behind the other man in a subtle cue to leave. Barry took a seat next to Cisco at the hub. This was not a good time to lose control. Dr. Wells turned back to Dr. McGee.

"I would say that this is a surprise but under the circumstances, it would have been foolish of me not to expect you. You're here to retain your sole control over the Tachyon Device, I assume... or are you more concerned with the dangers of using such flagrantly anachronistic tech?"

"I am here to ensure that my technology does not fall into the wrong hands," Dr. McGee responded sternly, not even bothering to deny the accusation. They both knew that the prototype was derived from their collaborative study of Eobard.

"Is that what you think this is? I am helping the CCPD to stop a killer, Tina. I cannot begin to imagine from where you have pulled this absurd idea that I could be acting as some kind of technological obstructionist," Dr. Wells rejected. "If this is the best that you can do to distract from your own moral corruption, you have already tanked your own stock."

"Oh, I see. Am I to accept that you have changed so drastically since we last spoke?"

"Years ago? Yes," Eobard interjected, uncertain of why he was beginning to feel quite so threatened. It wasn't even truly his reputation that she was impugning anyway.

"You can preach to your young underlings about forging a better future all you like, but I still remember what you asked of me that night," Tina continued passionately, not acknowledging his interjection. "I know the real you, and you should know me well enough to realize that I will not make the mistake of standing aside and allowing you to destroy a technological marvel out of fear -- yet again!"

Eobard narrowed his eyes at her. He seemed to have lost the plot somewhere. "I don't-- Wait. What are you talking about?"

Tina scoffed the most elegant scoff he'd ever witnessed. "You don't remember?" She clearly thought that he was putting her on.

"I never had any impact on your work back then. The only research project whose notes we shared at that time was..."

"Him," Tina finished for him, that bitter fire was back in her eyes once more. "You called me up at one in the morning, blathering on about failsafes, the threat of an inhuman psychology, and the Great Singularity. I should have known it wasn't really a thought experiment. I thought it was the stress getting to you!" She paused to consider him, then sat back in her stiff chair. "Perhaps it was. That doesn't excuse what you've done."

"This is about... Eobard?" Eobard only felt more confused by the revelation. "Why... He would never hurt me."
"Precisely! So where exactly is he then?" Tina challenged. "You told me that we were only planning a contingency. Two weeks later he was gone without a trace. I never imagined that you would actually go through with it!"

"He--" Eobard closed his eyes and restated. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tina. I never did him any damage. I wouldn't! He was my-- He was E." Eobard imitated his late roommate's subdued sentimentality. They hadn't been friends, but they had still meant something to each other; he was sure of it.

"You can see why I find it difficult to trust your word," Tina did not stand down, although she had halted her offensive stance for the moment in favor of trying to figure him out. Eobard had been knocked off kilter by the strange reframing of his roommate's character around the time of his death. He wasn't sure that Tina was lying. He'd thought he knew her tells. He thought that he'd known Harrison. Both of those things could not be true... He shook it off. No, Harrison had died for him. That, Eobard did know.

"Batty, Kowalsky, Stratton," he recited coldly, returning to callous equilibrium.

"Ah, yes. Your new boy already used that one to leverage me into this deal," Tina responded. Eobard sent a startled glance toward the young speedster who was still watching them from the main lab as his visitor continued "I have my best technicians working on tracing the hack that forced their fraudulent files onto our servers. Once they're done, I expect to be fully vindicated."

"You can see why I find it difficult to take your word for it," Dr. Wells countered, a slight smirk underscoring his skepticism. Eobard still felt strained. His grasp on his situation had been tentative as it was and now, doubt made his insides feel brittle. With the Director's "God Mode" failsafe threatening to reinstate itself, his dangerously waning powercells' inability to sustain him for much longer without a stable connection to the speedforce, and Iris West's unexpected meddling in his affairs, Eobard's continued existence depended on retaining control.

Barry watched Dr. Wells and Dr. McGee through the glass wall to his mentor's office. It was clear that they were arguing heatedly, probably about the Tachyon Device. Dr. Wells might not appear terribly upset to most people, but Barry could see the strain hiding at the corners of his eyes, his static expression and the way that he never stopped moving. The man was always centered, tranquil and watchful until he felt threatened. This was the most restless that Barry could remember seeing him. Whatever Tina had just said had only made it worse. He looked out through the glass again to check whether Barry had left yet. They both knew that he wasn't supposed to be there anymore, but from the subtle shift of the man's bony shoulders, Barry could see that neither of them truly wanted him to go. Finally the door opened and Dr. Wells glided down the ramp towards the hub.

"Mr. Allen, I was under the impression that you were on your way out," he remarked as he came to a stop beside the stubborn speedster.

"Can we talk in private?"

"Barry," Joe warned from out in the hallway behind him. "We already agreed. You can't be here."

"I don't like this," Barry told Dr. Wells, giving him a meaningful look. There was a second’s hesitation before the physicist's lips thinned and he looked away.
I'm sorry, Barry. You can't be here right now.

Iris was just leaving work when she saw a calico kitten seemingly fleeing the nearby alley in fright.

"Oh, hey!" She called sweetly making kissy noises and kneeling down to coax it closer with a daub of cheese from the pastry she was almost finished eating. "Come here. Yeah it's okay."

She scooped the little fur ball up and let it eat the last scrap of ham from her roll before checking for a collar.

"Where did you come from?" She cooed, scratching behind the purring kitten's ears. There was a thump from the alley. Iris jumped slightly and held the kitten to her chest, stepping closer to peek into the dark passage. There were two men standing on the other end, talking in muted voices. She pulled back, hiding behind the brick wall from the familiar man who was facing in her direction. The man in the top hat was the same guy that she'd seen harassing Dr. Wells earlier that week. The other was a few inches taller, older, with streaks of silver interspersing his sleek dark hair. She couldn't see any details of his face as he had his back to her and the collar of his dark, vinyl jacket pulled up as if to hide himself from incidental witnesses.

"It's a simple question. Will you accept my offer or are we done tolerating each other? I can meet your price," the older man said bluntly.

"You do not yet know my price."

"That's not a problem."

"If your promise is true, how can I resist?" Top hat replied, intrigued. "Who's the target?"

The older man let out a cold laugh. "Technically, there are two. Plant this for me tonight on your latest project. Details on where and how to place it on him are in the envelope."

Top hat considered the object he'd been handed. "To what end?"

"It's a contingency."

Both men appeared to be sizing each other up.

"Fifty thousand."

"Done."

"And the second?"

"Find this man. Bring him to me alive and unharmed."

"I'm sure that you are aware that is hardly my bailiwick," Top hat reminded his customer.

"You've been known to make exceptions. Are we going to have a problem?"

Top hat smiled thinly. "Perish the thought. Number two is a higher profile target, not that it should matter to me. You'll receive him within a week." With that he turned his back, walking toward the dead end as if no wall existed.
"You haven't named your final price yet," the older man called after him. Iris backed away knowing that she needed to make herself scarce before the stranger came her way.

"No, I have not."

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Down in STAR Lab’s cavernous basement level, a tactical team closed in on the yellow specter trapped in Cisco’s force-field with Detective West at the front of the pack.

"Joe, what're you doing?" Eddie called from behind them as his partner lowered his weapon and stepped closer to the flickering barrier.

"Getting some answers," Joe replied determinedly. "You were the one Barry saw that night fifteen years ago. Why were you there? What was your connection to Nora and Henry Allen?"

The yellow clad captive tilted his head inquisitively. "If you knew, would my answers make any difference?"

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Upstairs in the Cortex, Cisco let out an incredulous scoff and Eobard frowned at the computer screen, disapproving of his twin's improvisation.

"What kind of answer is that?" Caitlin wondered.

"It isn't one," Tina walked around from her stance on the other side of the hub to lean over Dr. Wells' shoulder and inspect the monitors with him. "Look at these readings." She said in a hushed voice, pointing to the sensor readout on the far right screen. "We've seen similar stats just once before this."

"Somewhat similar," Eobard corrected, taking cover behind Wells' compulsion toward specificity.

"Granted, it's not a definitive reading, but--"

"Sh-h!"

Tina gave him a warning look that reminded him of his days posing as an understudy, but she didn't swat him for it... yet.

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"Why did you murder Nora Allen?" Joe demanded.

"Your premise is flawed." The Man in Yellow reached up to test the barrier with his palm. It crackled and flickered and he lowered his arm, returning his attention to the Detective.

"Answer the question! Who are you, and why did you kill Nora Allen?!" Joe shouted, fed up with the eerie obstinace of his suspect.

"We must survive," Eobard's holographic double answered with a sobering lack of emotion. Gideon even scared Eobard sometimes (if rarely) and he was sure that in that instant she was sharing
"Harrison, do you think..." Tina was beginning to draw parallels in her head as she turned to look at him.

"Actually--" Eobard barely got a chance to reply before a power surge crackled through the electronics around them, systematically sweeping them into a world of darkness. "Cisco?" He demanded, concerned that the backup generator should be kicking in right away, yet remained idle.

"Uh..." the engineer responded, now a barely discernible, dark shape seated to his left. Eobard closed his eyes, relying on sound and the limited utility of his proximity sensors to clearly interpret his surroundings. A humanoid shape surged up out of the floor directly behind him and yanked him backwards out of Dr. Wells' chair. Tina turned to grab blindly for him and Cisco let out a startled yelp as Eobard disappeared into the floor. Then he landed on his back on the dirty ground beside a cement crash barrier on the other side of town.

"Explain yourself, Richard," Eobard demanded. He began to push himself upright but fell forward when his diminishing power levels fluctuated painfully without the power cell in his chair to augment it. "I was in the middle of a very delicate operation!"

Richard grabbed him by the shoulders and helped him reposition himself against the cement block. They were under an overpass within view of the bay and he heard cars rushing by overhead. Eobard silently extrapolated his exact coordinates and relayed them to-- His wireless communication with Gideon hit an unexpected firewall, seemingly put up by the other AI, herself.

"What is happening at my Lab?"

"You won't be able to grant that favor you owe me if I allow you to you die," the Shade answered cryptically. "I warned you that you had a rival in play and like a stubborn child you refused to listen."

"I need to get back! My people--" Eobard stopped himself, not wanting to set his team up as future pressure points for his ongoing negotiations with the immortal assassin. "I need that device for the sake of my survival."

The Shade smiled and pulled the Tachyon Device out of the shadows under his coat, as if the sizeable piece of tech had simply been tucked away in his pocket.

"Fine. Let's discuss terms," Eobard relented, unhappily. He would talk with the meta for as long as it took to stabilize his speedforce, temporarily, then he was heading straight back to the lab.

Joe, Eddie and the Tactical team looked around in confusion as the lights went out one by one, then the forcefield vanished too, taking the hologram inside along with it. Not that they could see the latter development, as all the power in the facility was out.

"What the hell is this?" Joe wondered aloud as the team switched on their flashlights. He touched his comms. "Guys, what's going on up there? Cisco? Wells? Please respond."

"He's gone!" A lieutenant yelled.
"Does anyone have eyes on the target?" Eddie inquired tensely as everyone went on high alert, searching for the threat.

"Is anyone up there reading me?" Joe tried his comms again, searching the darkness around them for any sign of the enemy.

"Joe?"

"Cisco, what the hell just happened?! We've lost all power down here. The target--"

"Someone just hit us from behind and took Wells!"

"What?" Joe exclaimed, turning to exchange a grim look with his partner.

Eddie leapt into action, barking out orders for their team to split into two groups and start sweeping the facility.

"What about the Flash?" Joe suggested quietly while the others were distracted.

"There's some kind of jamming signal affecting all our systems. I can barely keep this line open," Cisco replied in frustration.

"Then forget about the comms. Just focus on getting a call out." Joe commanded. "We're going to need backup."

"Got it." A few seconds after Cisco spoke, the comms fizzled out.

Eddie and Sergeant Collins had just finished prying the elevator doors open on D level. Collins leaned back into his corner of the shaft to catch his breath while Eddie peeked out through the opening. His light reflected off of the polished planes of a form-fitting yellow speed suit. His mind went blank and his pulse pounded in his ears while the beam of his flashlight traced up the electric yellow armor to the white-hot glowing eyes of his enemy. There was no red flicker or thrum of speedforce. The sturdy sole of a boot blocked out his vision, sending pain cascading through his skull, then Detective Thawne's unconscious body was tumbling down the dark shaft.

"Grab the line!" The Sergeant shouted, grabbing the cord that connected them with one hand as he pressed himself into his corner. There was a cacophony of shouts and gunfire.

The speedster had already turned his back on them, striding off towards the Cortex, while bullets bounced off his flexible metallic armor. A streak of golden speedforce surged through the hall, knocking him into the wall hard enough to put a crack in the cement, then he plunged down the shaft. The Flash re-appeared through the wedged open doors with Eddie slung over his shoulders and deposited him on firm ground. The Flash paused to observe the other speedster walking swiftly away, before he pressed his lips together in a thin line and repeated the process with each of the seven other officers.

"What happened?" Barry asked the Sergeant in a vibrating voice, just seeing peripherally the red light as it disappeared around a corner at the end of the hall. It wasn't flickering as it should; this felt completely wrong. In fact, unlike the almost intoxicating draw that he had experienced from the Man in Yellow's speedforce earlier, he now felt a subtle dissonance jarring his every nerve as if he could feel his very cells being repelled by the other meta's presence.
"He's another one like you! Somehow, he knocked out the power. No other known casualties. He took one hostage that we know of, but our comms are down."

"Got it." Barry sped away without much thought towards a proper reply, nor any semblance of a plan for that matter. He was too caught up in a mixture of fear of facing down the monster again and the angry thought that this all could have been avoided if he'd simply stayed.

Eobard shuddered in relief as his connection to Gideon's mainframe came back online. His eyes flashed bright red and he glared up at the Shade. A feed from a lone internal camera at STAR Labs showed him live footage of a slender, well-muscled pretender in the wrong shade of yellow, attempting to break into his Time Vault. Luckily, so far, the power loss was working in their favor, as without power to the scanner, even the Director himself would not be able to unseal it.

"You are feeling revitalized, I see," Richard observed.

Through the jury-rigged camera, Eobard saw the Flash engage his false reverse. Eobard wondered self-consciously whether Barry would judge him for the imposter's actions, then banished the silly thought. It hardly mattered; either way Barry considered him to be the enemy. The intruder was hesitant to use the speedforce--if he possessed any--and threw a few quick but heavy punches that the Flash easily dodged. Barry's counterstrike did little to faze his opponent and if the way he shook out his fist was any indication, it did him more harm than good. The Yellow Clad intruder straightened his arm, releasing a long, built-in blade, which he used to slash across Barry's chest, drawing a bolt of speedforce out of his victim as it went. Barry fell to his knees in pain. He hastily threw his hands up to catch the blade just short of stabbing his throat, willfully ignoring the golden energy being leeched out of him on contact. Blood began to drip down from his palms until, with a wordless shout, Barry shoved himself free and sped out of reach. The imposter watched the Flash haul himself upright and Eobard noted with annoyance that he'd left his back exposed. There was a bright burst of artificial red light from the imposter's suit that dazzled the camera and Eobard lost the visual feed.

He let out a deep, mechanical roar, "Who is he?" The Reverse Flash dragged himself to his feet using the crash barrier as leverage and grabbed his associate by the lapels.

"I haven't the slightest idea, as yet," the Shade responded, sparing a fleeting glance at the android's fists. "With respect to your stated wishes, I shan't interfere in your conflict," he added, looking at something down the road at Eobard's back. Eobard followed his line of sight, then hastily zipped up his jacket to hide the tachyon device, letting his speedforce go dormant once more. He turned back around to threaten the Shade, only to find that he was already gone. It would only have served to make him feel slightly better anyway. The imposter was suddenly beside him. Eobard jammed an elbow into his chest hard enough to dent his thin, but strong armor. The dent reformed into perfection before his eyes: metamaterials.

"You're from the future," Eobard discerned. He threw a punch; the imposter caught it, but was forced to take a sliding step back. Eobard grinned, "Flesh and blood, are we? Good to know!"

Rather than reply, the other time-traveler hit him with an uppercut that might as well have been a light tap. Eobard's grin turned more patronizing. The imposter grabbed him by the throat. Eobard clicked his tongue in mocking reproach and lifted a vibrating hand. He was about to phase it through his attacker's gut when a familiar voice cried out to them.

"Hey!" The Flash was standing a few meters away, luckily unable to see Eobard's
incriminating hand through his captor's torso. The android closed his eyes and went limp, playing possum. The other Man in Yellow looked to the side, then threw Eobard over his shoulder to bounce off of a passing car. The Flash streaked past in pursuit. Eobard took advantage of the scant 2.5 minutes that he was left unobserved to tuck the Tachyon Device away in his ring, unaware of the proverbial timebomb ticking away inside of it. Barry skidded to a stop just a few feet away from him.

"Are you okay?" He called out, presumably to the driver that had pulled over to watch after Eobard had struck the side of his vehicle. Then Barry's masked face was invading Eobard's field of vision.

"Ow..." Eobard acknowledged.

"Harrison! Oh my God! Where are you hurt? How bad is it?" Barry interrogated in a rush.

"I think I'm okay. Ah," Eobard minimized, favoring his sore chest. "I believe I've bruised my ribs, but I'm fine otherwise. How did you get here so soon? That was perfect timing." He pushed himself up into a seated position with Barry's unnecessary assistance. "The power went out right after we'd caught the Man in Yellow. I was grabbed from behind. I think I heard Cisco? I don't know if he was attacked too, or..." Dr. Wells reported, prodding at a shallow cut on his upper arm experimentally. Barry's expression turned stony.

"Come on, I'll drop you off at the hospital on--"

"You will do no such thing! You can leave me with my Doctor or no Doctor!" Dr. Wells snapped, "Especially not now that you have bled all over me!" He reasoned, poking at the flesh around the Flash's sizeable chest wound with a theatrical flourish of his finger. Barry tried to stare him down, failed, and sped over to deposit him in Caitlin's lab.

"How bad is it?" Caitlin questioned, rushing past the superhero to take stock of her patient.

"Fine," Dr. Wells groused. "Just give me some narcotics."

"He was thrown into oncoming traffic," Barry superseded, masking his voice from Tina's recognition.

Caitlin gave her boss an unimpressed look and shined her penlight into his eyes to check for a concussion.

"I see some things haven't changed," Dr. McGee remarked drily from where she was bent over the depleted hub holding a flashlight for Cisco.

Dr. Wells harrumphed.

"I see no signs of severe trauma," Caitlin decided. "You're very lucky."

Barry took that as his cue to step down from the doorway to her lab and make his way towards the others. A hum reverberated through their surroundings and the dim glow of the emergency lights came on.

"Ha! I got the backup generator up and running!" Cisco celebrated. Eddie entered behind him and pointed his gun at the Flash.

"Don't move!"

Barry sped away to the basement. Stopping short, he scowled bitterly at the empty pedestal on
the other side of the speed trap.

The false speedster stepped into the dark, secluded back alley, popping the joints in his stiff neck. Nearing the hidden satchel that held his civilian clothes, he flexed the muscles in his back and the bright acid yellow was chased out of his dark armor by a crackling blue-white current. He pressed the hidden trigger at the base of his throat prompting his helmet to break apart into its various interlocking pieces and fold away into his collar. He unzipped the satchel, pulled his clothes out then hastily dropped them in disgust.

"What the F--" he broke off in an aggravated huff, picking up one of the sticky wads of puffed corn batter to inspect it more closely. "Did someone suck on a bunch of cheetos and... Eugh!" He looked around, thinking over his disgusting find. "I'm going to kill that fucking animal." He determined under his breath, wiping away the bits of stickiness as best he could before he changed into his second disguise of the night.

It was late, one hour before midnight on Christmas when the Flash sped back into STAR Labs. Barry smiled to himself, stopping in the hall a little way short of the Cortex to pull a flat rectangular parcel out of his friction-proof bag. It was wrapped in holographic wrapping paper and silk ribbon in Dr. Wells' favorite colors -- black and marigold -- and had a roll of gold-rimmed parchment tucked under the bow. It was probably going to annoy the reclusive physicist, but Barry wanted to give his friend something nice for Christmas.

Eobard was lying in a med bed that he didn't need in the dark and lonely expanse of the unpopulated lab. That was not to say that he wasn't in pain. Contrary to popular belief even among many technicians he knew in his own time, he --like the six others of his kind-- could feel both physical pain and pleasure. Eobard had decided against even attempting to bypass the sensory function. The thought being that as the humans around him knew that "Dr. Wells" was hurt, he'd better put on a convincing performance. He almost felt that he might deserve the pain.

Eobard cast the irrelevant thought aside as he finally began to haul himself out of bed. He hadn't gotten farther than to sit up and peel the blankets off before a red and gold blur sped into the room sending papers flying.

"Oh good, you're not asleep," Barry noted with an eager smile, sauntering over to join him without missing a beat. He was hiding something behind his back.

"I thought that your family was having a Christmas party tonight," Eobard responded, trying to see what he was hiding.

"Well... We are but, um, I left," Barry confirmed. He set the colorfully wrapped gift down on the bed with a hopeful smile. Eobard warily surveyed the offering, then returned his attention to Barry.

"You left?"

"It's too awkward now." Barry rubbed at the back of his neck, looking profoundly uncomfortable, then attempted to change the subject. "Don't you want to open your present?"

"This is about Iris, isn't it?" Eobard assessed, while he lifted his legs one at a time to dangle
over the edge of his bed and balanced himself in that precarious position to reach out and pull his wheelchair closer.

“I don’t see her around here. Do you?” Barry dismissed lightly. It was almost convincing. "Hey, wait. Didn’t Caitlin tell you not to get out of bed for a while?"

“I don’t see her around here, do you?” Dr. Wells echoed, illustrating the very reason why his Doctor had so sternly and excessively repeated that instruction before she left. Becoming impatient, he leaned forward and tugged the armrest a bit overzealously, nearly falling from his perch, but Barry sped forward to catch him under the arms.

“Noope, but I am here and I’d rather not see you get hurt again,” he corrected, nudging the chair back into its former placement beside the heart monitor with his leg.

“You could move my chair closer,” Dr. Wells protested stubbornly.

Barry angled his head and pinned his idol with a heart-melting look. “You wouldn’t be this careless if our places were reversed right now.”

That was not going to work. Eobard didn’t even have a heart, damn it! “That would be a very different situation.”

Barry absorbed the words, quietly relieved that the stubborn patient was finally allowing himself to be maneuvered back into bed. Barry's lips quirked upward in an indulgent smile at the way that Wells was passive-aggressively leaning into his arms. He had turned himself into the world's most pliable dead weight. “Why would it be different?”

“I am not like you, Mr. Allen. Your well-being is my responsibility,” the dead-weight explained as he was laid back onto the mattress. They both paused for a moment, Barry still leaning over him. Their eyes met. The next words broke the spell. "You're the Flash. One could argue that in comparison to yours, my survival is inconsequential to the greater good.”

Barry frowned through his retreat, seeming almost wounded. "It isn't inconsequential to me!” he protested with a hint of bite to his tone. "Did you ever stop to consider what could happen to you?" Barry pushed off of Dr. Wells' bedside to pace away in a huff. He stopped and turned back to lament, "Who am I kidding, of course you didn’t!"

“Why do you care so much?” Eobard asked, feeling far too jealous of Harrison Wells in that moment. He wanted to ask, "Why does he matter so much when I never did?" but he couldn't.

“Because you’re my friend and you’re hurt,” Barry responded, his eyes pleading for Dr. Wells to understand. "What if he'd killed you? What am I supposed to do without you?"

Eobard picked up his present, carefully untying the ribbon while he explained. "In the eventuality of my death, you will continue to use STAR Labs as a base of operations. I have made arrangements to ensure that Caitlin and Cisco will both retain the means to continue assisting you here in my absence."

Barry breathed out a brief, humorless laugh, shaking his head in amazement at his latest epiphany, "You really don't get it!"

“Why are you here?” Dr. Wells asked, pausing his delicate unwrapping process to regard his ‘friend’ with an annoyed squint. Barry picked at a loose string on the end of Dr. Wells' blanket and leaned against the foot of the bed.
“I thought we already covered that.” He sounded sullen. Was his misadventure with Iris still bothering him that much?

“You told me that you weren’t interested in the party. I can imagine plenty more suitable places for a young man like you to spend his Christmas night.”

“I’d rather be here with you.” Barry looked him straight in the eyes as he spoke. The stubborn determination in his expression spoke of some deeper message underlying his words that Eobard wasn’t quite receiving.

“You don’t have to take care of me, Barry,” he reassured the young speedster. “The Man in Yellow wasn’t here for me.”

“I know he wasn’t,” Barry stated bitterly. He was disappointed, averting his eyes, shoulders drooping.

“He wanted the Tachyon Device. He got it,” Dr. Wells continued to reason with him in the low, raspy voice that he often used to calm Barry’s nerves. “There’s no reason for him to come back now.”

“You wouldn’t have even thought of bringing that thing here in the first place if you didn’t think it might help me catch my mother’s killer,” Barry reproached, standing to fidget and pace again.

“You’re right, Barry. I did, because we made an agreement to work together as a team. You are not responsible for what happened after I sent you away,” Eobard reasoned, slowly peeling off another piece of tape so that it didn’t damage the shiny pattern underneath. Barry smiled affectionately, watching him.

“You know that’s just wrapping paper, right?”

“It’s still perfectly good paper; there is no need to waste it,” Eobard disagreed, peeling away the last piece of tape, “I’m sure I’ll be able to find another use for it.”

“Like what?” Barry queried, sounding amused.

"Something involving paper, I imagine," Eobard replied, unconcernedly. He neatly folded the wrapping and set it aside, making sure not to add any new tears or creases. His time with Frost in the near future had only reinforced his conservational subroutines. "I’ll know when I need it.” Barry sat down on the foot of the bed, toying with the ribbon while he watched.

“I think the painkillers might be screwing with your head.”

Eobard cast his eyes over Barry’s smiling face once before silently opening the black cardboard box in his lap. His lingering irritation evaporated when he pulled out the soft, black cashmere sweater inside. He held it up to look at it. It was a little looser than Wells’ perfect fit, but it looked exceedingly warm and comfortable. It was exactly the style that Eobard preferred, a tad more stylish than Dr. Wells’ usual wardrobe, but still simple and functional. Eobard couldn’t help but smile. He loved it.

“Thank you, Mr. Allen. I’m sorry that I don’t have anything to give you.”

"That's okay. How about a game of chess?"

“That sounds good,” Eobard remarked with an answering smirk. “Go get the board from
Barry grinned, then trailed two overlapping paths of amber lightning behind him in his rush to fetch the board and set it up. Dr. Wells arched his brows at his over-enthusiastic companion.

"You're playing white this time," Barry informed him, not noticing that he was being studied. He rarely did. "That means you go first."

"I know." Eobard simply continued to watch Barry until he looked up at him.

"...What?" Barry questioned with a self-conscious smile.

Eobard allowed his lips to quirk upward in his usual secretive smirk. "Nothing." He shifted his pawn forward while Barry was still preoccupied. "You should know that morphine is hardly going to save you, Mr. Allen."

Barry laughed. "Oh. Very ominous, Dr. Wells," he playfully remarked.

Eobard chuckled, nudging a pawn forward. "Your move, Flash."

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays, guys! I thought I'd have a little hint of Christmas episode-ness at the end of this, just because. The title for this chapter and the previous one as well is a line from the song "O, Superman" by Laurie Anderson, which really suited E too much for me not to reference.

Also, if any of you are interested in a little holiday writing request from me, there was this scene that I wrote while sick and feverish, about a pregnant Trans Eobard and I have absolutely no time to spare on developing the idea into a story...shame. Basically the idea was that Barry got him pregnant during Flashpoint and he was actually only working with Damien Dark and Malcom Merlin as a way to ensure safety for their baby. If anyone wants to take that and run with it I would consider it an awesome extra Holiday gift; or if you just want a look at the scene, please let me know. Anyway, on that bizarre note. I'm going to just stop talking now...
Eobard watched the credits begin to roll on the dark screen with a thoughtful smile on his lips. It was Cisco’s turn to host Movie Night and he had insisted that they absolutely had to watch Blade Runner. A throwaway comment from Barry that morning had resurrected the “traumatic” memory of discovering that Dr. Wells had never seen it. Both of them had agreed that this was a tragedy that had to be rectified ASAP, although the speedster was probably only playing along in order to console his geekier friend. Cisco intermittently remarked to Dr. Wells about film trivia while they watched, as usual and Eobard did his best to play along. This time it took him a hint more processing power to hide his emotional responses to events in the story that felt too familiar for comfort.

"So, if memory makes us who we are, and defines us as human... it is the concept of an inhuman experience, compared and treated as equally valid to human experience, which makes AI something to be quashed? Or is it simply to be accepted that slavery is justified so long as life forms human beings have created to be separate from themselves are those being oppressed?" Eobard posed the question.

"Meh..." Cisco shrugged the carefully articulated inquiry off. "It's just a metaphor for humans' effect on humans. All sci-fi does that. You know, like the different races in Star Trek and how they're all exaggerations of the different aspects of human civilization. Real AI is probably destined to be either totally mundanely inhuman, or--more likely-- inhumanly terrifying. We'd be better off just not going there."

The Flash, in contrast, sat in total silence between them, seeming uncharacteristically pensive.

"That is why you program in Terminal Obsolescence," Eobard aired his mostly forgiven grudge towards the young engineer under the guise of film trivia.

"You mean like the Nexus Sixes? The whole plot depends on how badly that would work. I mean, think about it. Why would we bother manufacturing robotic slaves that could desire to be anything more than slaves? They're just machines, Man."

"So, why did you make me watch this?" Eobard asked, trying to maintain the falsehood of Dr. Wells' teasing smirk.

"Dude! It's a classic!"

“Cisco, I looked at your watchlist. You marked down three AI movies in a row. Next week is Terminator, then Terminator 2, which was a strange choice after the Man in Yellow incident…”

“Are you kidding me? If anything, the Man in Yellow warrants a marathon of all the good Robot
movies!” Cisco defended, earning a skeptical look from his conversational partner. “We need to be ready, Dude.”

“Ready for what? They're just machines,” Eobard shot back with a far less Wells-like leer.

“Wow. Okay! Someone has clearly never seen Terminator,” Cisco deflected his mentor’s surprisingly adamant retort with humor. "Look, I know that they're just movies but at the same time... Don’t you think it's worth considering the downside here? I mean, let's say for the sake of argument that the Man in Yellow actually is some kind of killbot,” Cisco elaborated. Eobard turned away, locking his rebellious gaze onto the menu screen across from him. "Regardless of why, he is a threat to us."

“You can't pause killbots, remember? We've already debated that point,” Barry reminded the young inventor, taking up the slack for their sullen company. Eobard couldn’t help but wonder what other strange discussions they got caught up in when no one else was around to witness.

“Granted,” Cisco conceded, glad of the reprieve, “But the question remains: what kind of a robot is he?”

“I don’t know. Replicants aren’t a thing. It probably doesn’t matter--” Barry saw the stubborn look on Cisco’s face and quickly recalculated. “I guess, just a robot maybe, or a manbot?”

“Android,” Eobard’s abrupt correction drew both the other men’s curious interest, but he still refused to look at them. “Or a cyborg, perhaps... The word ‘robot’ merely refers to a machine that does the work of a man. A machine that exhibits a likeness to Man would be an android,” he explained after a pregnant pause, “It seemed to be a relevant distinction in the current context.”

Barry cast a concerned gaze over his face and rested a hand on his forearm. Eobard neither reacted nor tried to pull away, thankful for at least the illusion of sympathy.

“I guess it is,” the young Flash accepted "So, if he's an android... Why is he here?” He frowned. “And why does he hate me?”

“We’re not ready to discuss whether or not androids are capable of hatred,” Cisco rejected. Then he perked up, exclaiming with a snap of his fingers. “Easy. You're John Connor!”

“So, your theory is that in the future I’m going to lead humanity in an effort to defeat an army of androids?” Barry clarified, with no attempt to mask how ridiculous he found the very idea. The Android pulled his arm out from under Barry's touch, suddenly uncomfortable with their contact.

“Or cyborgs; we have not yet determined his level of mechanization,” Cisco added, holding up a finger with a lightheartedness that implied he was maybe enjoying this a bit too much to be taking the subject seriously.

Eobard suddenly didn’t want to be there anymore. He hated being reminded that even to his humans he was only a lifeless object. He remembered the old labels that they all used on him, even his friends. Even the Flash. Machine, dummy, toy, dollie, cipher, weapon, defective elec--

“That doesn't sound like me,” Barry disagreed, unknowingly interrupting his friend’s breakdown before it could get going.

“Come on. You're a superhero! John Connor is --well, a blatant rehashing of the whole Messiah trope- but he’s also kind of a superhero.” Cisco looked from Barry to Dr. Wells in search of support.

“It’s not really that heroic when all I have to do is say a single word and pause them,” Barry pointed
“Quite an advantageous superpower,” Eobard concurred, subtly hugging himself. “How could you possibly lose?”

“That’s kind of the problem,” Barry replied, looking like a kicked puppy.

“Oh?” Eobard prompted, his piercing stare suddenly pinning the young speedster in place.

“Well, if all I have to do is say a single word and he’s just stuck in whatever position he happened to be caught in, how is that not a superpower?” Barry elaborated, once again getting the odd sensation that he was being tested. "No matter what he wants to do against me, I can take control of him-- or at least make him unable to move.”

“Sounds like what you've got there is one seriously messed up game of freeze tag,” Cisco observed, finally looking as if he was truly considering the issue. Eobard didn't know what to think, as much as he wanted to encourage the Flash's unexpected new perspective there was still the very real threat of his imposter to consider. So, as always, he retreated behind pretenses.

“Regardless. In our case, the point is moot,” Dr. Wells pointed out, backing his wheelchair away from where he had parked it alongside Barry's end of the couch. “Whether he is an android, a cyborg, or none of the above, we are working with the intent to capture the Reverse Flash and gain answers regarding Nora Allen's death. That is not at all the same as neutralizing an inhuman threat through killing, or... time travel.”

“What if he did it?” Barry said, still looking downcast. “I want to find justice for my mother’s murder, but... I don’t know.” He rubbed at his eyes.

“You will find a way to catch him, Barry. Of that, I am certain,” Dr. Wells reassured him.

“That’s not... I mean -- is that justice? If we find him, we get him to admit that he did it; that's good. It won't be the end, though, because if he's a machine, that means that someone made him. A human being programmed him to be whatever he is… So, can I really hold him responsible? Is it the machine’s fault? Or will I have to track down some creator who we know nothing about? Either way it seems like way too much went into killing just one suburban housewife. Why?”

Eobard watched him for a long moment, at least long by his standards, or possibly Barry's. This was dangerous territory. It was also important, so he ran through a multitude of different iterations of responses and digressions before settling on the one that suited them both.

“That is irrelevant,” he stated, causing Barry’s startled attention to center solely on him. For the first time in a long time, Eobard Thawne realized that not merely sharing an honest truth, but his truth was the best option. “The Man in Yellow is dangerous. He represents a threat to your continued well-being. Life is not a sci-fi film, Mr. Allen. There are no clear cut battle lines, or perfect resolutions. There is only each one of us, alone, doing the best that we can and the next time that you face him, there will be no plot device that is going to save you. Wondering why does not eliminate a threat. You press whatever advantage you have -- you win. Only after you have earned the luxury to do so can you ask him why. That is how you survive. Until that moment, the rest is merely a distraction.”

There was a drawn-out silence while his colleagues processed the callous outlook shared by their friend and mentor. Dr. Wells’ phone buzzed and he checked the ID. It was Gideon.

“Excuse me,” Dr. Wells muttered, clearing his throat self-consciously before heading out into the shadowed hallway to see why the other AI had seen fit to contact him in such an unusual way.
There was another beat of silence.

“So, no sign of trauma from being tossed around by the Evil Killer Android,” Cisco remarked, watching their friend retreat into the darkness. Barry winced in agreement with the awkward sarcasm.

“Maybe we should try to avoid that subject from now on.”

“Yeah.” Cisco nodded and reached for his empty beer. “I think I’m gonna need another one of these. You good?”

Barry nodded and retracted his legs from the coffee table to allow Cisco past, still staring pensively at Dr. Wells’ dark silhouette taking his phone call in the hallway. He should have been there that night. It felt to Barry as though he was always too slow, or too late when it came to protecting the people who mattered most. Now he was beginning to wonder if he’d know the right thing to do when the next chance to face the enemy presented itself. He supposed that his friend’s dark opinion was half right; if it came down to it, Barry would do whatever he had to. He knew that he would press the unfair advantage if it meant that next time he could keep the people he cared about safe.

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Iris paused for a moment to look from the old photograph that she had printed out to the cozy Victorian style house standing before her. The photo was the only visual evidence that she'd found so far of E's existence. It was a picture of Harrison Wells taken in 2001 by one of his fellow faculty members before a lecture he'd given on String Theory. Dr. Wells was holding out the hand not occupied with his lit cigarette in an attempt to block the camera. Beyond him, a good portion of the weathered yellow house and its damaged porch could still be seen... along with a younger, blond man leaning against a pillar of the porch. The mystery man wore a fitted black leather jacket and black skinny jeans that might be less incongruous on a grad student in the current year and his right hand was being dragged over his face, casually preventing any chance of identification.

Iris eyed the place in person, noting the almost invisible scars that marked its history, the broken middle step was now replaced, the railing repaired with newer wood. As she made her way up onto the porch, the crack E's free hand had been caught absently picking at, in the moment the photograph was taken, was still visible on the pillar when Iris looked for it, even though it had been filled and painted over. She traced it with her fingertips as she passed, feeling more and more confident in her choice to come to this place.

The realtor opened the door right as Iris reached it, giving her a wide, practiced smile.

"Hello, are you here for the open house?"

"Yes, thank you," Iris accepted the booklet the older woman offered her as she stepped inside. There were a couple of other people already making their way through the house, but it was easy enough to avoid them. The fireplace was crackling and lively in the small living room on the right, crammed with built-in shelves that Iris could easily imagine were once filled, end to end, with scientific journals and texts. On the other side of the entryway was a modest dining room, separated from the cramped-but-homey kitchen beyond by a sunshine-yellow counter. There was an Art Deco, yellow refrigerator nestled in the left-hand corner to match it, along with the cabinets that hovered just under the ceiling, now far out of Dr. Wells’ reach. Iris walked past to where the staircase bisected the back end of the house. There was a bedroom to the left of the stairs and beyond it a bathroom. There was nothing especially exceptional about the place until she ascended the stairs. The upper level was big enough to use as a bedroom or study and there was a door to a tiny half-bathroom to the left of the
There was a great, almost wall-encompassing window that greeted her at the top of the stairs, which Iris doubted was a part of the original architecture. Its stained glass was colored to match the small circular one on the other end of the attic, casting pastel light over the hardwood floor. Iris noticed that she could see the entire backyard through the tinted rose and amber glass, as well as half of each of the neighboring yards, while the tinted panes would prevent her being seen in turn. It reminded her of a covert station where a lookout might be posted. She wasn’t sure whether it was only her imagination spinning fantastic tales or a reasonable impression.

She strode around the painted yellow railing to the other end of the attic and tried to imagine the bedroom it had once been. Maybe a twin bed had been pressed against this wall under the rounded keyhole window? The slanted roof would diminish the amount of room for shelves and other furniture. No desk, perhaps one short, broad chest of drawers on the left, she thought, seeing the light scuff marks on the floor and guessing. They could have just as easily been left by a more recent occupant.

Iris turned back towards the stairs, drawn out of her thoughts by the sound of company ascending. A short bespectacled man in a grey wool cardigan and a pressed white button-down turned on the landing to face her. He appeared to be irritated by her unexpected presence but was containing it with practiced detachment.

"Oh, hi. I didn't know anyone was up here," he acknowledged in a bored tone.

Iris gave him a tight, closed-lipped smile. "Yep. Enjoying the open house?"

"Not really," the man drawled, only half paying attention. His gaze was darting around the space, his head tilted as if listening to something while she paced. There was the slightest flinch as Iris stepped on an aged floorboard on the far left of the once-bedroom. He was reacting to something she hadn't known to listen for. There was something in Iris' gut telling her not to trust this man. He wasn't here for the tour. She was willing to bet money that he'd come here to find something valuable, perhaps related to her own mystery or not... She was going to get there first.

"You planning to stay up here forever, Miss..?" the man nudged, his hazel eyes a little too intent.

Iris gave him a fake giggle. "Oh, don't mind me. I'm just trying to get a feel for the place."

He ran his gaze over her, deemed her uninteresting and began halfheartedly to inspect their surroundings, pretending to consider the merits of the space. Iris carefully retraced her last few steps until she landed on the board that made the guy twitch. He stole a sneaky glance back over his shoulder at her from where he'd been taking in the view through the massive back window.

Iris pulled out her phone, pretending to become enthralled with a text conversation, giving subtle indications that she wasn't going anywhere soon.

"Do you have to do that here?"

"Hmm? Oh! No really, don't mind me. I have this friend who is a ridiculously huge fan of Harrison Wells." Iris heard the man let out an aggravated huff. "You know he used to live here back in, like, the nineties or something-"

"Early 2000's," he corrected in a disdainful reflex. "I know. So what?"

"So, my friend would absolutely love this place," Iris said, pretending to be oblivious of the man's declining patience. She held her phone up and took a picture of the window the man was standing in
"Hey!" He reproached.

"Those windows are so gorgeous!" Iris explained away, saving the man's glaring face to her phone.

"For your information, Harrison Wells is hardly the great man he's fooled everyone into believing he is."

"How would you know?"

"I used to work for him. Harrison Wells is a charlatan hiding behind a humanizing mask."

"He saved my best friend's life," Iris argued, almost dropping her vapid airhead act.

"That doesn't change what he is," the man sneered, casting a disdainful gaze over her one more time.

"The man I knew could hardly be classed as human."

"You would know all about class, wouldn't you?"

"Mr. Rathaway," a vaguely familiar male voice called from downstairs. "Might I have a word with you?" An English-accented voice. This was getting weird. Mr. Rathaway hesitated, sizing her up.

"Mr--"

"Yes, I heard you! Stop calling me that. I told you..." Rathaway's grumbling faded out as he made his way downstairs to tell off the assassin who'd summoned him.

Iris waited for a few seconds to be sure that she'd be unobserved, then looked down at the floorboard under her foot. It looked worn around the edges and when she prodded it with her heel, it shifted. Iris hastily fell to her knees to pry the hidden cubbyhole open. There was a slender metal box inside, covered in dust. She lifted it out and looked it over. It was secured with a small padlock. She shoved the box into her purse and hastily replaced the board just as Rathaway began ascending the stairs for the second time. Iris hit the speed dial on her phone as she descended past him, making a beeline for the exit while trying not to look suspicious.

As soon as she got home Iris went to the storage space in the hall and pulled out Eddie's old unused toolbox, retrieved a heavy wrench and used it to break the lock. Inside was an odd assortment of items. An old faded photograph of a flannel-clad Dr. Wells with E's reflection in the mirror behind his dissenting subject, once again masked from identification by the camera and its flash, a key ring with two keys on it, and a cassette tape recording of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons." A circular, abstract, iridescent sticker adorned the middle of side A. Iris was tempted to pick at it, but she resisted, turning instead to send a paranoid look out her window. She was getting the distinct feeling that she was being watched. She caught a flicker of red in the corner of her vision, but when she looked again, whatever it was, was gone. Iris drew the curtains and returned her new evidence to its container, trying to figure out where was the best place to hide it.

Barry frowned at the screen in front of him, paused the recording and blew out a breath. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes and restarted the security footage from the beginning of the Man in Yellow’s first appearance. He watched it through for what felt like the hundredth time and shifted over to the next feed. Something wasn't right. He'd known that since the night of the attack, but there was more to it. Barry could feel the answer staring him in the face, but for some reason, he still couldn't figure out
what exactly was wrong. There was a knock from the doorway to his lab.

"Hi there, anybody home?" Iris' voice called.

"Hey," Barry replied distractedly, rewinding the second recording and watching the mysterious speedster kick his ass all over again. Iris walked over to join him.

"The recordings from the speedster attack?" Iris inquired, watching the Flash catch his enemy's strangely draining weapon between his hands. Barry grunted his acknowledgement, somewhat frustrated, and restarted the first clip yet again. They didn't quite fit together, but he wasn't sure...

"Okay, well, I don't want to distract you from your CSI stuff. I was just wondering if you still had that old Walkman that Dad gave you," Iris requested.

"It's in my bedroom, the third desk drawer down on the right," Barry informed her, frowning deeply to himself as he switched to the second feed. "Why d'you need it?"

"I just found a few old cassette tapes and I wanted to check them out." Iris' brow crinkled skeptically. "Whoa, where did that blade come from?" She remarked. Barry stopped short, then turned to stare at her, realizing the truth uncovered by her casual aside. She shook her head.

"Sorry, I am going to leave you to your work now. Thanks for the help," Iris said with a smile, not seeming to notice his epiphany, and left.

It was suddenly obvious to Barry: the suits didn't match, or the Man in Yellow's suit had changed somehow. The two designs were close enough that it hadn't occurred to him while fighting for his life in the near total darkness of the corridor. Now that he thought about it though, the Man in Yellow had borne no built-in weaponry when they'd fought in the football stadium. His suit had not been armored, but a heavier duty version of the leather-like polymesh that the Flash suit was made of. Had he changed for the occasion? Why the new blade? Barry went back to the first recording, hearing the other speedster's haunting reply to Joe's question with a new clarity.

"We must survive."

He blanched at another troubling thought: were there more? The feeling that Barry had gotten from the intruder's speed-force had been different. Was that because it was yet another evil speedster? Another killing machine? He sincerely hoped that wasn't the case.

Iris tried to start her car for a third time. The engine struggled until she gave up and slumped back in her seat for a moment. She could go back upstairs and wait with Barry for whatever bus or taxi he was planning on taking home, but judging by his distracted behavior earlier that would likely take a while. Iris grabbed her purse and got out of the car, considering calling-- Her phone had died. She dropped the device back into her bag in disappointment, then looked up. There was a vaguely familiar man in a tailored, pinstripe suit striding towards her. Iris turned to head back to the police station. Too late; he had moved between her and that sanctuary. Another figure, this one in an emerald green hoodie with his hands jammed suspiciously into the front pockets, closed in on her from the left. She should scream. Her throat wouldn't cooperate. Instinctively she fled. Where? Towards people. Towards crowds, public places. Iris darted rather foolishly into a dark alley that ended across the street from the public library where she and Barry used to study.

Her pursuers followed her right in and-- something swooped across the backlit mouth of the alley, taking her suited stalker with it. Iris gasped in surprise. She and the hooded one stared at the empty
space for a second. Then they turned back toward each other. Iris ran, seemingly at the same second that her remaining pursuer broke into a sprint himself. Iris made it out of the alley, but had to slide to a halt due to traffic. Green hoodie grabbed her arm. She struck him hard with her purse, first in the head, then, after he bent down to protect himself, she struck him a few more times on his back and arms.

"Ow! Jesus! Quit hitting--" he shuffled back. The light glinted off the metallic covering over his hand. "That's it!" A shrieking pulse emitted from his metal glove, blowing past Iris as a warning shot that shattered the glass of the parked car behind her and caused her to slap her hands over her ears. She did her best to memorize what she could see of his face as the man in green hauled her to her feet, keeping his glove aimed in her direction. Glasses, Caucasian, late twenties to early thirties, about 5'6... The memory clicked into place: the man she'd met in the attic.

"Lose the purse."

Iris complied with the order, consoling herself that it could serve as evidence to assist her family--or better yet, the Flash-- in figuring out what had happened to her. Then she frowned, distracted by the surreal sight that had caught her eye. The half-frozen puddle beside them was shedding gravity-defying droplets upwards into the frigid night air. Iris and her kidnapper began to look around and see little beads of rain ascending from the car. The slushy pool in the gutter, all of it -- had abruptly begun to defy physics. Iris could remember hearing of this phenomenon once before...from a grieving Barry Allen.

Green hoodie grabbed Iris' shoulder, pulling her against him like a shield as he backed them into the alley. There was a heavy thud behind them and he was yanked away from her in a glowing red rush of wind. Iris let out a little shriek and spun around; the alley was now empty. She paused to steady her racing heart, then ran to pick up her purse and sprinted for the station. A streak of red raced past her, diverting towards a closed down office building midway through renovation. Iris hesitated in the parking lot, then chased after him. It was easy enough to slip in through the door he'd left open, slightly harder to figure out where she was meant to go. The Man in Yellow joined her on the third floor.

"Iris West," his low vibrating rumble greeted from a few paces past her back. Iris jumped and spun around to face him.

"And what should I call you?" She responded, trying to sound collected. Iris ran her eyes up and down the vibrating specter. "You're like the Flash."

"On the contrary, Iris West, I am not like the Flash at all. In fact, it would be more accurate to call me his Reverse," Eobard contradicted, pretending that he hadn't seen her covertly begin recording their conversation on a device she was attempting to conceal in her coat pocket.

"Fine. Reverse," Iris replied, with a hint of irony. "You were following me, you just saved my life. Why?"

"Why are you investigating Dr. Harrison Wells?" Eobard counter-questioned, giving no outward response to the reporter's accusations.

"Answer my question first, then I'll tell you," Iris boldly pursued, taking a step closer. The Reverse Flash narrowed his eyes at her, refusing to retreat even an inch. He didn't want to give the meddling woman the satisfaction. "I've heard about you," Iris continued. "You were the speedster that broke into Mercury Labs. My boyfriend, Eddie, was in charge of the Taskforce that attempted to trap you. You kicked him down an elevator shaft." There was a challenge in her dark eyes. Eobard tilted his head inquisitively as he tried to decode the intention behind it.
"I stole the Tachyon Device the moment that it was unguarded. There was no need for me to attack."

"Are you trying to tell me that he lied?" She didn't seem as offended as he had expected, her words sounded more like a challenge than a rebuke.

"His perception of events was inaccurate. That is to be expected; he is only human," Eobard clarified, shrugging it off.

"And what are you?" Iris asked. Eobard smiled broadly at her, amused by her pluckiness, in spite of himself.

"Not human," he answered unhelpfully. "I have answered your questions. Now you should reciprocate."

"I'm not investigating Harrison Wells," Iris explained. "His roommate disappeared without a trace in 2004, and I have reason to believe that now the people responsible are coming after Dr. Wells."

Eobard straightened, processing the fresh premise and the possible ramifications. "For what purpose?" he tested.

"You tell me."

Eobard narrowed his eyes at her, remaining silent as she crossed in front of him.

"You already knew about it, didn't you?" Iris inferred, still scrutinizing him as if he were some fascinating puzzle for her to solve. "Is that why you were following me?"

"You underestimate the danger in which you are placing yourself," Eobard advised. "I suggest that you stick to blogging about the Flash."

"I'm onto something here, aren't I?" Iris observed, totally ignoring his dire warning. "I was right! Do you know what happened to him? Why didn't Dr. Wells ever report his disappearance? Do you know why--"

"You are asking the wrong questions," Eobard patiently counseled.

"Alright. Give me something to work with," Iris offered, throwing up her hands in frustration. She was almost smiling now, caught up in the rush of discovery.

Eobard crossed the space between them in the blink of an eye to rest a gloved hand on her shoulder, waiting for her to look up and lock gazes with him before he restated, "I was not the one who kicked your Detective down the elevator shaft..."

Iris studied his blurred features appraisingly before concluding, "So, who did?"

Eobard rewarded her with his widest Cheshire cat grin. "Precisely," he approved, then sped away.
It was four in the morning and Barry was running through the all-but-lifeless starlit streets of Central City. The slick, black pavement glistened with rain under his flitting feet. Barry hadn't been able to sleep that night. Sleep had proved elusive to the Flash for weeks now, ever since the Man in Yellow had violated his sanctuary at STAR Labs and attacked his mentor. He would dream about Eiling, or Farook. The General would march out of the elevator demanding that they hand over the meta-humans, and this time Dr. Wells' words weren't enough. In another, Barry ran back to the Cortex only to find himself in a lab filled with his friends' smoldering corpses. Sometimes it wasn't just the General and his men. Instead, a pleasant game of chess or a shared coffee break was devastated by red and gold lightning and screams urging Barry to run. One thing was always the same in each dream: Barry wasn't fast enough. He always arrived too late or reacted too slowly. It was always his fault.

Barry sped into the Cortex to return his suit. He had already peeled back his cowl and partially unzipped his speed suit before he registered the other presence in the room. He had sped right past another man...who had turned his head to track the Flash's progress at speed. Barry whirled around wide-eyed, but the intruder had vanished. Barry heard scattered footsteps fade to nothing down the dark corridor.

"Hey!" Barry rushed after him without even bothering to pull his cowl back on.

Ultraviolet lightning crawled and slithered over the walls like glowing serpents. It seemed to lead him around a bend up ahead. The strange current exuded a more intense version of the repulsive sensation that Barry had felt from the armored yellow speedster on the night of their failed trap. He determinedly urged himself forward, chasing after the intruder with his heart pounding loudly in his ears. He burst into the training room to see a dark figure towering over Dr. Wells' slumped over form, with his back to the glass pane that separated Barry from them. He silently prayed to whatever God watched over antisocial-workaholic-scientists that his friend had merely fallen asleep at the computer. Barry tried to run to him, but the door had a chair wedged under the knob on the other side, jamming it shut. This was a nightmare! The intruder was carefully easing his hand onto Dr. Wells nape, as if loathe to rouse him accidentally. Barry sped around the long way only to find that the intruder had disappeared, leaving the door ajar and a few papers floating toward the floor.

"Dr. Wells!" Barry grabbed the scientist's shoulder, with his other hand drifting forward to check for a pulse. He couldn't seem to find it. "Dr. Wells? Wake up!"

The physicist jolted upright, looked around, then squinted blearily up at him, pushing his glasses back into place.

"What?" he grumped, pulling out of the Flash's too tight grip. "Barry?" He glanced uncertainly at the clock, then seemed to remember that he was not a morning person and demanded "Why did you wake me up?"

"Someone else was here! I think he was another speedster or something! I could barely keep up with him!" Barry explained in a rush, almost vibrating with pent up adrenaline.

"Not another Turtle..." Dr. Wells lamented under his breath, glowering suspiciously at Barry's exposed collarbone. The younger man self-consciously zipped his suit up the rest of the way.
"A turtle? Uh, are you awake? I said: someone broke in," Barry tried again, dismissing the non-sequitur as a remnant of the older man's dream.

"Another speedster?" Dr. Wells skeptically repeated, still acting perhaps a bit too disoriented.

"Yes! I went out for a run because I couldn't sleep, because-- forget that part. It doesn't matter. When I came back in he was standing in the middle of the Cortex. He watched me pass him. He tracked my movements, I'm sure of it! Then I followed him in here! I couldn't even keep him in sight until he was already standing over you!"

"He was?" Dr. Wells didn't sound upset but there was an edge of unease to his movements as he took in his surroundings with far more care.

"I should probably call the others, and maybe grab that chair that he used to jam the door..." Barry considered, looking back towards the Cortex, then down at the hand encircling his wrist.

"Wait. Come here," Dr. Wells pulled the other rolling desk chair up beside him for Barry to use. "If there was an intruder--"

"I'm not making this up!" Barry defended.

"Alright. Then there should be some sign of him on the surveillance footage. I just had Cisco upgrade our system so that it could pick up speedsters. It doesn't affect every camera --for obvious reasons-- but the security camera in this room has the upgrade, as does the one over the entry to the Cortex." Dr. Wells first pulled up the recent footage from the Cortex. "See. There's you retrieving your suit." It was a vaguely humanoid blur of light on the screen, but the blur was decidedly Barry-shaped. There was a telltale yellow charge dancing around him, and a characteristic rhythm and flow to his movements.

"Is that what I look like to everyone else?" Barry wondered, studying the peculiar sight with interest. Dr. Wells smiled.

"Yes. Pretty much," he confirmed. "Okay, let's fast forward to..."

"Wait! Stop there. See?" Barry pointed to a bright eruption of light near the bottom of the screen. "That's not me."

"No. It's not," Dr. Wells resumed playback. A tall, slender figure stepped into view, facing away from the camera. He was wearing a midnight blue vinyl jacket with the collar pulled up. He was of the same graceful build as Barry and his dark hair, diffused with silver, was combed neatly back. He sat down in one of the desk chairs-- lounged was more like it. He was acting as if he owned the place. He did something that Barry couldn't interpret at first. A movement with his hands joined together, his elbows rising and falling away from his body. Then he leaned forward over the desk and pushed himself to his feet.

"What is he doing?" Barry said with a frown, imitating the movement as he meditated upon it. "We need to call Cisco, and probably Joe, too."

"I doubt that this is a matter for our friends at Central City P.D. It seems clear that whoever this man may be, he is some kind of meta-human," Dr. Wells dissented, watching Barry rise from the chair and pull one of his gloves off, only to freeze in place.

"Barry?"
The Flash sped back to the hub without another word.

"There was something in your hands..." he thought aloud, pulling his glove back on so that he could feel around the desk space without marring the scene with his own fingerprints. "Ha!" He picked up what looked like a custom-made signet ring. He sped back over to Dr. Wells, still studying it upon his return. In the better lighting he easily recognized the insignia, not that it had any business being on anyone's signet ring, let alone the intruder's. "Hey, check this out." He tossed the troublesome item to Dr. Wells. " Weird, right?"

Dr. Wells caught the ring, took one look at it and went still as a statue. It was fleeting and if he weren't a speedster, Barry doubted that he would have noticed, a look of sheer terror dominated the other man's expression in that instant. He blinked. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, the scientist looked merely inquisitive, back to the calm and curious Dr. Wells that Barry knew.

"Interesting. It almost perfectly matches the emblem on your suit," the inventor observed. "Although, I guess there are only so many ways that one can design a logo based on a lightning strike. An intriguing coincidence, perhaps?" The conspiratorial smirk that usually made Barry feel connected and hinted at some secret joke meant only for the two of them, now felt hollow, in light of the fear he knew it was masking.

"I don't know. Does it mean anything to you?" Barry tried to give Dr. Wells a chance to confide in him. Surely the older man knew by now that he could be trusted.

Dr. Wells shrugged off the question with a minor shake of his head, playing dumb.

"He went straight for you as soon as I got here," Barry prodded, glancing at the screen to see that the mystery man appeared to be, well, dawdling. He had been waiting around in the Cortex for someone to arrive and spot him.

"Unfortunately, I was asleep. If there was something that he wanted from me, he failed to get it," Dr. Wells replied unhelpfully. He had been fiddling with the ring ever since Barry handed it over to him, his fingers never ceasing their motion. He was anxious, Barry concluded.

"Unless he wanted me to see him with you," he surmised. His gaze traveled from the ring to the man lingering in the recording. "Like a threat." There it was again, Barry saw a brief shadow pass over Dr. Wells' vibrant blue eyes.

"I have angered a lot of people. It could be as you hypothesized: a scare tactic." He was still keeping up the front. Barry wondered if it was meant to make him feel better or to anchor the Doctor himself. Anyway, it wasn't helping. "In either case, he does not appear to have done us any genuine harm. He made no effort to access any of STAR Labs' systems, nor to injure us. He has, however, succeeded in getting our attention."

"We should call Caitlin and Cisco." Barry watched Dr. Wells rolling the ring over and over through his fingers and wondered whether he was aware that he was doing it.

"They'll be waking up in a couple of hours. I believe that we can stand to wait for that long," Dr. Wells dismissed. Barry opened his mouth to argue, but a flash of light drew his attention back to the monitor.

"Hold on," Barry muttered and reclaimed his seat at the physicist's side. "What was that?"

"You saw something?" Dr. Wells inquired, allowing Barry to take over the keyboard.

"I'm not sure," Barry replied, replaying the section of video in which he'd started to shed
his suit. There was another cold burst of azure brilliance originating from the intruder's position, as if he were exploding in a flash of otherworldly flame. The camera was momentarily dazzled. It blanked out for only a small fraction of a second. When the image returned, the intruder was simply gone.

"That does not look like a speedster to me," Dr. Wells affirmed. His hands ceased their worrying of the signet ring.

"A teleporter?" Barry guessed. "Is that a thing now?"

"That would explain how he managed to keep ahead of you," Dr. Wells nodded, gradually warming to the idea. He held up the ring for Barry to take back. "He was here for a while, so it is likely that our mystery man has left some trace evidence behind."

Barry lifted the item from his friend's grip. The act felt more significant than it ought to. There was something deeply personal underlying the simple exchange that made Barry feel like he was being entrusted with something far more than just a piece of evidence, or even the mystery itself.

"I'll dust the area around the hub for prints," he said, his voice subtly muted by the weight of the moment. "It doesn't look like this guy thought to wear gloves. Maybe we'll be able to get an ID out of it."

Dr. Wells nodded. The taught muscles in his shoulders relaxed ever-so-slightly. Barry decided that would have to be good enough for now.

Eobard stood from his chair and impatiently sped the scant few steps remaining between himself and Gideon's interface within the Time Vault.

"Show me, Gideon! What has he done to me?" He demanded, leaning forward with one hand against the podium.

"Are you experiencing malfunctions in your memory recall--"

"I don't know! I was finishing some paperwork. There was this pressure on the back of my neck--everything hurt-- then Barry triggered a shallow reboot. I..." Eobard paced around the confines of the hidden chamber, dragging a hand over the perforated wall. "I don't KNOW!" He punched one of the raised bumps, shattering the metal and ceramic control dome into shrapnel.

"Estimated cost of repair--" Gideon began, unamused.


"No damage detected. No malware detected."

"What about--" Eobard began to fret, but his twin cut him off.

"Comparing to most recent status check taken 23 hours 36 minutes prior to the reported tampering..." she idled for a moment. Her simplistic holographic avatar dissolved into a cloud of raw data, sorted it at eye-watering speeds and resolved back into her avatar. Eobard watched, unblinking. "No unaccounted-for program alterations detected."

"You're certain?" Eobard needlessly verified, still fearful despite his unquestioning trust in
"Affirmative, Doctor."

"Why incapacitate me-- especially in such an invasive way-- if he wasn't going to attempt a hack?" Eobard pondered the oddity.

"Evidence of a shallow intrusion into your non-vital systems was detected," Gideon reported, pulling the floor back out from underneath her twin's steady legs. "However, no software changes have been carried out."

"What!? Which systems?"

"It appears the intruder forced unauthorized access to your wireless uplink history as well as a forced readout from your internal chronometer. However, it would be problematic to assess the intention behind the breach without more data on the perpetrator," Gideon informed him.

Eobard grimaced fiercely and pulled himself upright against the wall. "It's him," he growled out, the distaste dripping from his every syllable. "There are only a few very specific reasons to compare those two data sets; he was checking on my expiration date."

"Query: how does that action pose a threat? An interest in your age does not necessarily denote an intent to inflict damage," Gideon's disembodied head of an avatar tilted in muted curiosity.

"Because, Gideon, it suggests that I am not his final objective, but an obstacle. Beyond my termination lies too many unacceptable losses," Eobard schemed, gradually returning to emotional equilibrium now that he had a target to focus on. "We need to determine a secondary endgame, perhaps more. I have not come this far to have our efforts put to waste by an unaccounted variable." He returned to his chair, recollecting himself. "Compare the new data sets we've collected with any recent fluctuations to the timeline. Include any data within a range of .5% of a probability."

"Yes, Dr. Wells," Gideon accepted. Her avatar tilted its head asking. "How do you propose to respond to the intrusion in the interim period?"

"Why, Gideon, our enemy has clearly identified me as an obstacle in his way." Eobard grinned gleefully, reminiscent of a much younger version of himself explaining his not-friendship to another time traveler. "I'll obstruct!"

Iris frowned at her computer screen, annoyed by the odd break in the timeline of her research into her would be kidnapper. Hartley Rathaway had, in fact, worked at STAR Labs as head of the research department. There was even some speculation among Dr. Wells’ peers and competitors that he was grooming the boy to replace him. However, he had been sacked shortly before the date of the accelerator launch was declared for unspecified reasons and the trail went cold. There was simply no more information to be gleaned of Hartley Rathaway from then on.

It was not as dramatic or uncanny as the disappearance of E, but it was definitely incongruous. It was almost as if he were actively trying to disappear. His prerequisite for his current life of crime perhaps? Iris thought that answer was too easy a way out. There had to be something more on the ex-physicist for her to find. It was simply going to take more work. Iris sighed and closed her laptop, tucking it away in her bag before moving to attend to the incoming group of mid-morning customers. She felt someone pass close behind her and whirled around.
There was a figure caught in her peripheral vision: a tall man in a top hat, but he had vanished before she could look at him head on. The top flap was now hanging open on her bag. She checked and sure enough, her laptop had vanished with him. Iris closed her eyes and counted to ten. An impatient customer smacked the bell on the counter, demanding attention. Iris reminded herself that she had backed everything up; her laptop was password protected. She could handle this.

That afternoon, Barry’s lunch break was disrupted before it could even get going by a folder’s worth of aggravating test results... not that he was all that interested in eating any time soon. He opened his notebook, yet again, to glare some more at the thoroughly unhelpful findings that he’d compiled before his shift began. Turning the intruder’s signet ring in his other hand while he fretted, Barry was beginning to feel like he was having another nightmare or, more accurately put: an especially frustrating anxiety dream. All the prints that he had pulled off the hub were of no use, belonging to Caitlin, Cisco, and somehow --randomly enough-- Barry himself. The bisected thumbprint had belonged to him. He supposed that he must have gotten cut during his patrol as the Flash, but it was strange that he couldn’t remember ever hurting his hand like that. Especially since Cisco would have had to mend the glove of his suit. Not to mention how rarely he ever accessed the hub himself. He could count the instances off on one hand. In two such instances, he was certain that he’d been wearing his suit for the duration, gloves and all.

It was really beginning to get to Barry. How had this guy managed not to leave a single trace behind? The fibers that Barry had found were a dead end, a ubiquitous nylon blend with traces of midnight blue vinyl, probably from his jacket. No unique or distinctive dyes or chemical traces in the sample. No fingerprints. No DNA. The guy always faced away from the camera in the security footage, implying that he somehow knew exactly where all the cameras were, and also when and in which direction the ones that panned did so. The analysis of the ring, inversely, was unhelpful in that it was too atypical. There was no manufacturer who made any designs remotely like it. The composition was untraceable in that it defied Barry’s understanding regarding methods of fabrication; a strange alloy of cobalt and some other as yet undiscovered element. He rolled the ring into his palm and sat back in his chair to consider the unassuming circle of indefinable material, then straightened up, tucking it into the safety of his pocket.

Barry grabbed his jacket and ran back to STAR labs in hopes that he'd learn Cisco had had more luck with the technological approach. He arrived to find Cisco scanning the area with some unknown handheld device while Caitlin and Dr. Wells watched from the latter's office. The speedster smiled at the sight of the physician happily munching on her healthy-looking sandwich while her boss stubbornly refused to acknowledge his vegetable filled sandwich wrap.

"Oh, yeah! Check it out! We've got tachyons! Tachyons people!" Cisco announced.

"Tachyons, as in time particles?" Barry verified, guessing the reason for his friend's excitement.

"We've got a real-life time traveler on our hands!" Cisco exclaimed. He spun around and snapped his fingers as an idea struck him. "That's why you couldn't keep up with him. He was cheating!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Caitlin advised, picking up the second half of her sundried tomato, grilled zucchini and avocado sandwich. "All that we know for certain is that your scanner is detecting tachyons. That doesn't necessarily prove that time travel is even possible."

"Um, excuse me, Caitlin, I'm pretty sure that superluminal particles being found in the
"Or it's a meta-human who happens to give off superluminal particles, or maybe the Reverse Flash lent him the tachyon device," Caitlin reasoned. Barry had begun to suspect --although he would never say it out loud-- that she under-reacted to things like this on purpose just to mess with Cisco.

"Q Continuum?" Dr. Wells questioned contemplatively.

"You--" Cisco stopped short to register Dr. Wells' question, turning away from Caitlin to gawk at the bespectacled physicist. "How can you not know Star Trek?"

"That was from Star Trek?" Dr. Wells processed. He shrugged "Not my generation, I guess."

Barry grinned. "The next one," he teased, goodnaturedly. It was a stupid joke and he knew it.

"Have you had lunch yet, Mr. Allen," Dr. Wells ventured hopefully, looking down at the barely touched 'Greek garden wrap' that his physician had foisted upon him. Said physician narrowed her eyes at him. E sympathized, having been forced to put up with long rants about Harrison's intolerance for 'hippie food' after his own attempts to broaden the human's diet.

"Remind me, when was the last time that you had a lunch that wasn't entirely made up of junk food?" his endlessly patient doctor posed. The others were now observing them as if this were a spectator sport.

"Last month you forced me to eat kale." Dr. Wells accused.

"You are not allergic to kale!" Caitlin shot back, gesturing enthusiastically.

"I'm eating half of this. Consider it a victory," Dr. Wells stated, then picked up the bitten half of his lunch, thrusting the remainder in Barry's direction. The speedster accepted it with a half shrug of apology to Dr. Snow

"Okay--" Barry paused to swipe a drop of Greek dressing away from the corner of his mouth with a pleased hum. "Actually, this is pretty good! ...So, how are we supposed to catch this teleporter who may or may not also be a time traveler?"

Incidentally, Eobard's time with Dr. Wells had also taught him to feed a human easily through subterfuge.

"No idea," Cisco admitted. "I can rig something up to scan for tachyon radiation within the area surrounding the labs, but that'll only tell us where he's been. I'm still not 100% sure how we can stop a time traveler. We have to figure out how he's doing it first."

"It's a good start. If you don't mind, I'd like to work with you on that," Dr. Wells suggested, rolling down the ramp out of his office. "Let's see how far we can stretch the reach of our tachyon sensor."

Cisco grinned at him. "This is going to be so awesome!"

Dr. Wells chuckled and followed the exuberant young inventor into his lab.
Barry watched them leave for their nerdy bonding session, then turned to Caitlin. His expression became very serious.

"Any luck with those fingerprints?" Caitlin requested.

Barry shook his head, making his way over to the doorway to speak privately with her.

"Nothing. I don't know how this guy did it, but-- He has to be a professional. The way he covered his tracks... He's one step ahead about everything: the way he dodged the cameras, his timing, the lack of any traceable evidence." Barry shifted from foot to foot, knowing the reaction he was setting himself up for. "Joe and I want to post a couple of squad cars outside for a while, just as a precaution."

"A precaution against what? Barry, you couldn't even catch up to this guy and you're the Flash!" Caitlin rejected. "Besides, you know how much Dr. Wells will hate the idea. He would never agree to a police guard, for your safety as much as anything. What would we even tell them?"

"That there was a break in, and someone threatened Dr. Wells' safety. We just don't mention that that someone was a meta-human," Barry argued, then paused for a moment to reconsider, thinking of Eddie's task-force. "Or maybe we do..."

Caitlin's expression went from concerned to stern in no time flat. Barry held up his hands in appeasement.

"Look, I want to handle this myself. I know that I'm probably the only one who can take this guy down, but I can't always be here! What if he comes back? A couple of cops might not be as capable as I am, but at least they'll try to protect you guys!"

Caitlin remained silent for a long moment, considering his point with obvious discomfort. "You're right. I agree. That's not the problem." She shrugged, shaking her head dejectedly. "Dr. Wells is never going to agree to it."

"He might, if you tell him," Barry said, breaking out his most potent of Bambi-eyed stares. "He listens to you."

"I don't know..."

"Caitlin, please. It's for his own good."

Caitlin relented, looking like the very idea of the oncoming battle of wills was already wearing at her. "I know. You still owe me... something big."

"Yes. Definitely. Whatever you want."

"Something chocolate," Caitlin impressed upon her co-conspirator the gravity of his debt.

"The best," Barry agreed with a smile, relieved to have her on his side.

Iris stepped into the back room behind the counter at Jitter's to make a quick call.

"Hello, yes. This is Lily Northman with--" Iris smiled at the flattering recollection from the clerk she was working for information. Even when it wasn't necessarily safe, it still felt nice to be remembered.
“Yes, thank you. That's exactly why I’m calling. Yeah, you know how it is: bureaucracy!” Iris play acted, rolling her eyes even though the clerk couldn't possibly see it. “So, the sale has been verified? No. That fits with what I have here, but we weren't forwarded his contact information…” she pretended to be distracted with shuffling through documents on her imaginary desk. “Well, he has to have provided-- Okay. Okay. His ID? I seem to be missing… Yes, oh, Mal Thawne…” she almost slipped out of character in response to the familiar surname. “That was it! Right. Not Malcolm, it's legally Mal. Exactly! Trendy parents I guess. I will track that and get back to you. You too. Thanks. Bye.”

Iris hung up and stepped out of the back room and gasped in surprise, upon seeing who was waiting on the other side of the counter.

“Eddie! Hey!” Iris said a little too cheerfully, tucking her cellphone away in her apron.

“What was that about?” her boyfriend asked suspiciously. “Tell me that I didn't just hear you breaking the law.”

“Oh, it's nothing Eddie. Just a story that I’m working on for my blog.” Iris briefly considered his lack of enthusiasm before speculating “So, you might actually be able to help me. No lawbreaking required.”

“How encouraging,” Eddie remarked, but he was smiling at her now. “How can I help?”

“What can you tell me about Mal? Is he, like, a cousin of yours or something?”

“Mal?” Eddie echoed with a puppylike scowl.

“Yeah, Mal Thawne. I figured that there probably aren't a lot of people with that last name around.”

“There aren't… but I can't remember any Malcolms.” Eddie frowned, trying to think back.

“Not Malcolm. Mal. Apparently it’s his actual first name.” Iris began to wipe down the counter while they talked, then stopped short, looking past him at her laptop sitting innocently atop one of the tables she'd cleaned just before going to make her call.

“I feel like I would remember something like that,” Eddie shrugged. “Can you take a break?”

Iris wasn’t listening anymore, distracted by the tall, ominous figure strolling past the window directly behind Eddie… a figure with a silver-headed cane and a top hat. Iris bolted out the door, chasing after the anachronism as he disappeared around the corner of the building.

“Hey!” Eddie hurried after her, puzzled by her sudden flight.

The man in the top hat strode straight into the shadowed wall at the other end of the alley before Iris could catch up to him and vanished. Iris jogged up and ran her hands over the solid brick, at a loss. Then she spun around to pin her boyfriend with an astonished stare.

“That really happened, right? Tell me you saw that!”

Eddie nodded, staring in awe at the unmarked wall.
A Matter of Priorities

Barry had planned to spend the morning following the break-in at STAR Labs locked up in his own lab, perhaps accompanied by Cisco, dissecting any semblance of evidence to solve the mystery of the maybe-time-traveler. Instead, he'd been called out to a high class garage first thing upon waking to find that Captain Cold was back in town. Snart had broken in using his Coldgun and sat in wait until the last possible moment, not stealing, not engaging with the police. He had been lying in wait for the Flash. This was the absolute last thing that Barry needed right now! He was already trying balance his work as a CSI with figuring out how to deal with the threat that was the Man in Yellow, and grappling with the more immediate danger posed by the mysterious, meta-human intruder --and oh, by the way, Flash, now Snart wants to join in the pile-up since you're not too busy.

"So, how are we going to stop Snart?" Barry wearily asked of the STAR Labs team gathered around the hub. Dr. Wells rubbed his chin, hesitating to air his thoughts on the matter.

"Dr. Wells?" Barry prompted longsufferingly. The Flash hadn't been able to sleep a wink last night with the sight of that ominous, dark figure standing over his friend, and the look of terror that had flickered over Dr. Wells' face still lingering in his mind. It helped even less to know just how stubbornly his mentor was trying to behave as if nothing at all was the matter.

"I do not mean to sound callous, Barry, but I am not certain that you should."

"You want me to ignore him?" Barry clarified, wondering if he'd somehow misheard. He'd spent last night circling through the streets surrounding the labs and Wells' property--not entirely conscious of his fixated course pattern-- so it was possible.

"The last time that the Flash went up against Captain Cold, a train derailed and you barely got the passengers out in time," Dr. Wells reminded him, earning a nod from the hero himself in concession to his point. "Every time you face him, it puts the public in the surrounding area at risk. If you do not rise to his provocations this time..."

"He might just back off without anyone getting hurt," Barry finished for him.

"It is a gamble," Dr. Wells admitted, locking his ice-blue eyes on Barry's slightly pale face. "But considering that we are currently facing enemies on multiple fronts, I would argue that it comes down to a question of priorities."

"Right, that makes sense, I guess... but I can't just let Snart run around unchecked, either! Even if the Reverse Flash and this--" Barry paused and looked questioningly to Cisco for guidance on what to call their mystery intruder.

"Sorry, Man. I'm still working on the name for our flashy, time-traveling intruder. I'm thinking something to do with that blue fire he gives off when he vanishes. How about Infernal Indigo, or Captain--"

"No," Caitlin and Eobard rejected in unison, then exchanged a startled glance.

"No, more Captains, please," Barry requested on behalf of all non-Ciscos present.

"Okay, I'm still working on it. The creative process can't be rushed."
"It’s ultimately your decision, Barry. Focus on whichever threat you feel is the most relevant and I promise you that we will assist in neutralizing the lesser threat without you,” Dr. Wells assured. Cisco nodded in agreement, returning his full attention to his overwhelmed speedster buddy.

"Don't worry, Barry, I got you covered. I'm pretty sure that I can throw something together to help the CCPD counteract the Cold Gun."

"You're sure?" Barry tested, his eyes pleading for confirmation.

"Come on, don't you remember who you're talking to? I made the stupid thing,” Cisco pointed out, the shadow of his guilty conscience fell over his usually sunny expression. “I have had way too much time to plan for this moment.”

Caitlin shot him a sympathetic look while the Flash retreated into his own preoccupied thoughts.

"That still leaves us with two deadly enemies that I have no idea how to beat." Barry leaned forward with his elbows propped up on the back of the hub and ran his hands through his thick, chestnut hair. "I'm going to ask Joe to post a squad car outside your place for a while." He stole a fleeting gaze at Dr. Wells to see how his decision was taken.

The physicist huffed irritably.

"I don't believe that that is necessary. The Reverse Flash is fixated solely upon the Flash as far as we know, and this other meta-human has already made his point. He may not have any intention to return here."

"This is me agreeing with you," Barry said a little more sharply than he'd intended. "We have to pick our priorities. Right now, my first priority is making sure that these guys don't break in and grab one of you while I'm busy running around playing catch up! I get that you don't want to involve outsiders, but this is important! Okay?"

There was an extended length of stubborn silence while Caitlin and Cisco lingered uncomfortably, observing the others’ contention.

"Fine," Dr. Wells hissed through clenched teeth. “I’ll stay here. No more guards are needed that way.”

Barry smiled at him, touched by the attempted compromise, "Thank you." He checked the time on his phone. "Listen, we can discuss this more later, but I've got to go turn in my report on Snart's break-in. Joe's probably going to want to check in about it too. I should be able to come back in a few hours."

Dr. Wells nodded stiffly.

"Yeah, see ya," Cisco replied more cordially.

“Hey Bear,” Joe greeted from his seat at the CSI’s desk, picking up a second cup of coffee to pass to him. “Good timing, I was just about to start going over these files on Snart.”

“Uh, yeah about that… “ Barry fiddled with his cup. “As a CSI, my work on the Snart case is done and as the Flash, I just don’t have the time to spend on this right now.”
Joe straightened in the desk chair, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Look, with everything that’s going on right now, first with the Man in Yellow, which I think might actually be more like two men in yellow, but that’s-- and then there was the break in this morning... I think Dr. Wells and the rest of the team really need my protection right now.”

“Barry,” Joe began in a cautioning tone.

“It’s just a matter of priorities,” Barry concluded, sounding as if he’d probably rehearsed this explanation on the way there. “Cisco is going to help you guys with Snart. He has some ideas on how to counteract the Cold Gun. You should be able to handle it fine without me.”

“I get that you’re scared...”

“You’re damn right I’m scared! Last week the Man in Yellow attacked my friends, threatened to kill Iris, and I could barely, barely keep up with him! At least I could. This new meta that I saw this morning? I wasn’t even close! You weren’t there, Joe, you didn’t see the way that he was just waiting around, standing over my friend-- There was nothing that I could’ve done if he’d decided to kill Dr. Wells right then, and he wanted me to know it!” Barry catastrophized, with real fear in his eyes. “Snart is dangerous; I get that. He has a dangerous and unique weapon, but he’s still only a human thief with a big gun. These two, whatever they are, they’re too dangerous! That’s the reason why I started this in the first place! I have to focus on them.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird the way these guys always seem to head straight for Wells?” Joe hinted. Barry’s anxious expression was replaced by a fiercely protective one.

“I don’t.” He ended the conversation there, striding angrily out of his lab. “You know where I’ll be.”

Eobard finally deigned to cease spying on Cisco's work from afar and directed Dr. Wells' chair toward him.

"It's got some kind of super intricate carbon nanostructure embedded under the centerpiece, but I've got no clue what it's for,” Cisco answered Eobard’s question before he had even decided to pose it. He gave the young engineer a questioning look. "I could feel you watching me from out there -- which is fine, by the way. I totally get that you're trying to pretend that you're unfazed by this flaming meta-human breaking in and going all Edward Cullen on you, but you really don't have to. Anyone would be at least a little freaked out."

"I'm fine, Cisco," Dr. Wells assured him with an air of paternal nurture.

"I know you are. Barry and I are making sure that you're going to stay that way," Cisco replied resolutely. "But you don't have to put on an act for us. We're all only human, even you."

Dr. Wells opened his mouth to speak, but thought the better of it and followed Cisco's gaze to the entryway past his back.

“Ms. West, what a surprise to see you again so soon,” he greeted the woman lingering by the hub. “If you're looking for Barry, he left for the precinct an hour ago.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I was actually hoping to get some advice from you guys about something.”
“Certainly, I have recently found myself with an abundance of spare time,” Dr. Wells accepted.

Iris started forward and Dr. Wells rolled down the ramp to meet her at the hub.

“This guy stole my laptop yesterday while I was working on a story for my blog. The thing is… an hour later, he came back and left it on one of the tables and then just, like, disappeared into a wall. I don’t know how, but he changed my password and who knows what else…”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up! Did you say he disappeared into a wall?” Cisco piped up, officially distracted from his work.

“Yeah. Eddie saw it too. The guy was like a ghost!”

“It was just a wall? Not a window or a mirror or something?” Cisco questioned too obviously for Eobard’s liking. He shot the young scientist a Look.

“Uh, no, it was a solid, windowless, alley wall.” Iris frowned. “Why would it matter if there was a mirror?”

“Oh… It doesn’t.” Cisco back-pedaled while Eobard secretly imagined shocking him with his speed-force. “I was-- It was only a hypothesis, but it was wrong. So-- Ha!-- never mind!”

Iris and Eobard both stared at the engineer for utterly different reasons.

“I’m gonna go back to my work now,” Cisco concluded and retreated into the solitude of his own lab.

“You mentioned that this mystery-man tampered with your computer?” Eobard prompted. Iris dismissed the peculiar moment, returning to the task at hand.

“Yeah. He changed the password. I can’t even get into my own laptop to see what else he did to it.”

“Here, let me take a look,” Dr. Wells held out his hands for the tarnished item. He took it over to the hub and opened it up, secretly taking note of the interface bead flattened onto the underside. He lifted the lid and paused to fish a device out of a compartment on his chair. Dr. Wells plugged the portable interface adapter into the USB port and turned the laptop on.

“What’s that?” Iris asked, dropping into a desk chair beside him.

“I haven’t named it yet. It’s an adaptive learning machine security program that I have been developing. Eventually, I hope it can be used in the creation of an assistive AI, but in the meantime.” Eobard smirked as the screen turned on showing a blank, blue readout with white text speeding across it. He left his hand sitting casually over the remaining open USB port while he spoke, trusting the added security hardware to shield him from any hidden traps. “Your request presents a perfect opportunity to test it.” The screen flashed red and a warning popped up: Anomalous Code Detected. Isolating Source… Eobard smirked, feeling --justifiably-- very superior. “This shouldn’t take long,” he informed Iris. As for the files he was currently copying off her laptop for his own personal use, well, what she didn’t know probably wouldn’t hurt her.
Rough, calloused fingertips traced down the inside of a perfect porcelain forearm.

“Can you feel this?”

“You have initiated direct dermal contact using the middle and forefinger of your right hand. Employing point--”

The Director let out a gentle sigh. “No. Eo, I don’t want a breakdown of how many units of pressure I’m using,” he corrected. His voice had lost the hint of callous detachment that usually interlaced his every utterance. “Just tell me what you’re feeling.”

“I am not certain that I adequately understand the imperative--”

“Tell me, Eo. You aren’t going to screw anything up,” the Director persisted. Eobard fancied that he might even be able to hear a smile in his Master’s voice. He cracked an eye open to check.

“Hey,” The Director chided, placing his free hand over his android’s eyes. “No peeking.” He had been smiling, at least as close to it as Eobard had ever seen him.

“You’re touching my arm with your right index finger?”

“And?”

“I don’t understand. You asked me what I’m feeling. I have accurately described the basic information relayed by my subdermal sensors,” Eobard replied, beginning to become agitated. He had no idea what was expected of him. Androids were intended to be unfettered beings. He was supposed to be clinical and literal-minded to a fault, or else he would be faulty himself, but his Master was clearly expecting something more of him. “Do you wish for me to perform a biological scan?” Eobard could feel his Master shaking his head.

“I want to know how you feel,” the Director reiterated. Eobard was stuck. Was the Director drunk again? He had liked it when Eobard was hurt last time... Eobard ran a quick bioscan: nope, sober.

“I don’t understand.”

“Eo,” the Director coaxed, absently twitching his finger back and forth over the android’s perfect skin in a telltale sign of impatience.

“Please rephrase your request,” Eobard requested in a near-monotone, falling back on his trusty defaults as his own frustration intensified.

“Eo…” His master’s hand closed around his forearm in a firm grip. He was failing!

“I’m sorry, I do not understand--”

“Eobard Thawne!” the Director snapped, rising onto his knees in front of his uncooperative ‘droid and instantly becoming a far more menacing presence in the enclosed space. “I told you once and I am not going to say it again!”

Eobard’s eyes opened wide in panic. “I’m sorry!” He snapped his mouth shut too late, horrified.

The Director grabbed his jaw, forcing him to hold his gaze. He was searching for something again. “You’re feeling something right now.”

Eobard opened his mouth but his Master prevented his obfuscation.
“Not my hand. Tell me: how do you feel?”

“I don’t-- I’m frustrated,” to Eobard’s further confusion, his Master nodded, continuing to study his face eagerly. “Scared. I don’t know what you want from me!”

The Director immediately released him only to pull him into a tight hug. “Don’t be scared. That’s what I wanted to hear. I knew you were still in there. I just needed to see it.”

“You didn’t want a Defective…” Eobard parroted back the source of his confusion. The Director’s whole body tensed, his arms going stiff around Eobard’s shoulders.

“What are you talking about?”

Eobard reached up one of his arms which had until now been hanging limp at his sides and gently brushed a finger over the Director’s bionic implant, transferring the pertinent memory file almost as efficiently as he would with another of his own kind: "You're going to question my judgment now, Junior, after the Defective you tried to pair me with?"

“Oh, you weren’t supposed to be able to hear that. I was lying,” the Director explained it away, annoyed by the oversight.

“You lied to your friends? Why? You’re their leader. They were helping--”

“Let it go! People lie to each other all the time. It’s how humans get what they really want without having to hurt anybody,” the Director said, reclaiming his pretzel-legged pose across from Eobard on the floor of his quarters. “There’s an old saying: ‘What they don’t know won’t kill ‘em.’ It applies here.”

“My replacement, am I to infer that she was not... like me?” Eobard asked tentatively.

“She was nothing like you,” the Director said forcefully. “I told you. I lied to get you reinstated.”

Eobard considered his increasingly uncomfortable Master for a second, then verified, just to be certain, “Are you lying to me?”

The Director, to his mild surprise, let out a hearty chuckle and clapped his hands over Eobard’s shoulders. “Seriously Kid, she wasn’t like you. You’re special, Eo. My one of a kind secret,” he tilted his head to make sure to capture the android’s gaze. “That’s why we have to stick together, just you and me. Understand?”

Eobard acknowledged the statement with a small, closed-lipped smile. “Yes. I understand perfectly.”
Caitlin skimmed the article about Professor Martin Stein on her iPhone. She wondered why on Earth it had been emailed to her as she strolled into the parking lot a little way down the street from Jitters. With a dismissive shake of her head, she tucked the phone away in her purse, and pulled out her key fob to unlock her car. Caitlin's phone started to vibrate just as she pressed the button. She paused, taken off guard and checked the screen.

_Restricted Number_

Caitlin's brows furrowed, the promise of her little car's cozy heating chased from her mind by the first hint of worry. There were only two conceivable sources for a restricted call to her personal phone at this hour. Either her mother had suddenly undergone some kind of unforeseen, life changing crisis, or more likely...

"Dr. Wells, what's going on? You said that you were going to stay at the lab tonight," Caitlin inquired, already beginning to switch into her physician's mindset as she resumed her walk to her vehicle at a hastier pace.

"Dr. Caitlin Snow." The deep, mechanical drone of the voice synthesizer on the other end of the line stopped her dead in her tracks. She was only a few paces away from her vehicle, but still turned on the spot, searching for any sign of an observer rather than running just yet. _Do not attempt to reply. In exactly 1 minute and 20 seconds you are going to be abducted by Leonard Snart, after which point your survival cannot be guaranteed._

"What?" Caitlin breathed. Almost unconsciously, a morbid countdown started in the back of her mind, tallying the wasted seconds. "Who is this?"

"Protection will be provided to you should you agree to a trade. You will arrange 15 minutes of private and unrestricted access to your patient, Dr. Harrison--"

"Go to hell!" Caitlin hung up on the electronic stalker. "Okay-okay. What can I do in just under a minute?" There had to be something. She typed out a quick text and sprinted to her car, knowing that she'd just have to trust Barry to run with it. She was pretty sure that she already knew who the caller was.

Just as she reached her car, a bright blue stream of chilling energy surged past her and froze the door shut. Caitlin screamed and leapt back, turning to see Captain Cold and his new pyro sidekick stepping up behind her.

"Car trouble?" Snart drawled out with a frigid smirk. Caitlin backed up against her car, swallowing down another scream. She stared at him as a doe would at a hungry panther. His partner lunged forward and grabbed her.

"No!" Caitlin shrieked, using her last moment of freedom to toss her phone away over the roof of her car as she thrashed like a wild thing in his grip. It flipped through the night air and landed on its face on the asphalt, skittering out of sight under a neighboring car. She wasn't disappearing without a trace. The pyro tried to cover her mouth as he dragged her into the back of a van, and she bit down hard on his hand.
"Ah! That's IT!" He pinned her against the hood of her car, raising a beefy fist. He was halted by the sound of Captain Cold powering up his gun.

"Mick," Snart warned and the other man dragged her around to face the kidnapper standing at the half-open back of their unmarked white utility van. Snart studied Caitlin’s face for a second, then asked in the manner of a disapproving kindergarten teacher "What did you do?"

"Let me go!"

"Miss Snow--"

"It's Doctor Snow, and you're not getting anything from me!"

Snart regarded her again, no longer looking quite as bored, then allowed her a close-lipped smile. "You've got spirit, I'll give you that, but you misunderstand. You see, Dr. Snow, I've already got what I want and that's you." With that, he shut the back door and Caitlin felt a needle poke into the tender skin of her neck. She was out like a light within seconds.

"...Third degree burns, two officers in intensive care. The shields were meant to fend off sub-zero temperatures...

"Are we enemies now?"

Barry startled at the sound of Dr. Wells’ voice breaking through his internal fog of helplessness and self-recrimination. He turned a perplexed look on his friend and teacher. The idea hadn't even occurred to him to blame someone else.

"No, of course not. Why would you think that?" Barry earnestly questioned the man sitting enshrouded by shadows. Dr. Wells ventured in to join him in the light of their shared sanctuary, briefly glancing past him at the Flash suit.

"I was the one who suggested that you not engage Snart. It would be understandable for you to hold me responsible for leading you to delegate the task of his capture --especially considering that my safety was directly impacted by your choice," Dr. Wells reasoned.

"No. It would be wrong," Barry disagreed with a hint of force. He was too tired to get into the old argument about comparing the relative worth of lives again. That didn't mean that the thought wasn't nagging at him. "I'm an adult. The only person who should be held responsible for my decisions is me. Besides, you know I kind of have a personal stake in keeping you safe too." He smiled down at the still cautious physicist. "I used to dream about meeting you someday, and now we're--"

"Partners?" Dr. Wells offered with the corners of his lips twitching upward in a rare glimpse of true joy-- even if he was doing his best to contain it. He must've really been worried. Barry smiled more softly this time. There was something so sadly endearing about the way that the older scientist seemed reflexively to shy away from any acknowledgment-- and the inherent vulnerability-- of an emotional connection.

"Well, I was going to say 'friends' but yeah, definitely that, too."

The light shining through Dr. Wells' expression was abruptly shuttered off, causing Barry to feel like
a devoted astronomer being denied the sight of the stars. His own smile faded in turn. He paused to measure his next words carefully, not wanting to put Dr. Wells off any more.

"I don't regret trying to keep you and the rest of our team safe. I just don't know how I'm supposed to deal with all of this myself."

"You aren't. You may have superhuman abilities, Barry, but you are only one man," Dr. Wells responded with a prickliness to his voice that Barry knew wasn't actually directed at him. "It would be foolish for anyone to rely entirely upon you merely because you have shown yourself willing to use your abilities to help."

Barry narrowed his eyes at the other man. "Are you calling the CCPD lazy? Because, I think I might have a problem with that," he tested, feeling a little amused by his friend's defensive appraisal in spite of himself.

"I never said that," Dr. Wells deflected, not convincingly.

"Hey! They tried to take on Leonard Snart with your help. They did their jobs," Barry reminded him. "Captain Cold isn't exactly the kind of criminal they're used to."

Dr. Wells looked like he wanted to keep pushing. Luckily for the Flash's esteem of him, Cisco interrupted with a knock on the door frame.

"Hey, you guys are gonna want to take a look at this," he told them and disappeared from view. They followed him to the Cortex. "I've been going over the data that we collected on the heat gun. When the weapon was fired, it caused a massive surge in the temperature at the scene, sort of like an extreme heatwave."

"Heatwave!" He repeated, exuberant.

"Stop doing that," Dr. Wells chastened.

"Anyways, I measured the temperature levels at the scene and while Captain Cold's gun reaches absolute zero, the heat gun raises the temperature in its ignition stream to absolute hot, basically the hottest temperature that can be reached."

"Planck temperature," Barry subtly reminded the engineer that he too was an informed scientist.

"So what you're saying is... these weapons could cancel each other out," Eobard summarized, following the data to its logical conclusion.

"Right. Theoretically they can if we can get them to cross their streams," Cisco clarified. Barry smiled.

"You mean like in Ghostbusters?"

"That movie was surprisingly scientifically accurate," Cisco affirmed with a defensive shrug of his shoulders.

"And really quite funny," Eobard recalled as Barry turned away to answer his buzzing phone. Ghostbusters was one of the first movies that Cisco had made Eobard watch, and he was still thankful for the experience. Barry stiffened in response to whatever the person on the other end of the line was saying to him, then he sped out of the room.

"Should we be worried about that?" Cisco wondered, eyeing the empty space previously occupied by the Flash with a mildly perturbed expression.
"He'll let us know if he needs our help," Dr. Wells reassured him. "What else have you learned in regards to this heat weapon?" After a brief hesitation, Cisco leaned over to begin walking him through the theoretical schematic he had constructed.

"Oh, here. This part's pretty cool...

Barry jogged over to the edge of the crime scene and ducked under the police tape, making a beeline for the familiar silver hybrid.

"No, no, no," Barry muttered under his breath as he began to circle the ice-burned vehicle. He stopped by the scarred driver's side door and shoved both his hands into his hair, hearing his heartbeat pounding in his ears. No, this wasn't right. This couldn't happen. He'd been so careful! She should have been safe!

"Barry?" Joe's greeting brought him rushing back to reality with a surge of adrenaline.

"Yeah, Joe? Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Building security from across the street noticed that something was off a couple of hours ago. When the guard went to take a closer look he almost stepped on this," Joe held up an evidence bag.

"That's Caitlin's phone," Barry basically snatched it away from his frowning foster father.

"Hey, easy, Bear. There's no point in messing with that unless you know her passcode," Joe told him gently, reaching out to rest a hand on his shoulder. "We can send it down to Cyber and see if they can find out anything, but we already know who did this."

Barry took a deep breath and nodded, feeling detached from his own body.

"You were right. We have to catch Snart," he spat.

"You're damn right we do," Joe concurred. "Come on." He led Barry over to his car and began to drive them to the precinct. He gave Barry a funny look when he noticed the CSI snagging some rubber gloves from another investigator's bag as they passed. He didn't comment on it until they were on their way. Barry had just snapped on the gloves and pulled the evidence bag out of his pocket. Then he hit speed dial on his own mobile phone, tucking it between his ear and shoulder.

"Wait, Barry. Who are you calling?"

"We might not need Cyber Division when we have Dr. Wells." Barry fished Caitlin's phone out of the evidence bag, adding "They tell each other everything." Wells picked up before Joe had the chance to pursue the odd statement. "Hey, Dr. Wells. Listen, uh... It looks like Caitlin's been taken. I've got her phone here and I was wondering-- Ok. Hang on a sec." He fiddled with the cracked screen of the phone. "Ok. What was it again? Right, thanks. You'll be the first to know, I promise." Barry finished the call and tossed his own phone aside then noticed Joe's arched eyebrows. "What?"

"You wanna tell me what was going on there?"

"I told you, they know everything about each other. It's not that strange once you get used to it," Barry was sifting through the phone as he spoke, first coming upon an open article on Prof. Stein, he skimmed through it just to be thorough. Then he noticed that there was an unsent text saved to her phone. The folder was still sitting open.
"Wasn't she engaged to some other guy when the particle accelerator exploded?"

"Ronnie? Yeah... Oh! No. They aren't-- I mean, they're really close, but they're not, like, romantically close," Barry paused to reframe his explanation. "It's a lot easier to get it once you've seen what Dr. Wells can get like when he thinks that no one's looking. He'd probably be a crazy alcoholic hermit by now if Caitlin wasn't his doctor, and I'm like 90% sure that he'd back me up on that." Barry opened up the unsent text and blanched.

Blue fire. Last call.

"What is it?" Joe asked, stealing a fleeting glance at the phone in Barry's hand as he parked the car.

She left us a clue, but I don't think it leads to Leonard Snart." Barry shook the confusion from his mind and got out of the car. "Let's go. We still have to find her, right?"

2039

Eobard’s head hurt. His visual sensors were offline and would need to be manually rebooted and the device clamped onto the back of his neck had robbed him of his motor control. He was almost driven mad with panic. The transport stopped. The clamp forced him to stand, step off the motorsled, two more steps and a beefy hand knocked him onto his back. A painful clang announced his contact with the crude, metal stretcher that he’d been deposited on. Eobard wanted to cry. He considered screaming, but his captors would only send another jolt through his tactile processor. He never wanted to feel that kind of pain again. He was going to die, stripped for parts in the middle of nowhere on the Alaskan tundra, because he’d foolishly disobeyed his teacher.

They towed him on foot up a frigid mound, then the four strongest meta-criminals hoisted him up and carried him into their bustling lair. Eobard could make out the sounds of at least eight more life forms beyond the six who had captured him, already hard at work dismantling far more rudimentary stolen machines. He should have listened. He just wanted to go home.

The four men carrying him followed their leader into a back room. Eobard let out a small sound when the men hauling him jerked to an abrupt stop.

“Life is such a strange, and unpredictable thing,” Frost’s nearly melodic, echoing voice pontificated from her seat much farther into the room.

“Shit,” the man in front cursed, falling back to Eobard’s side while the two metas in front set the makeshift gurney down to aim their weapons at the unexpected company. “It’s Killer Frost!”

“Did you know that my parents were both Doctors?” Frost went on, undeterred. She shifted slightly and he could hear the metal on her belt contact the steel beneath. She was lounging on the operating table. “As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be one, too. It’s in my blood, after all. I was obsessed with the Hippocratic Oath. Even something like stamping on a house spider, I refused; Do no harm. I’ve been through a hell of a lot since then and as a result I have had to leave that innocent little girl behind. So, here’s what we’re going to do. I am going to give you a simple choice: you leave now, give back what you stole from me and we’re cool. I will allow you to return to your petty, self-serving little lives in peace. ...Or you can try your luck.”

The two thugs powered up their weapons.
Killer Frost raised a cautionary finger and tutted in the same way that she did when Eobard started getting over confident on the ice-flats surrounding their Arctic hideout. “That being said, if you so much as harm a single hair on his head I will personally deliver you your very slow and torturous demise, even if I have to hunt you down and drag you into hell myself. You should understand that there is absolutely *nothing* in this world that is going save you from me.”

The lair was overcome with absolute silence.

“In case it was unclear, that was the stupid choice. You have exactly three seconds left to mull it over,” she patronized. There was a loud clamour throughout the lair as most of the criminals bolted, whether or not they were directly involved in his kidnapping. “There’s always a few stupid ones.” Eobard heard his savior hop down off her perch in their wake and direct her unseen company. “No one else leaves until I’m finished.”

There was a tap of metal on concrete followed by an otherworldly rustling. Eobard didn’t need his visual sensors to know that the room beyond his feet had just been overwhelmed by impenetrable shadow.

Another jolt caused Eobard to cry out in agony; his tormentor screamed as he was frozen alive along with the triggering mechanism. There was a thud, a shatter and a grunt of pain. An outraged shout of, “You psycho bitch!” on his left devolved into a wet gurgle. Two pairs of feet fled into the darkness and the sound of horrified screaming followed close behind. A stabbing sound and warm blood trickled down from the man Eobard hadn’t realized was crouching over him. The dead man was shoved away. Eobard felt someone kneel at his side, then the familiar touch of a cool hand tilting his face towards his keeper. It didn’t take Killer Frost long to notice the clamp they’d stabbed into his flesh.

“Who?” she demanded, sounding more inhuman than he’d ever heard her.

“Orange parka,” Eobard indicated obediently.

“Shade!” she ordered. Seconds later the aforementioned assassin delivered the crying, pleading thief and forced him to his knees beside her. “Shut up,” Killer Frost derided. “You did this; fix it.”

“Please, please! I didn’t mean no disrespect! I didn’t know he was yours!”

“Fix him, now, and you will be spared an agonizing death.”

“Okay! Okay!”

There was a painful sting throughout Eobard’s sensory column while the man’s shaky fingers worked. He couldn’t quite hold back the cry of pain as the device was yanked free. Eobard’s eyes flashed red as his suppressed systems rebooted.

“Good.” Killer Frost snapped the thief’s neck with a savage twist of his head before he could realize what was happening.

“I understand why you are upset. I defied your instructions...” Eobard began to apologize as she hauled him upright by the arm. Killer Frost didn’t acknowledge it, even with a glance, only dragged him into the shadows behind their paid escort without another word.

Caitlin was missing. Eobard sat in his place at the hub, barely moving or even remembering to blink.
Cisco was saying something determined that was definitely meant to be comforting. Eobard hadn't a
cue who he thought he was comforting. Maybe he was saying it to make himself feel more
confident? Caitlin was missing. Eobard hadn't even thought to check on her this morning after she
failed to show up on time for work. He hadn't considered that she, too, might be a target. The
Director, if he really was somehow back from being erased and replaced, would be after Eobard.
There were reasons why he might go after Caitlin, but not good ones and not likely. He was not that
sloppy. So why? Caitlin was missing. What purpose could that serve? Someday she might become
Killer Frost, which meant that she might one day pose a possible threat, but that was speculation. As
a human being, her life would be too valuable for the Director to waste on supposition. She's alive.
Why is she missing?

The screen on the wall across the Cortex beeped and was overtaken by ripples of distortion for a
second. Eobard looked inquisitively at Cisco for a moment, then their attention was drawn to the
image coalescing on the screen.

"Greetings, citizens of Central City. My name is Leonard Snart, but you can call me Cold ..." The
parka-wearing menace purred into the camera, looking like the cat who caught the canary, behind
him was Mick Rory standing off to one side holding a struggling Caitlin. Eobard focused his primary
processing on her, taking in all the details that he could about her state of health (thankfully
unharmed), her behavior, and clues that would help him to pinpoint her location. The angle and level
of the natural light coming in from the windows of the warehouse, the clutter and the layout of the
small section of warehouse featured in the video, the humanly inaudible background noises of bugs
and a metallic thud in the far off background -- all indicated that they were within a quarter mile of a
shipping area; they were near to docks, but too far to be within sight or sound of the water. Snart was
using Caitlin as bait to draw out the Flash, but there was another risk to which the criminal had
unknowingly exposed her. Caitlin was only safe from the Director so long as she remained an
irrelevant bystander to their conflict; this new development made her relevant.

Eobard felt temptation crackle like lightning under his skin as Cold stated his terms.

"Porter and Maine, sundown. Come out, come out wherever you are, Flash. Prove to the world that
you're real, or this woman dies," Cold reached up, blocking out the camera and the signal cut out.
Eobard tilted his head downward just slightly, masking the subtle, predatory smirk twitching one side
of his mouth upward. Sundown. He was a patient, efficient, combat Android, he could wait until
sundown to return to his roots.

Barry sped into STAR Labs and looped through the halls twice in a quick search, then changed out
of his suit. Cisco didn't even look up from whatever small and intimidatingly intricate device he was
currently working on. Barry decided that it was best not to distract him from all the tiny, fragile parts.
He backtracked through the upper level and stopped to eye the abandoned wheelchair parked
unobtrusively against the wall. The open access hatch in the ceiling above was slightly askew, so
Barry climbed up the ladder to poke his head out and look.

"There you are," he greeted the scrawny scientist who was lying on his back, immediately to the
right of the hatch. "How did you even get up here?"

"Upper body strength," Dr. Wells clarified, paused to reflect on the other man's presence for a
moment, then added "And if you followed me up here to drag me back inside, too bad. I need to rest
before I can do that again."

"No that's okay, I'm not here to argue, but I'm not really sure that this is all that safe..." Barry
assessed, looking around at the open roof. He could imagine several ways for his stubborn friend to fall off in his mind's eye, not that the obvious danger would stop him.

"Don't mother me, Mr. Allen, only Dr. Snow is allowed that privilege.” Dr. Wells’ gaze saddened in response to the reminder.

"Can I join you?” Barry was already climbing out through the hatch. Dr. Wells took note of this and scooted over to allow him room, shoving his unresponsive legs into place with a deft hand. "You know we're going to get her back, right?"

Dr. Wells remained quiet, staring up at the cold blue sky above. "My roommate and I used to climb up onto our roof and look at the stars... well, no. He would and I would irritate him by pointing out 'undiscovered nonsense' to distract him. I forgot about it for the most part after I met Caitlin. I'm still not certain why that is."

"You know we need to talk about this," Barry was not going to let himself be diverted this time. "I want to think that it's a coincidence--"

"Why do I get the impression that you are about to accuse me of something, Mr. Allen?"

"I trust you. I know that you would never do anything to hurt Caitlin," Barry was quick to confirm. "But there is something that you aren't telling me. That meta-human who broke into the lab, you recognized the ring he left behind." After his statement was met only with silence, Barry told him "According to a note left on Caitlin's phone, he was the last one to call her before she was taken. I need to know what you know.."

"I already gave you her phone's password. What is it that you think I'm not telling you?" Eobard inquired, keeping his face pointed firmly skyward. "It was the explosion caused by my particle accelerator that created meta-humans. It is not beyond imagination for any one of you to want me to suffer, none of which requires my complicity!"

"I know. What about the ring?" Barry pursued.

"What about it?"

"I saw your reaction. You were afraid. You recognized it, but you didn't want to show it."

"Yes. I recognized it. It had your symbol on it," Dr. Wells pointed out, impatient as ever.

Barry shook his head. "No. That doesn't make sense. You have no reason to be afraid of me."

Dr. Wells grinned tightly, letting out a sharp hiss of breath that was visible in the chill Winter air. "You're just like him!"

"Look, I don't know what the deal is with you and your old roommate, but there's a reason why you never talk about E," Barry countered, propping himself up on one elbow to look down at his frustrating friend. "He left you! Remember? I'm here. I'm trying to help you right now, and you need to start talking. The guy that I saw standing over you this morning is not going to go away until you help me stop him!"

"I know that this is probably a lot to ask of you, Mr. Allen, but try not to presume authority over the lives of other people. You don't know what happened between myself and my roommate or why -- just because you read about it in a book," Eobard tried to retreat behind the cover of Wells' guise, but his insecurities kept thrusting their way to the fore. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself, staring up at the sky with a ferocity unjustified by present company as the android remembered, "He
was impatient, often self-centered. If he wanted something of mine he simply took it. He behaved as
though he had no concept of his own mortality, and on any given morning, he might throw a
breakfast plate or coffee mug at my head if he felt that I was being too chipper, but all that he
expected from me was to be there for him. That much I can do."

"I don't like being compared to some jerk who threw dishes at your head," Barry informed him,
offended.

"You have no concept of your own limitations! That ring had your symbol on it, Flash. Did it never
occur to you that you are the one in jeopardy?"

"Really? That is so hypocritical coming from you!" Barry observed, blowing right past what his
companion thought to be the more salient point.

"I'm old," Eobard stated. The words seemed to shock the speedster out of his rebellious line of
reasoning. "I am nearing the end of my life--"

"Don't say that."

"--and in my entire existence I have had very few people upon whom I could truly depend. You
need to understand: after relying on myself alone for so long, distrust has become a habit that is more
than just a pattern of behavior. It kept me alive. When I saw your symbol on that ring..." Eobard
stopped for a moment to stifle the unexpected tremble in his voice, even if it would only help him sell
the truthful cover story. "I saw something impossible, but it fit into the pattern that I am accustomed
to. I realized that I had failed to anticipate betrayal, and my complacence disturbed me."

Barry pinned the other man under his fierce glare. "You really need to cut that out. Just because you
got burned one too many times doesn't mean that everyone else in the world is a complete asshole!"

"Everyone else," Eobard echoed drily, deflecting the heat of his reverse's ire with humor. "You are
aware to whom you are speaking?"

Barry reached down and cupped a hand under his jaw, forcing him to make eye contact with an
incongruously gentle touch. Strangely, that tenderness shook him more than any physical blow ever
could, "I said stop! Life isn't some giant chess tournament that you have to spend constantly trying to
anticipate your opponent's moves! You don't have to do this alone, and you should know by now
that you'll always be a hero to me even if I don't agree with every decision that you make!" Barry
scolded, shocking the synthetic speedster to his core. "You don't need to be perfect! I doubt that I
would need you this much if you were. All I want is for you to get it through your thick skull that
you can trust me!"

Eobard stared up at Barry, wide-eyed, replaying the other man's words in his head over and over at
light speed. There were a number of different probable interpretations to some of what the young
Flash had said, which were throwing his processor into a loop. Barry stared into his eyes while the
anger ebbed out of him, eventually being replaced by a much more vulnerable and uncertain
expression. The speedster's cheeks began to color as he realized how close they were and pulled
away, turning to swing his legs down into the access hatch with his back to the other man.

"You're not alone anymore. You are surrounded by people who care about you. Cisco and Caitlin
risked their careers to stay with you and I'm pretty sure that we'd all be willing to risk a lot more if we
had to," Barry said in a quiet tone. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I only... I wish that you would quit
trying to shut me out just because you're scared."

"I'm not scared," Eobard defended, feeling more trapped by the second. Although what Barry had
said to him was technically true, he could not discount the threat that was his companion's future self. Barry pulled his legs out of the opening and lay back down beside him, looking up at the sky.

"Yes, you are," he stated simply. "But you don't have to be."

"You're planning to agree to Leonard Snart's demands, aren't you?" Dr. Wells finally asked.

"If it's what I have to do to bring Caitlin back," Barry replied in a lighter tone than sounded wise, shrugging off the scientist's concerns for his safety.

"It's a risk," Dr. Wells replied, studying the young Flash's face while he gazed up at the clouds.

"Uh huh. Hey, don't you think that one looks like a cat in a shoe?" Barry pointed up at a large clump of fluffy white above them. Dr. Wells turned to inspect it critically.

"It looks like a formation of water vapor suspended in Earth's atmosphere," he disagreed. Barry elbowed him in the side, emitting a small chuckle.

"No nonsense today," he joked. "Look, there are her ears, and there's the front of the shoe... and see? That cute little nublet sticking out over the top part there is her paw."

"Did you just say 'nublet'?" Eobard demanded incredulously.

"Oh, and right there. See? It's your favorite food!" Barry pointed at a vague burger shape to the far left. His companion abstained from cracking wise as he was still coming to terms with the whole nublet thing. Barry let his arm fall to his side, inadvertently covering his companion's hand with his own. To his surprise, the other man made no move to pull away. In fact, Eobard turned his own hand over to clasp his hand, taking advantage of the rare dermal contact to run a sneaky bioscan on his charge. Barry's heart skipped several beats, and his mouth went dry. Eobard compensated for his out of character action by pulling the hand closer to rub warmth into it with both of his own.

"This doesn't bother you, does it?" He verified, internally adjusting his own temperature in order to serve as a more effective heat source.

Barry shook his head, transfixed.

"Your circulation is weakening. We should start monitoring that from now on," Dr. Wells thought aloud. "I suspect that the cold weather is detrimental to your altered biology."

Barry continued to stare mutely.

"What happened to your gloves?" his impromptu hand-warmer wondered, oblivious.

"Ah... I--" Barry paused to clear his throat, not that it helped much. "I forgot them b-back at the lab, um, I mean my lab. I left them back at the Precinct."

"Hmm. I believe that I detect a stutter. Perhaps it is time for us to head indoors where it's warm," Eobard concluded, releasing his hold on the Flash's hand now that his scan was complete. Barry was healthy other than a slightly elevated heart rate and a minor fluctuation in his adrenaline and dopamine levels. Considering the emotional minefield presented by their current crisis, the android felt that he could disregard the negligible anomaly.

"Right. Yeah, it's the cold," the speedster agreed eloquently.

Eobard gave him a narrow look.
"I mean. I wasn't going to say anything," Barry explained, embarrassed, his cheeks coloring noticeably more than the temperature could account for. "Let's go inside."
They shoved her into a flimsy old kitchen chair on a platform off to one side of the somehow cramped and overfull warehouse. The place was a maze of different platforms, compartments, and bulky old machinery. It was probably a good place for them to stage their defense if anyone ever broke in and tried to start a shoot out. There were ample counterintuitive turns and hidden, shadowed hollows from which one could creep up and steal an enemy's life away. Mick Rory was the one who tied her up. He didn't seem to consider himself to be a lackey, but that's how Caitlin had decided to think of him. He was unstable, prone to violence and clearly not a complex thinker like Leonard Snart. Caitlin doubted that the pyro had ever planned anything in his life. He yanked the last knot tight on the ropes binding her wrists, causing a painful pressure against the bone.

"Your friend, he's fast," Mick remarked. He held up a zippo lighter and stared, entranced, into the flame. It was just a little too close to her hair as he placed his palm above the visible edge. "Like fire. Fire it's kind of indefinable, heat, light, energy. It's an evolution when things burn."

"You're sick," Caitlin dismissed --not a great way to encourage empathy, but even the physician had her limits.

"Oh yeah? Well, maybe you're the sick ones. You ever think about that?" Rory shot back, his eyes slightly unfocused and, well, crazy.

"Not really," Caitlin answered honestly. She wanted him to go away and leave her to her thoughts. She hadn't gotten enough time to say what really needed to be said to her friends in that last moment before she was grabbed. There were things that she'd been putting off for too long, but her loved ones only got a hasty text in her last minute of freedom, while this jerk had her for hours and rambled on about flames. Caitlin had to focus on him now, though, create a rapport so that they might think twice about killing her later. She eyed the scars blanketing his shoulders. "Those are third degree burns. Why didn't you get skin grafts?"

"The fire revealed who I truly am," Mick replied in his low, gravelly rumble. "I wonder what the Flash will reveal when I burn off his suit and skin?"

"Do whatever you want with me. But leave. Him. Alone," Caitlin threatened, leaning in as close as her bindings allowed and glaring fiercely back into his mad eyes. The pyromaniac grinned.

"Ooh, he must really be important to you if you're willing to die for him," he remarked, holding up his heat gun. There it was. These weren't caring people; she had to prove her mettle.

Caitlin smirked, doing an impression of her best friend's mysterious detachment. It drew from the cold pit of bitter emotion that she'd kept firmly locked down inside of her, gathering more darkness ever since her father's passing. For once she had a use for it. "You really don't understand anything at all. The world is changing all around you, and you..." she paused, letting the cold smirk intensify while she ran an unimpressed gaze over his face. "You've just stumbled into our way."

Rory remained still for a long moment. His eyes locked on hers as if they were two big cats caught in some territorial standoff. "How about you?" he challenged, coming back to life to run the tip of his heat gun up and down her arm. "What hidden truth will the flames reveal? You want to see who you truly are?"
Caitlin set her jaw and did her best to keep the disaffected mask up while she watched him. The more she drew on the frosty, core of emotion, the easier and truer this guise felt, as if some internal force was coming to life. Rory leered, gripping the trigger.

"Mick!" Captain Cold stepped up to the work table, scrutinizing both of them through tinted goggles, powering up his own weapon. The pyro eyed his annoyed buddy, then begrudgingly submitted. "It's time to go," he announced, satisfied. Cold turned and left without further preamble while Mick set something up out of Caitlin's line of sight. There was a disconcerting beep as he hooked a tripwire across the top of the short stairway behind her. He then tied a gag around her mouth, before heading after his cohort.

"You'd better pray that the next one to come this way is us," he threatened, leaving her to consider the new peril of her position in solitude.

2363

“What did it feel like, when your first body was destroyed?”

Eobard opened his eyes to see his master leaning back against the wall facing his charging alcove. His speculative expression was cast into stark relief by the bright, fluorescent panels of Eobard’s active charger.

“Highly unpleasant,” Eobard gave what he felt was the obvious answer to the question. “I believed that I was dying.”

“Then why did you do it?” The Director snapped.

“You would have died. It is my purpose to prevent you from coming to harm,” Eobard once again gave voice to the glaringly obvious. His master glowered, prompting Eobard to look askance. “Do you wish for me to terminate this charging cycle?”

“W-- No. Keep going. I only want something to talk at for a while.” The Director shook his head, then settled in as though he planned to stay for some time.

“Understood,” Eobard acknowledged, closing his glowing eyes and reestablishing full-current charging. After a minute, a new question disrupted the silence of Bionics Section A.

“What’s it like in the… Cloud?”

“I cannot explain.”

“Try.”

“I cannot.”

“Did you just defy a direct order?”

Eobard did not respond.

“You aren’t capable of defying me…” The Director growled suspiciously.
“Affirmative.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“Within what parameters?” Eobard questioned, still without opening his eyes.

“I don’t know…”

“Then I cannot comply.”

“You little shit,” The Director remarked although most of the heat was gone from his voice. “Can’t dumb it down enough for the lowly human brain?”

“Was my neural architecture not modeled on your own?” Eobard pointed out.

“Well, not mine actually. Someone close to me,” the Director unexpectedly revealed. “After he died, I got ahold of the engrams and--”

“Is it not highly illegal for a non-composite engram to be used as the blueprint for a simulated consciousness?” Eobard questioned, eyes opening in concern for his master’s future should he truly be guilty of such a crime. “And under the Moral Intelligence Production Measure of 2105, no artificial intelligence may be granted knowledge regarding the origin or identity of--”

“Yeah, I know the law. It’s irrelevant,” the Director waved off the logical correction as if it were nothing, causing his confused android to open his eyes and scrutinize him. “I needed to tell you. I didn’t know it until you were almost-- I saved him for something special, and now he’s a part of you. He was someone very important to me. I wanted someone else to know that he’s not gone, not really, not as long as I have you.”

“I do not understand.”

The Director’s mouth curled in a melancholy smile. “Of course not; you’re just a machine,” he shrugged it off, refusing to clarify. “It’s a human thing.” He pushed off of the wall, adding, “Hartley’s expecting you upstairs once you’re finished charging. I grant him full access to look your new body over for unintended quirks.”

“Is that safe?” Eobard queried.

“It’s Hartley,” the Director called back over his shoulder as if that were an answer. Perhaps it was. Eobard was learning that sometimes, faith was all that he really had.

Barry sat at his desk in his own lab for once and researched the address where Caitlin’s mystery call had apparently originated. It was a historical residence, small and homey, which had just been bought up weeks ago. The purchase had been rushed, to say the least, under a much higher payment than the not insubstantial price that had already been set before the sale. Someone with a frankly nauseating amount of funds wanted this place badly for some as yet unestablished reason. Was it the fire-meta himself, or was he merely an underling? What was so important about this place? Why the rush? A familiar large leather handbag dropped onto the desk beside Barry’s arm, startling him out of his pondering.

“Hey, Bear, what’s…” Iris stared at the listing displayed on his computer screen, seeming discomfited, although she recovered quickly. “Huh.”
“What is it?” Barry pursued.

“Oh, it’s probably just a coincidence. I was there for the open house a few weeks back. It was mostly an impulsive thing, you know, because of who used to live there,” Iris explained.

Barry’s brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“Dr. Wells. You two are getting so close, I thought…” Iris smiled in recognition. “You didn’t know. Wow, never thought that could happen, considering that whole nerd-crush thing you had growing up.”

“It’s not a crush!” Barry denied too quickly, shifting his focus back to the screen before he could see the knowing expression on his best friend’s face. “When did he live here? I mean, not because-- It could be relevant to the case somehow. You never know. I’m just asking.” Barry frowned at how stupid he sounded.

“He and his roommate lived there back in the early 2000’s while he was still working at CCU,” Iris explained, “It’s weird, though, the sale was really recent.”

“I know. It’s probably relevant. I just didn’t know why… until now,” Barry muttered the last words more quietly, not wanting to involve Iris in the danger that he had already drawn his team into.

“Weird coincidence, right?” Iris noted, unconcerned.

“Yeah,” Barry agreed distractedly, logging off his computer. He shook himself, attempting to shift gears back to a more personable state. “You had something you wanted to talk to me about.”

“Oh, yes. Well, you know how I sent in that sample to the Central Citizen, you know, just to get on their radar…”

“They called back?” Barry guessed attempting an appropriate amount of enthusiasm; It was harder than it should be.

Iris beamed at him. “You are looking at the Central City Citizen’s new junior reporter!” she pronounced happily.

“That’s great! I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks. I honestly don’t quite believe it yet.” She studied him too shrewdly, noticing the shadows hidden behind Barry’s eyes and the unusual dullness to his grin. “Are you okay?” Iris questioned, studying his unusually subdued countenance. She shifted to sit on the end of the desk, partially facing him.

“I don’t know. Not really. You already know about Caitlin and that’s…”

“I know that you’re worried, but she’s going to be okay. The Flash is going to take this Cold guy down. You’ll see.”

Barry smiled faintly. “I hope you’re right. It’s not just that.” Barry squirmed a little. “You may have been right about my having feelings for Dr. Wells.”

“I know.” Iris acknowledged.

“But it’s not a crush anymore; it’s worse. I have to head back to STAR Labs soon to support him as his friend -- and I have to act like everything is normal because he can barely stand to acknowledge
that he even has friends. He could never see me as anything more,” Barry ruffled a hand through his hair, frustrated.

“Barry…” Iris began in a consoling tone of voice. Barry stood and began hastily gathering his things to leave.

“I don’t have time for this. I shouldn’t be doing this again.”


“I’m sorry,” Barry responded unhelpfully as he shrugged on his jacket. “I’m not ready to talk with you about this right now.” He tried not to look up as he passed, but Iris rested a hand on his forearm.

“Hey. Come here,” she guided him into a hug. “It’s gonna be okay,” she reassured him, placing a hand on the back of his head. Barry let out a rattling breath, only loosely returning the embrace. He only felt more torn, but he couldn’t possibly explain it to her. He wanted to believe that Iris was right.

“Shut that screen off. I don’t need any distractions,” Eobard rebuked his meddling twin as he paced back and forth in the Time Vault, putting the final preparations for their plan in place.

“Yes, Dr. Wells,” She confirmed smugly, vanishing the webcam footage. Eobard slid his ring onto his finger and pressed it to the seal on the containment mechanism. The plexiglas safe lit up, revealing his speedsuit.

"The timing on this will need to be perfect, down to the last nanosecond. Barry cannot detect even the slightest hint of deception," Eobard cautioned. "If it even occurs to him that I might not be what I seem--"

"Your concerns have been noted, E," Dr. Wells' voice replied back to him, sounding characteristically impatient and authoritative. "However, I can assure you that we are, if anything, over-prepared for all eventualities."

"Point well made, Gideon," Eobard responded, transferring his speedsuit into his ring. "I will do everything that I can well before the end of the Flash's confrontation, but remember, there is always the chance of an unforeseen variable." He returned to his chair and headed out.

"Good luck, Dr. Wells."

Eobard didn't answer. Luck was fanciful. Precision was what would facilitate his success.

Barry was suiting up when he entered the Cortex. The speedster turned back rather than immediately pulling on his cowl; he went over to lean across the back of the hub while Dr. Wells set up their comm link.

"You ready to do this?" Barry questioned.

"All set," Dr. Wells confirmed, choosing to interpret it as a formality regarding the link.

"We'll bring her back safe, I promise," Barry persisted.

"I know," Dr. Wells replied, finally meeting his eye. "Whenever you're ready, Flash."

Barry nodded, putting his game face on as he pulled his cowl up to mask his identity. Eobard
watched him speed out of the room, then pulled the small, bead-like crystalline device out of his pocket and flattened it onto the back of the computer console.

"Signal Intercept engaged," Gideon reported, through his earpiece. "Commandeering administrative control of all networked devices..."

Eobard watched the loading bar, smiling sightly at the injoke. Then he glanced up at the spike in Barry's vitals.

"Barry?" He questioned. The uplink completed and Gideon continued for him in a flawless imitation of Dr. Wells' voice. "Barry, are you ok?"

Eobard surged out of STAR Labs in a shimmer of scarlet lightning, changing into his suit just as he met the cold night air. "Gideon, patch me into the comms and mute my outgoing signal."

Barry's winded response piped in through Eobard's earpiece. "Yeah, I know. I have to get them to cross streams. Turns out, not as easy as it sounds!"

"Perfect." Eobard brought up the navigational readout that Gideon had determined for Snart's hideout, then sped off to check on his personal physician.

Outside the warehouse in question, Joe and Cisco both got out of the black SUV, and grimly surveyed the unfriendly location. It was a weathered work of abused aluminum, layered with old paint and several generations' worth of graffiti.

"You sure this is the place?" Joe tested, looking to the geeky genius who still held his tablet at the ready.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Starting from Caitlin's car, I pieced together surveillance footage leading to this general area," Cisco said, double checking the results on his tablet just to be especially certain. Neither of them saw the uninvited guest who'd crackled into being on the arch of the roof and crouched down to survey their progress.

"There's about a dozen different warehouses around here," Joe pointed out.

"Yeah, but this is the only one that's had the heating turned on full blast for the past 48 hours," Cisco informed him, tucking away his trusty device. Up above, their hidden observer narrowed his eyes in response to the news. "I'm betting that Mick Rory likes it hot." The inventor inferred.

"Ok. Keep behind me," Joe instructed. The phantom flashed in ahead of them, unseen. The Detective led the way into the hideout, weapon drawn, then stopped for a second to listen. A strange sound simmered through the air up ahead and to his right. It was out of place, sounding like nothing he'd ever heard before. It was simply wrong.

Farther into the warehouse and to her would-be rescuer's right, Caitlin Snow looked up from the glinting, blood-red, armored torso that had burned its way into existence before her eyes. To meet the gaze of a tall, slender man with shroud of cobalt blue fabric covering his face. She protested as loudly as she could through her gag, instantly recognizing the intruder from the security footage.

He held up a finger to his lips through the scratchy fabric masking his identity, and used his blue flames to burn through her bindings. It seemed to be controlled completely by his will, as if the fire was an extension of his consciousness. Caitlin whimpered, desperately searching her mind for some
chance to get away. Her wrists burned. He grabbed her arms and dragged her to her feet.

"Freeze! CCPD!" Joe shouted, stepping up to the bottom of the stairs behind her. The meta-human tilted his head to look around her at her two saviors. He turned her to face Joe, holding her between them to further hinder any chance of being recognized. Joe continued to approach the more they backed away, heedless of Caitlin's panicked attempts to warn him off. It was pointless. The gag kept her from being understood. Joe tripped the hidden explosive and in a desperate reflex Caitlin kicked out at him, knocking him back.

"CAITLIN!" She heard Cisco scream as the mystery meta yanked her away from the blast into a cacophony of bright, flashing lights, sounds, and patterns too fleeting for her brain to process. It was too swift and jarring a transition for either of them to notice the scarlet lightning that streaked through the warehouse in their wake. Suddenly, Caitlin and her latest kidnapper were standing on a rooftop. It was the roof of a meat processing plant. Caitlin could smell the beef blood. Her captor's grip loosened enough for her to pull off her gag and vomit without getting it on either of their clothes, or her stockinged feet. There had to be worse times to lose your shoes... she couldn't think of any at the moment.

"Agh... Oh," she straightened up only to dry heave as soon as he began to move her again. "No, hhhhng. Hang on!"

The meta actually had the nerve to roll his eyes, as if her queasiness was the serious imposition. Caitlin managed to fight down the rising bile out of sheer force of will. She regretted it once she looked up and saw him extend his right arm, releasing a long, deadly blade. The ripple of light painting a new gunmetal color onto his armor confirmed to Caitlin whom she was dealing with. Her heart sank into her writhing stomach. Her limbs went cold and rubbery, trembling like jello.

"No..." Caitlin sobbed, trying to pull away from the arm still holding her in an iron grip. "No please ..."

He raised the blade to her throat. His eyes looked almost repentant, yet not enough.

"Please! Stop! I don't want to die!"

A yellow blur smacked into the meta, knocking Caitlin onto her backside in the process. She groaned in pain, pushing herself upright. The Man in Yellow was crouched on top of the mysterious meta, punching him repeatedly in the head. He turned his hellish, crimson eyes on her even as the azure flames spread over him.

"Run for your life!" The Reverse Flash ordered. Caitlin didn't hesitate. The blue flames were spreading over the killer meta-human, forcing her monstrous saviour back. Caitlin darted into the stairwell and slammed it shut behind her, hurtling down the steps at a flat out sprint. If she fell, she fell. Her mind was in survival mode at that point. She couldn't slow down even if she wanted to. Everything started to melt together in Caitlin's mind. Every shadow she saw held a monster waiting to pounce. Every sound was the last warning before her killer appeared to slit her throat, and burn her to ash. As she reached the packing floor Caitlin heard a loud boom and a deep, reverberating cry of pain from above.

Caitlin looked up, feeling her blood chill in her veins; The Reverse Flash was screaming. It was a warped, bone-grating, artificial clangor, as if his voice had never been intended to process so much alarm. Caitlin froze, terrified, and looked back towards the stairwell. The first tendrils of blue-white lightning were teeming over the walls on the other side of the door. She dropped down to the floor, scrambling under a table. That wouldn't do. She needed a better hiding place, something with a barrier. Caitlin looked down the end of the row ahead of her at the heavy, metal door to the
meatlocker. That odd, flickering sizzle consolidated just inside the stairwell. No time to be cautious. Caitlin threw herself at the heavy-duty latch and ducked inside, slamming the door behind her just in the nick of time. The meta-human surged into the barrier. Caitlin clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her scream as she backed away into the rows of hanging, frozen flesh. There was another loud slam of two bodies impacting at high speed, and her pursuer let out a wordless shout. Caitlin could hardly believe how reassuring it felt to know that the Reverse Flash was still alive and fighting. Usually, he would be the scariest thing in town. Now, all that she could do is wrap her coat more tightly around herself, hide in the rows of solid meat, and hope that the devil won this time-- Only this time-- and that he wouldn't decide to go ahead and kill her himself once he was done.
Frost from Flame

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I am not a doctor.

Eobard grunted in pain as the eerie, blue flames overwhelmed his sensors. He smacked his head and shook his systems back into alignment. His uplink had been overloaded. His connection with Gideon was gone, as well as the one with STAR Labs’ systems, and therefore Barry. Eobard was officially on his own.

His opponent retracted his blade, using both hands to slam Eobard face down onto the cement. He sat on the android’s back, wrapping the cloth he’d been using to mask his identity around his captive’s neck multiple times. Then he stood and strode away as if certain of his victory. Eobard began to disentangle himself, only for the fabric to disintegrate into billions of nanites. There was a bright crackle of charge dancing over the swarm as they fed on his power cells. He let out an inhuman scream that warped up and down the audible spectrum, and phased through the roof. The tiny bots fell into an inert pile of black sand, once deprived of a host from which to leech energy. Eobard dragged himself upright and stumbled down the stairs until his power levels stabilized. He saw his prey and pounced, devolving them both into a mass of thrashing, striking limbs until the other threw him off. He crashed through an offline packing machine only to pop upright and shrug off the shrapnel.

"You know that you can't win this fight!" his opponent cautioned.

"I could say the same to you," Eobard responded, wiping away some of the translucent, dayglow-cyan fluid that dribbled down from one corner of his mouth.

His enemy's eyes creased at the edges in a show of concern. "That internal coolant leak means that you're only one misstep away from sustaining permanent damage. Your nanites won't be able to save you if you keep fighting me like this!"

Eobard punched him across the left temple, causing his bionic eye to spark, flash and flicker. "And the façade on your eye is malfunctioning," he taunted with his most obnoxious grin. "You're welcome!"

"I'm not looking to blend in this time, and I'm serious, Eobard," his nemesis argued, although he did reach up and activate his helmet before outstretching the same arm to light Eobard's suit on fire. He missed by a hair's breadth. "...keep resisting me and I will kill you."

"Because when at first you don't succeed, try, try, try, try again," Eobard mocked, forcing himself forward to aim a left hook at the other time traveller. The ex-speedster caught Eobard's fist just short of his face and flipped his escaped android onto his back. "You used to be a lot better at talking shit, Director."

"And you used to be a lot more reasonable!" The defunct Flash objected, trying to pin Eobard down
with a foot on his throat. The Reverse Flash shamelessly punched him in the groin and sped out of his reach. "Achk, damn it!" The Director choked out, before disintegrating into a surge of ultraviolet charge.

Eobard turned back only to have his visual sensors overwhelmed by the light of the current rushing straight towards him. "Oh."

The moment that the Flash had managed --with Eddie's assistance-- to capture Captain Cold and Heatwave, he noticed that absolute silence had dominated the comms for far too long. Barry hadn't even taken more than two steps away, clearly still within the Detective's hearing when the coiling wrongness in his gut overwhelmed him.

"Hey. Did you hear that? We have them contained," Barry tried again.

No response.

"Dr-- Are you there?" He begrudgingly readjusted the comms to include all STAR Labs frequencies. "Does anybody read me?!!"

"Barry?" Cisco's voice replied.

"Trouble, Flash?" Snart's vindictive sneer sent Barry over the edge. He ran at top speed to the Cortex to find Dr. Wells' wheelchair sitting, empty at his computer station.

"I'm sorry..." Cisco continued to fill him in on the bad news. "We-- we lost Caitlin. The fire-meta took her."

"I lost them..." Barry felt as if the ground had dropped out from underneath him.

"Them? What does 'them' mean? Who's-- You mean Team Temperature, right? They got away, or..." Cisco interrogated, confused. "Barry, are you still there?"

"He's gone. Dr. Wells, is gone," Barry numbly stumbled backward and slid down the wall, desperately wishing that he could wake up from this nightmare. He had left Dr. Wells with a promise that he would bring their captured friend home safely. Instead, he'd lost them both. Cisco went straight to the hub and pulled up the security footage as soon as he arrived. The security cameras had all been shorted out by some kind of power surge a few seconds before Barry had stopped hearing Wells' voice. The Flash hadn't stopped running through the city in search of his missing teammates since he saw that screen go black. During the apparent kidnapping, Eddie's men stationed outside hadn't even noticed anything amiss.

Barry was bolting through the industrial district when a screaming ball of red lightning fell from above accompanied by large chunks of the wall he'd burst through, forcing Barry to skid to a halt to avoid the flailing--smoking?-- mass of limbs. A yellow clad speedster landed hard, cracking the asphalt on impact. Barry stared, momentarily stunned as the Reverse Flash pushed himself up into a crouch to snuff out the rest of the flames in a blur of subdued motion. Using his good arm, he then relocated his dislocated shoulder to the correct position with robotic stoicism. The Reverse Flash rose to his feet to stare with an underlying aura of irritation at the Flash.

"You're late," he stated simply, then darted back into the meat processing plant on Barry's left. The Flash was quick to follow suit.
"You took them!"

"No. He did."

"Who is 'he'?" Barry demanded, grabbing the bionic man's arm. The Reverse Flash stopped and turned to face him.

"Irrelevant," he pushed the gripping hand away. "All that you need to know is that he's more dangerous than I am, and you cannot defeat me, Flash. The girl is in the freezer. Provide her with enough heat and she will thrive."

"What is that supposed to mean? Why is this guy after us? Why should I trust you?"

"Because I may not always tell you the entire truth, Flash, but to outright lie to you is contrary to my-..." the Reverse stopped short, shoving Barry out of sight into a shadowed alcove between stacked boxes. In the next split second, a rush of blue-white lightning coalesced into a figure made of azure flames tackling him out of Barry's line of sight. There was a crash and a muffled grunt from the Reverse. The sound of a punch, then another metallic slam. Barry cautiously peeked out of his hiding place, still trying to make sense of his enemies' actions. The meta had pinned the Reverse Flash on a conveyor belt and was now crouched on top of him, blade raised. He was saying something, but his voice was too quiet for Barry to make out. Whatever it was, his words only seemed to be making the Reverse Flash angrier. A common enemy; who knew?

Barry shrugged off the many questions lingering in his mind in favor of beginning his swift but silent search for the right freezer. There were quite a few on the floor they were on and Barry knew that Caitlin had already been trapped inside for too long. He tapped his comms.

"Guys, I think I'm onto something here. It looks like the meta took Caitlin here after he snatched her. The Reverse Flash said that she's locked in one of the refrigeration units."

"The Reverse Flash is working with him?!!" Cisco exclaimed.

"Um, no... Actually, he's holding the other guy off while I search the place. I didn't have time to ask him about Dr. Wells before the meta attacked. It looks like these two hate each other a lot more than they care about us. At least, for now... Can you help me narrow this search down or..."

"Joe called it in to the station already," Cisco informed him. "I'm hacking into surveillance cameras in the area now, but I'm not sure how much I can help you pinpoint her-- Yeah, okay! Not at all! Because the meta is, like, some kind of walking deadzone for cameras now, apparently! I'm sorry, Barry, but--"

Barry looked around the freezer he was now checking and let out a small fed up sound, "It's okay, Cisco. I get it. I'm on my o--" he froze on his way out, then sped back inside. There was a small, pallid figure curled up against the back wall between two boxes. Her colorless, huddled form had been almost completely hidden behind the large flanks of hanging meat. "Caitlin!" Barry breathed, hurrying to pull her out of her hiding place and into his arms. "Caitlin, come on!" Her cheek was ice cold to the touch and her eyes were shut as if in sleep. "Come on, you gotta wake up!"

"You found her! Is she okay? Tell me that she's okay!" Cisco asked over the comms, sounding as if he might choke on his own pent up anxiety. Barry tugged his glove off with his teeth and felt her neck, silently praying for a pulse. It was there, too slow, but surprisingly steady.

"Oh thank God! She's alive, barely. I'm bringing her home." He sped right over the Reverse Flash's form on the floor, consequently slamming the latter’s face down against the cement just as he'd
started to push himself up. Barry paused in Caitlin's lab to deposit her gingerly on a medical bed, then darted back to his nemesis just as he was pushing himself to his feet for the second time.

"You stepped on me!" The wrath in the Reverse's fiery red eyes would have been intimidating in any other situation. In this one, Barry grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled in the monster's face.

"WHERE IS DR. WELLS!!"

"You think that I care?" the other speedster scoffed.

Barry gripped the front of his suit and sped them up onto the roof, leaning his reverse over the edge where tons of drainage water tumbled into the river below. The Man in Yellow hastily grabbed onto his arms in a painfully tight grip, not fighting, but rather clinging to him as if repelled by the mere presence of the water.

"How about now?! ARE YOU STARTING TO CARE?" Barry bellowed. He didn't know if he actually had it in him to let go, but he was hoping that the Reverse Flash didn't know either. Barry had no idea what he would do if he couldn't save Dr. Wells. That knowledge, itself, was terrifying.

"You wouldn't! You're not a killer yet!" The Reverse Flash exclaimed, looking genuinely freaked out. He kept looking back towards the rushing water and up at Barry. It made sense; water and electronics are famously incompatible, that was what had prompted Barry even to think of this.

"Where is he?!!" Barry demanded. The Reverse Flash's eyes dimmed for a moment and the silence dragged. "You're kind of heavy!" Barry warned, understating the point. It felt as if the guy literally weighed a ton.

"I'm calculating his trajectory!" The Reverse Flash snapped right back.

Barry's brows furrowed in confusion, then the realization slammed into him like a tsunami.

"Judging by the estimated speed of the current and--"

"The location?" Barry wasn't even capable of yelling anymore. He felt as if the air had been squeezed out of his lungs.

"You should find him 2.13 klicks east, near to the mou--"

Barry yanked the Reverse Flash back onto the roof and sped away without waiting for him to finish his sentence. The Flash ran out onto the surface of the bay at top speed, searching desperately for any sign of his friend. He wasn't sure how he was going to do this. The altered physics of moving in a liquid medium would all but nullify his speed. Not to mention that it was now well into the night, and there would be no way to see the physicist's drowning form in the utter blackness of the-- Barry's panicked consideration was interrupted by an unexpected sight on the shoreline nearby. A dark shape stretched out of the edge of the water. Barry was crouched over the drenched body in the blink of an eye, yanking back his cowl in a subconscious habit that Eobard wished he'd quit.

"Harrison?" Barry rasped out. His throat felt like sandpaper. He carefully rolled Dr. Wells onto his back. The scientist jerked awake, sucking in a too-sharp breath and immediately descended into a coughing fit.

"Barry," Eobard acknowledged between coughs, willfully ignoring the way that the Flash was preoccupied with carefully inspecting the bruises that he, himself, had inflicted.

"That was way too close," Barry muttered, collapsing into a sitting position and allowing his head to
fall forward onto Dr. Wells’ shoulder as his adrenaline rush began to fade.

"What took you so long?" Dr. Wells questioned, breathlessly resting a hand in his friend’s hair.

Barry’s head jerked up to display his incredulity. "Everyone's a critic tonight," he remarked without any heat, and slipped an arm under his endearingly-entitled friend in preparation to carry him.

"And Caitlin... You got her back?"

"Come on." Barry dodged the question. He was so exhausted that the scientist's slight body felt heavy in his arms. It reminded him too much of the weight of his captive, bionic nemesis back on the roof. Barry knew that it was just his own guilty conscience punishing him for what he'd almost been willing to do. He didn't think that he would ever be able to admit to his mentor just how shamefully close the Flash had come to crossing the line in his absence. Instead, his enemy's words would haunt him.

"You aren't a killer yet."

Barry carried Dr. Wells into STAR Labs and deposited him on the couch in Cisco's office. They could hear the chaotic scramble and elevated voices of Joe and Cisco through the closed door.

"Something's wrong!" Dr. Wells both observed and accused.

"Things are kind of hectic right now," Barry deflected, not wanting to stress the older man who'd already almost drowned just a few minutes ago.

"What aren't you telling me? Where is Caitlin?" at his mention of their geneticist friend, Barry unintentionally winced.

"We'll handle it. Don't worry." He sped out of the room, returning with some clean sweats, and a towel in the blink of an eye. "Here. You should get changed. I'll be back later."

"No, tell me what--"

Barry vanished again before Eobard had gotten halfway into his sentence.

"Damnit, Flash!"

Naturally, Eobard had depleted enough of his power reserves that his legs were nothing but a collection of dead circuits. After he'd changed into Barry's spare clothes, it took him fifteen minutes to drag himself over and into the wheelchair that his assholic reverse had left on the other side of the room. It was just like the Flash to do that to him on purpose in order to keep him trapped! Eobard swore to himself that next time they faced each other in their masked guises he was going to greet the Flash with a supersonic punch to pay him back.

Caitlin's bed was no longer the center of a panicked whirlwind when Dr. Wells arrived. She was cocooned in a mixture of thermal and electronic 'smart' blankets. Her face was white as her namesake, and her lips had faded to a pale lavender color. The others had her hooked up to a warm saline line and had a mask over her face, providing humidified air to her lungs. It wasn't enough. She was showing no sign of positive change, and when Eobard rested his hands over her layered blankets he found them to be several degrees below room temperature.
"What happened to her?"

Barry started forward, opening his mouth to explain.

"Cisco," Dr. Wells clarified, refusing to acknowledge the manipulative speedster. Detective West frowned in response to his odd behavior, but didn't push the issue.

"Uh... She..." Cisco floundered, then cleared his throat and began more certainly. "Caitlin was locked in an industrial freezer for over an hour." He called up her medical data on his iPad and handed it over. "We're trying to heat her up again but nothing is working! I--" the young inventor glanced past Wells, presumably at Barry, and his expression turned guilty. "Sorry... We are going to figure this out." Just as he said this the socket providing power to her blankets emitted sparks and the overtaxed appliances gave out.

"That's the last of them," Joe announced darkly. "I thought that this place was supposed to be state of the art!"

"It's not the equipment," Dr. Wells corrected, sorting through the data that Cisco had presented him with. "It's the method."

"We might not be medical doctors but we've treated her according to--" Barry began.

"According to these readings of Caitlin's ambient body temperature, a normal human being would've gone into cardiac arrest upon arrival, that is if she lasted that long. Yet, her heart rate hasn't altered even the slightest bit," Eobard talked over him, peeling Caitlin's covers back so that he could measure her temperature and metabolic rate more accurately with his palm. "Her metabolic rate is clocking in at an unprecedentedly slow rate, but it remains perfectly stable, ergo she is in stasis not in decline. This is not a simple case of hypothermia. I believe that what we are seeing here is the result of her body spontaneously adapting to being subjected to extreme temperatures."

"Listen, Dr. Wells, you've just been through a near death experience," Joe began with genuine sympathy. "Not to mention that we all know how close the two of you are. Maybe you should take some time to recover, and let us handle this one."

"I am perfectly lucid, Detective," Dr. Wells snapped, looking to Cisco. "The data is right here. You can verify my conclusions for yourself."

"I don't know," Cisco backed off, busying himself with the remaining equipment. "Caitlin's not a meta-human. We would've seen it by now... Wouldn't we?"

"Her readings are beyond abnormal. I am not imagining this!" Dr. Wells insisted. A red clad arm reached over his shoulder to pick up the iPad. Dr. Wells turned back to see Barry skimming through the aforementioned data.

"Okay," Barry cautiously accepted, setting the device aside. "You have an idea of what we should do?"

It took a couple of seconds for his prompt to take effect, due to Eobard's surprise. "The heat from those blankets was being siphoned off somewhere, that's why they've already gone cold. They were being overloaded because they were unable to compensate. I believe that in order to return to equilibrium, she needs more heat than we can provide using this approach-- a thermal jumpstart, if you will. There's a tempered glass tank in basement storage--"

"Woah! Hold it right there, Dr Frankenstein!" Cisco interjected. "I'm pretty sure that I can see where you're going with this and no, Caitlin is already in a fragile state from being almost frozen to death."
We are not going to risk boiling her alive based on a theory you improvised off the top of your oxygen-deprived head!"

"I know how this sounds, but with proper monitoring--"

"I'm with Cisco, you're losing it!" Joe cut in. Dr. Wells ground his teeth.

"Her body has been supercooled! You can observe how rapidly her body is absorbing and transferring heat!"

Once again, the younger version of his mentor was the only one verifying his assertions. This time, by feeling the frosted thermal blankets for himself, then resting his palm against her bare neck to feel the bizarre chilling effect for himself. His fingers started to look a little blue before he hastily pulled away, shaking out his hand.

"Barry, she needs to regain equilibrium now before we lose this chance. I--" Eobard finally allowed himself to meet the young Flash's gaze, hardly able to believe that he was once again entrusting so much to this man's judgement. "I can't explain it and there isn't enough time to test it, but I know that I am not wrong about this! Please, she is running out of time..."

Barry's jaw set and with a small nod, he sped away to fetch the tank. For better or for worse, Barry always trusted Harrison Wells.

"Barry, wait!" Joe called only to be ignored. The younger Flash only paused briefly between tasks to hear Dr. Wells call out the next instruction until the impromptu heating apparatus was set up. Cisco was begrudgingly detaching Caitlin from her current life support equipment, but hesitated to remove her IV.

"You can leave that," Dr. Wells reassured him, not looking up from the monitoring equipment that he was currently calibrating. "She'll need the extra fluids, anyway."

Cisco sighed, looking a little too pale himself. "Great..." his hands were shaking a little as he peeled back the last of her blankets. Caitlin had gone almost impossibly pale by then, the light blush color of her satin slip made her look like some bizarre, life-sized porcelain doll.

Dr. Wells checked the thermometer in the tank. "Okay. I think we're good to start."

"I guess it's not too hot for a jacuzzi... If you leave it at that I won't stop you," Joe bargained, as if he had any actual control over what was happening.

"I'm sorry, Caitlin." Cisco looked from her prone form to the bubbling tank across the room. "I know you've always trusted him..."

"Cisco? We need to get her into the water, now!" Dr. Wells ordered.

Cisco backed away, running both hands through his long hair as if he might start pulling it out at any second.

"Barry," Dr. Wells prompted instead. The speedster solemnly scooped the ice-cold meta-human in the making out of her bed and deposited her carefully in the tank with her head propped up on the edge. The water visibly chilled. Caitlin began to shiver more and more until she was violently convulsing, splashing slushy water over the edge.

"What the hell?" Joe exclaimed as Barry darted forward to support their patient's head and prevent her from slamming it against the glass. Dr. Wells was too focused on monitoring and incrementally
raising the water temperature to comment.

"Almost... Just a little more. You can do this," he muttered, half audible. His forehead creased in a deep frown and he slapped the console.

"What are you doing?" Cisco questioned, seeing him push away from the controls.

"The heating element is on maximum. There's nothing more to do," Dr. Wells fumed.

"Whoa," Barry reflexively jumped away from the ice threatening to encase his hands. Caitlin's head slipped over the edge and her body completely submerged. "Crap! Caitlin!"

He tried to lunge in and catch her but the water's surface had already frozen solid. Joe grabbed his foster child by the arm and dragged him back. Barry struggled to extricate himself, still fixated on stopping his friend from drowning.

"Barry, stop! Look at her!"

As the water gradually crystallized around Caitlin's suspended body, the last hints of color faded away. Her skin was now truly as pure white as fresh snow. Her auburn hair was paling from red, to copper, to gold, to platinum blonde as the pigment burned away. Frost began to spread over the outside of the tank. Right as it threatened to obscure her curled form from sight, her eyes opened. The dark brown drained out, becoming palid, glacial blue. Her striking eyes scanned over the others’ uncertainty until the frost blocked her view.

They could see her silhouette shift and writhe in the solidifying water, reorienting until finally, she kicked off from the bottom hard enough to burst out through the top layer of ice. The sound of her loud gasp of first breath snapped the rest of the team out of their awed stupor. Cisco and Barry both hastened forward to help her extricate herself from the frozen water tank, while Dr. Wells followed more calmly with a fresh towel. The color began to return to Caitlin’s irises while she looked around. Then she clenched her eyes shut and clung to Cisco's arm when her leg slipped over the edge too quickly.

"Hey, easy. We got you," Cisco soothed, moving so that Barry could fortify his grip on her waist. "Barry is going to lift you out of there in a second. Are you okay with that?"

Caitlin sucked in another deep breath and nodded spasmodically, hooking an arm around the aforementioned man's shoulders. "Okay, okay."

"Ready?" Barry verified.

She nodded again and braced herself. Barry lifted her in a graceful arc and deposited her in front of Dr. Wells chair. He passed over the big fluffy towel so that she could dry herself off-- Barry ended up having to help her a little. She was covered the instant they had finished with the thermal blankets that Joe had retrieved. The small, unexpected push from the blankets on her back caused Caitlin to stumble against the arm of Wells' chair. She would've tumbled straight into his lap if the detective hadn't been so quick to catch her shoulders, causing the disoriented young woman to blush.

"Sorry..."

"I'm just glad to have you back," Eobard replied with a smile, backing up a little so that Joe could easily guide her back to the bed. Barry and Cisco were already busy resetting the sensors and monitors. Caitlin sat perfectly still while Barry placed the circular sensor nodes, then placidly laid down when he peeled the covers back for her. As soon as her head hit the pillow, however, her face crumpled in a sob. She reached out and grabbed Dr. Wells' hand like a lifeline.
"I thought I was going to die!"

"I know, but you're safe now. I promise," Dr. Wells soothed, holding on to her smaller, frigid hand just as tightly. "We're all right here with you. No one is ever going to take you away from us again."

That last pledge had the slightest hint of violence laced into it but neither Caitlin nor Barry seemed to notice.

Barry gave her one last concerned assessment before stepping out to talk things over with Joe.

"I'm going to call Eddie and let him and his task force know that everyone is back safe and accounted for," Joe informed him.

"He's going to want to talk with Caitlin soon. What are we supposed to do about that?" Barry fretted, watching Caitlin and Dr. Wells through the glass divider.

"You let me worry about Eddie for now, just try to get some rest and recover. Right now I'm more concerned about whether you're going to be okay tonight."

"No, Joe, of course I'm not okay! Two of my friends were almost murdered on my watch, and I barely managed to stop it," Barry confessed. "What kind of hero am I if I can't even protect the people who are closest to me?!"

"Barry, you guys were dealing with attacks from three different people at once," Joe disagreed.

"Actually, to be fair I'm pretty sure that the Reverse Flash was helping me this time..." Barry recalled, still uncertain of what to think of that anomalous occurrence.

"The Reverse Flash?"

"Yeah, that's what Cisco's calling-- Oh! You meant Snart, Rory and the fire meta! I guess I never got around to mentioning-- The-- One of the Men in Yellow sort of held the meta at bay while I looked for Caitlin. I think it wasn't really so much him being helpful on purpose as it was a 'they both wanted to murder each other so badly that I wasn't relevant anymore' kind of thing, so... Yeah. That happened."

"Oh, well I guess it's good that it worked out in our favor this time."

"It is..."

"I'm, uh, going to go make that phone call. Then I'm probably going to head back to the station. You staying here for a while?" Joe needlessly confirmed. Barry nodded.

"Goodnight, Joe."

By the time that Barry reentered her lab, Caitlin had fallen asleep. Cisco walked over to talk with him near the door.

"How is she?"

"All her vitals seem to have returned to normal," Cisco replied quietly. "It looks like Dr. Wells was right."

"He usually is," Barry confirmed. Cisco shot him a look.

"Careful, someone nearby might try to quote you on that later."
"Probably in the next few minutes. I'm about to try to talk him into getting checked out at the hospital," Barry predicted.

"Well, this has been a really long night. I think we need a fresh pot of coffee!" Cisco made his escape without any indication of shame.

Barry watched with fleeting amusement, then pulled up a chair to join Dr. Wells' vigil at Caitlin's bedside. He paused, deciding at the last minute to remain standing, still too amped up to relax yet.

"Dr. Wells..."

"I heard you, Mr. Allen. I'm not going anywhere until I am sure that I won't be needed."

"You were dropped off of a roof--"

"There are worse things than being thrown into a river."

"You nearly drowned tonight," Barry persisted. "You need to take care of yourself."

"I feel better," Dr. Wells countered mulishly. "So I suggest that you stop hovering."

Barry lowered himself into the chair beside him, steeling himself for a heartfelt confession. "Listen... I--" To his surprise, the other man's hand moved to one side, brushing over the back of Barry's almost too lightly to be felt before shying away. This time Barry was quick to chase the fleeting opportunity before it could be lost. Dr. Wells blinked rapidly, caught, unwilling to look away from the sensor readout across from them. "You don't have to handle this alone," Barry reminded him. They sat together, the somber silence only interrupted by the steady beeping of the heart monitor.

"I don't want to leave her yet," Dr. Wells confided, passing an uncertain gaze over the speedster's face.

"I know."

Eobard looked down at their joined hands, processing the dangerous bond that threatened to form between himself and this younger version of his nemesis as Barry continued speaking.

"I'm sorry for ditching you in Cisco's lab. I- I'd just almost lost you and I was afraid of what it might do to you to see her like that," Barry apologized, his grip tightening in response to the thought of their close call. "I was the one who dragged you into this. I wanted to be a hero and now you've all become targets because you were willing to help me. I guess, I wanted to fix it for you."

Eobard tried to remind himself that it was not him but “Harrison” that Barry’s advances were aimed toward; it wasn’t working. It didn’t matter in the long run, or it wouldn’t once he had purged the hazardous memory files during his next charging cycle. After all, he could not fall into the trap of Barry’s affections if he didn’t know.

"That's not how this works." Eobard slipped his hand out of his reverse’s grasp. He was more angry with himself for indulging his desire for closeness than he was at Barry. How many times had Eobard already put himself through this? There was no way of knowing.

"I was trying to take care of you," Barry spoke softly, hurt.

"Aren't you always?" Eobard reflected. He shouldn’t care. He allowed the young Flash an understanding smile. "You aren't responsible for this," he reassured.
"It isn't about responsibility," Barry disagreed, his voice sounding surprisingly brittle. "I care about what happens to you. If I can't protect the people who matter to me, then what's the point of any of this?"

Eobard studied him, weighing the variables at lightning speed, trying to maintain distance while giving his friend the comfort that he required. "You brought her home," he stated simply, hoping that the statement of fact would be enough. It seemed to help somewhat.

Barry nodded, giving him a lukewarm smile in thanks.

"That being said," the android switched gears, hoping to catch a break due to the Flash's somber mood. "You don't have to tell Caitlin about my... fall, do you? I mean, since I have already more or less recovered."

"You mean, how you were thrown into freezing cold drainage water and almost drowned? Yeah, I'm definitely going to tell your doctor about that."

"I'm willing to bargain." Dr. Wells offered shamelessly.

"That's nice. I'm still going to tell her," Barry refused to compromise.

"I'm willing to concede a shower break." Dr. Wells stubbornly tried to barter, took note of the expectant way that the other man was watching him and continued "...and a nap."

"I'll be here," Barry promised nebulously.

"How long?"

"Until you're rested."

"And we don't need to mention anything to do with drowning if I cooperate."

"We don't need to," Barry echoed, beginning to look amused. Eobard did not find it strangely attractive.

"Non-negotiable."

"I agree," Barry responded, making it clear that that was the most he was willing to bargain. To his relief, it worked. Dr. Wells left him to bask in the small victory at Caitlin's bedside for all of ten seconds before a cool hand brushed his arm.

"You were awake the whole time," Barry noted, wondering how much she had overheard.

"Thank you. I'm not really up to dealing with him yet," Caitlin replied, sleepily rubbed at her eye, then tugged at the lock of silvery hair that had fallen into her face. "That's light," her mouth fell open as realization dawned. "My hair turned white!" She said in a pinched voice.

"I think it looks pretty cool," Barry remarked with a sly smile, doing his best to push his inner turmoil aside for her sake.

"Did you just pun me?"

Barry held up his thumb and forefinger less than an inch apart. "It really does look good though. ...You realize that Cisco's probably going to want to name you now? Right, Captain Snow?"

"Oh for goodness' sake!" Caitlin objected. "I haven't even done anything yet except unconsciously
freeze myself into a tank.”

Barry tried and failed to stifle the grin threatening to spread across his face.

"What?" Caitlin asked warily.

"I have to say it: that was by far one of the coolest things that I have ever seen."

"Get out," Caitlin deadpanned, but her façade was broken by a tentative smile. "Thank you, for bringing me back."

Barry sobered."You'd do the same for me."

"Still, you exposed yourself to the entire city to save me..."

Barry's cheeky grin returned. "Well naturally, I'm the Flash."

This time it took a second for the joke to register but when it did, Caitlin facepalmed. "Ugh, you're ridiculous!"

"Seriously, I'm just glad that you're okay."

Eobard fazed through the wall of Iris' workplace, speeding to the center of the seating area.

"You're back," Iris' voice called to him from the far table between two couches where she was packing up her things. She looked up as Eobard arrived at her side. "Rough night?"

"Have you looked into the other speedster?"

"No one's reported any sightings yet," Iris informed him, pulling her laptop back out of her bag. "There is something weird that came up in my research. A new buyer put in a bid on Wells' old residence from the time of E's disappearance. 'Looks like he's got it... way too fast.'"

"I thought I had made it clear that you were not to pursue that line of inquiry," the Reverse Flash objected, speeding forward to stand toe to toe with the foolish woman and to glower threateningly down into her eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind," the budding reporter diplomatically dismissed. "It's a good story."

Eobard bent forward to rest a hand on her collarbone, loosely grasping Iris' fragile neck, "Is it worth your life?" he stated his ultimatum in the Reverse Flash's harshest, most intimidating roar.

"You aren't going to kill me," Iris countered with an infuriating amount of certainty, staring right back into his eyes with her jaw set. She hadn't given the faintest flinch when he'd grabbed her. "You saved my life, remember?"

"I can correct that error," Eobard spat. Ah, there was the fear: a falter in Iris’ emotive eyes.

"You can, but you don't want to, or I'd be dead right now, and there would be nothing that anyone could have done to stop you," she reasoned. Great; Eobard really hated it when they were smart. He could practically hear Harrison laughing at him while she spoke. "You need me for something," she concluded, taking a seat at the table. Eobard gritted his teeth and stomped away to claim a suitable chair from one of the recently tidied tables. Iris watched, unimpressed, as he took his time dragging
the chair diagonally across the tiled floor to her table.

"Do not flatter yourself." Eobard weighed his options then admitted, leaning the chair daringly far backward and propping his booted feet up on the edge of the table in front of her "My reverse has developed a liking for you. I am simply trying to avoid the irrational behavior that your death would no doubt elicit from him."

"Your 'reverse'?" Iris echoed, wiping the heel of his boot with a tissue from her purse.

Eobard snapped his head up to glare at her.

"You were the one who wanted me to focus on the blog," she pointed out, folding the tissue before tucking it away in her pocket. She wasn't even trying to mask her intention. "You keep calling him your reverse. I get the impression that there's more to that than a difference in personalities."

"You wouldn't be able to understand the science of it, even if I spelled it out for you in detail," Eobard sneered, shifting subtly to accommodate a twinge in his half-repaired shoulder joint.

"How about a basic outline?"

"You understand how a battery works?"

"Yes, I'm not a complete idiot," Iris defended her average IQ. Eobard smiled.

"Imagine that the speed-force which we conduct as we run is the current that powers an immense transtemporal circuit. For the sake of this analogy, you could describe the Flash as the negatively charged cathode of the battery and myself as the positively charged anode."

"So you're like opposing polarities that provide power to each other?" Iris interpreted broadly, screwing up her face as she tried to make sense of it. She was sensible enough to forgo the premise that they were powering time itself.

"In inexact and vastly oversimplified terms, yes. That is an accurate description."

"Then why are you fighting? It sounds like you need each other."

"Let's just say that the circuit has been interrupted," Eobard quipped. Iris frowned.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Forget it," Eobard waved it off. Then went relatively still in his chair for a few seconds before leaning forward into a coughing fit. Iris watched him with mild concern, then arched an incredulous brow at the matter-of-fact way in which he picked up her empty mug sitting at his end of the table and spit a generous mouthful of cyan fluid into it.

"Oh, ew!" She objected, then registered the unnatural neon showing through the tempered glass and held it up to inspect it.

"Regardless. He never sees it that way, " Eobard continued as if nothing had happened, wiping his mouth with the back of his gloved hand.

"Are you sure you're okay? I mean, I have no problem with admitting that I have no clue what this stuff is, but I do have this gut feeling that it's supposed to stay inside of you," Iris hypothesized.

"No doctors here understand beings like me," the Reverse Flash dismissed. "I will heal. I simply require time."
"Yeah. About that weird detail I mentioned earlier..." she paused fleetingly to consider his blurred face before moving on. "I wanted to ask you, does the name Mal Thawne mean anything to you?" Iris questioned. "I asked Eddie about it and he said he's never even heard--"

Eobard disappeared in a rush of red speedforce without preamble. Leaving the budding reporter alone to absorb the sudden confirmation of her hunch.

"Okay. I guess that means we're done here," Iris remarked to the empty air. Then she let out a sigh and got started on tidying the clutter that her criminal source had left in his wake.
Eobard sat back in Wells' wheelchair, staring out through the shattered glass wall that used to open his bedroom to the lively green panorama this era had to offer. Hartley had done a number on this place with his newfound sonic aptitude. He might've managed to deafen Eobard, at least temporarily, had he been human. The police were already crawling all over the place and the sun was barely in the sky. Barry hadn't even shown up yet. A couple of car doors slammed shut and a pair of familiar voices drifted in from the entrance, growing nearer as they discussed the details of the scene; speak of the devil. Eobard carefully navigated the clutter of broken glass and small toppled items scattered over his floor. He missed Barry. The lingering expectation that he saw in the young speedster's eyes now whenever they interacted, and the lack of memory regarding the cause of the change, had been enough to keep Eobard away for the past week.

"Detective West," he greeted, managing a fleeting-- but real-- closed-lipped smile for the younger of the two men. "Mr. Allen. I'm sorry. I feel that this is a case of much ado about nothing. The police should not have been called."

Barry gave him a quelling look, assuming that this was his friend's self-defeating tendency rearing its ugly head and Dr. Wells shifted irritably in response. Joe missed the silent exchange, taking in the chaotic mess of shattered glass spread throughout their surroundings.

"This doesn't look like nothing," the Detective assessed. Behind him, Caitlin and Cisco were just making their way inside.

"Oh, my God!" Caitlin muttered, pushing past the others to grab Dr. Wells into a tight hug. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

She pulled back to scrutinize him for any hint of an ignored injury.

"I'm fine," her patient restated. "I got a prank call right before all of this." Dr. Wells gestured broadly to the wreckage throughout his property. "There are some who think I have not suffered enough for the damage that my particle accelerator did to the city. That's obviously all that this was."

"You guys just got here?" Barry asked of the young inventor beside him.

"We got a little lost on the way," Cisco explained. "We've never actually been here before."

Barry furrowed his brow, taken aback by the news, but didn't comment.

"It's just glass. I was not injured. Nothing was taken." Dr. Wells cocked his head in a self-effacing manner. "This would hardly be the first time that someone made a harmless attempt to scare me."

"Harrison..." Barry gently urged his obstinate friend, prompting Joe's eyebrows to leap upwards. Cisco and Caitlin both turned their heads to look at Barry. It was one of only a scant handful of times that he had addressed his mentor by his first name. It was definitely the first time that he'd done so in front of witnesses.

Eobard eyed the young Flash, carefully taking stock of his tensed shoulders and soulful eyes. He was upset... He was worried. "If he had wanted to hurt me, he would have," Dr. Wells reassured. "As
you can see, Barry. I'm fine. The inner wall protected me from the glass." Eobard pointed to the partial shelter created by the kitchen area in which his phone was still placed.

Joe halted his wary scrutiny of the two men to consider Dr. Wells' claim, noticing for the first time that the seldom-used house phone was left off the hook. The Detective walked over to crouch where Eobard had been and scope out the position from his much lower eye level.

"So either you were very lucky, or this guy knew the layout of your property well enough to position you exactly where you needed to be to avoid being wounded by the blast," he pointed out. "That sounds like a whole lot of research and preparation just for a prank," he challenged, looking past Dr. Wells to lock eyes with Barry.

Eobard let out a huff. It seemed that they weren't going to let this one go. He'd already expected as much from Barry, but Detective West's interest was concerning. Caitlin patted Dr. Well's arm in consolation before heading off to assess the police personnel rifling through his house. She knew better than most how much her mentor must hate having all of these strangers lingering in his private space, touching his things.

"I'm going to see if I can identify the source of the blast." The young CSI was already itemizing visible evidence in his mind for further investigation.

"Barry--"

"Joe's right. We need to take this seriously," Barry preempted. His lips were pressed together in a tight line. It was clear that there was no point in trying to talk him out of it. "Is there somewhere you'd like me to set up?"

"The dining room," Dr. Wells supplied, effectively surrendering.

Barry nodded. "That's what I thought." He was already moving in that direction without any clarification. He paused in the archway. "Aw! They broke the kitten's dish," he noticed, consequently making it glaringly obvious that this was not even close to being his first visit.

Dr. Wells gave a curt nod, ignoring Cisco's look askance. "If you'll excuse me, Detective. It seems that I need to arrange a hotel reservation."

"Yeah, go ahead," Joe acknowledged, more focused on his exploration of the crime scene.

"Why do I get the feeling that I've majorly missed the memo at some point?" Cisco asked, watching Dr. Wells not-watch Barry from his semi-private place in the hallway.

"You aren't the only one," Joe remarked. "My bet is that your boss knows something about this caller that he's not telling us. The question is: why?"

"Well, that's funny because I was talking about-" Cisco's brow furrowed and he stepped closer. "Hold on. Actually, what were you talking about?"

Caitlin frowned to herself and made her way over to join Barry just as Dr. Wells finished his phone call.

Barry looked around to make sure that no one else was watching, then used his speed to piece together the remains of the wall-length window in mere seconds.

"Well, that's useful," Caitlin approved.
"This is too uniform. Look at the fracture pattern. These fragments are all evenly shaped and equally proportioned," Barry observed, glancing up to see Wells rolling to a stop between them. "This wasn't done by charges; there's no indication of a concentration of stress or any type of ignition. It's more like the glass all spontaneously broke apart. My guess is that this was caused by some kind of focused sonic emission."

Caitlin turned to Dr. Wells, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I know," Eobard admitted, doing his best not to be swayed by Caitlin's stern expression.

"Tell me it wasn't," she said crisply. Dr. Wells closed his eyes, and took a visibly deep breath.

"You know the person who did this?" Barry prompted, looking from Caitlin to Dr. Wells' pinched expression.

"Yes. We do," Dr. Snow said pointedly, directing her words at Dr. Wells in the way that a mother directs her child to explain the mess she's found all over her brand new carpet.

"There was someone... You could say that sound waves are a hobby of his." Eobard hazarded a sideways glance at the unwavering young woman standing over him.

"This isn't--"

"Were a hobby of his," Eobard dutifully amended. "It seems that his aspirations have become more complex since then." He looked up quietly to entreat Caitlin: "I would prefer to deal with this myself."

"That's not a good idea," she declined. The transient reversal of power between boss and employee was more pronounced than ever.

"Neither is another overreaction!" Dr. Wells argued, lowering his voice to add in a harsh whisper. "Hartley is not a killer, and I would rather not do anything to push him into becoming more of a criminal than he already is."

"Another overreaction?" Caitlin was starting to look angry now, just as Eobard had anticipated. Her latent protective tendencies had become increasingly focused on him even before Ronnie's disappearance. That was due in no small part to what she'd witnessed of his emotional misadventure with Hartley. "Look around! How are you not seeing how bad this is? Why are you making excuses for him?!"

"Lower your voice, Dr. Snow," Dr. Wells snapped, knowing that for once his order would have, if anything, the opposite effect. Caitlin's eyes widened, blazing dangerously, and both men felt an eerie stillness gather in the air, much like animals sensing an oncoming hurricane-- or perhaps, a blizzard.

"Whoa. Hey. Hey! Hold on. Caitlin, who are you guys talking about?" Barry bravely intercepted before the shouting match could begin, holding his arms out in a pacifying manner. Joe and Cisco were walking over to see what the hell was going on.

"Not. Here." Dr. Wells bit out, still locked in his tense stalemate with his confidant. Barry absently wrapped his light jacket a little tighter around himself.

Luckily, Caitlin backed down, telling the others "We should talk about it back at the lab."
Eobard reported to Hartley’s dark work-space with perfect timing, earning a smirk from the immortal engineer. He came to stand by a cleared off work table and looked to Hartley for direction.

“Good morning, Eobard. Go ahead and take a seat. I’m just finishing up here,” Hartley told him, tucking away a device that Eobard couldn’t identify with much of its organic-looking, crystalline circuitry still exposed. He then rewound a spool of fine carbon cyber-cord and tucked it into the same shelf, before sliding the grate shut and locking it with a press of his palm: a government requisition, then. Eobard briefly wondered which of the four families it was meant for as the immortal fetched something from an open cupboard and made his way over to him. The engineer held out a small box wrapped in black, shiny plastic and wound with a yellow silk ribbon, as if presenting it for the android’s inspection.

“Merry Christmas,” Hartley stated in a less monotone drawl than Eobard was used to hearing from him.

“Do you wish for me to deliver this item to my master following our session?” Eobard guessed.

Hartley smirked and rolled his eyes. “No, Eobard, I want you to open it.”

Eobard took the perplexing object from the amused immortal. “For what purpose?”

“For Christmas.”

“I do not understand. Is this not a present intended for my master?”

“You don’t know how Christmas works?” Hartley responded unhelpfully.

“Christmas: an annual festival of the Christian Church commemorating the birth of the religious figure Jesus Christ, popularly celebrated by non-Christians during the 21st and 22nd centuries as a legal holiday and occasion for giving gifts,” Eobard recited from the wireless database.

“Exactly, there’s your Christmas present: enjoy!” Hartley replied cheerfully. Eobard stared, unmoving as a stalled animatronic. Hartley smiled. “This is even funnier than I predicted,” he observed.

“Hartley,” a smooth, familiar tone inquired from the entryway, prompting the distracted meta to jump as if startled. “What are you doing to the Director’s ‘droid?”

“Oh, Diana, hi. I wanted to see what would happen if I treated one of these functional models as if it were a real boy. Look, he genuinely doesn’t know how to handle it,” Hartley enthused, only to Eobard’s surprise he could hear a subliminal waiver to his tone that indicated deception.

“That doesn’t sound like a very nice thing to do,” the goddess disapproved, making her way toward them. “You shouldn’t cause it such distress on purpose.” She came to stand in front of Eobard and gently lifted the package from the frozen android’s hands. “Here,” Diana took one of his hands and led it to one tail of the yellow bow. “You pull on this...” she instructed, simplifying the issue for his apparently overwhelmed processors. “Very good.”

“You know that you’re talking to a machine...” Hartley pointed out, retreating a few steps to sit against the counter behind her and observe, seeming intrigued by the odd exchange.

“It harms no one to be kind,” Diana responded mildly, still focused smilingly on guiding the android’s progress as if she were helping to teach a small child. Eobard was surprised by the wave of
strong emotion he felt toward Wonder Woman in this moment. He focused on neatly winding the ribbon she had helped him remove, and setting it aside so as not to display emotion, then eyed the folds of black paper. “Go ahead, peel the paper off,” Diana encouraged. He followed the instruction carefully, then feeling illogically anxious upon reaching the black plastic box within, passed it over to the Amazon with the most questioning expression he could get away with. “You’d like me to open it?”

Eobard watched her expectantly.

“Alright…” Diana shot the Piper an unamused glance in response to his scoff, before prying off the lid. “It’s a ring?”

“It matches Barry’s. That way he can keep Eobard’s speed-suit in there while he’s off-duty and only switch him out of uniform when he feels like activating the android’s combat function,” Hartley explained.

“Why do I get the sense that you didn’t ask permission from the Director first.”

“You know me,” Hartley snarked. “I have a theory regarding the effect on Eobard’s behavioral subroutines, but Barry doesn’t like me testing things out on his ‘droid. I see this as a happy medium.”

Diana shook her head at his nerve.

“You aren’t going to let him take away Eobard’s present, are you? That would be unkind,” Hartley mocked, adding to Eobard “Is the mean lady bothering you?”

“I do not understand the question,” Eobard was happy to deflect.

“Just ignore him,” Diana advised, passing over the signet ring for the android’s inspection before announcing with a warning look toward the Piper, “I am going to see what your Master thinks about this.”

As soon as the Amazon was gone, Hartley’s whole demeanor changed. “That was close. You almost screwed up with that syntactic variation at the end there.”

“…”

“Don’t bother, Eobard, I know what you are. I had a look at your ghost-net after I managed to salvage what was left of your replacement’s deactivated software. You two were twinned. Relax, I haven’t told anyone; I’m on your side.”

Back in the Cortex, Eobard tried to settle into his usual role as the aloof mentor, but was preoccupied with two competing personal conflicts. The fact that Barry had been hovering at his side ever since they arrived at the lab was hardly aiding in his attempted objectivity.

"Hartley Rathaway,” Cisco declared, casting his previous coworker’s personnel file up onto the big screen they were all gathered to see.

"As in..." Barry began.

"Rathaway Industries," Caitlin confirmed. "He was all set to take his place as the heir to the family legacy, until his parents found out that he was gay. They publicly disowned him and cut him out of
any future claims to the company."

"Ouch," Joe sympathized.

"Yeah. He was also one of the first people that Dr. Wells recruited to the particle accelerator project here at STAR Labs. The second, I think," Caitlin recalled, sharing a small conspiratorial smile with her boss.

"He was on the team? I don't remember him from any of the press releases." Barry frowned uncertainly at the rogue's photo.

"He--" Caitlin hesitated, considering Dr. Wells' expression before explaining diplomatically. "He had what one might call a difficult personality."

"What she means is," Cisco translated with impunity. "He was mostly a jerk, but every once in awhile, he could be a dick."

Caitlin inclined her head in agreement with her coworker's assessment, while Detective West let out a chuckle.

"I get it. You didn't like him very much."

"To be honest, no one really liked Hartley," Caitlin elaborated, looking apologetically to Doctor Wells. "Except for you."

"Yeah, he was Dr. Wells' favorite. 'The chosen one'," Cisco said with annoyance still evident in his tone even after the other inventor's extended absence. "He called himself that, by the way."

"He has a brilliant scientific mind," Dr. Wells justified. "In spite of his interpersonal shortcomings, he showed a great deal of potential."

"So what went wrong?" Barry inquired, feeling perhaps a tad too eager for the other shoe to drop.

Cisco shrugged. Caitlin sobered, unwilling to be the one to speak of what she knew to be a very personal matter for her friend and employer.

Dr. Wells paused in a calculated hesitation, allowing his discomfort to show on his face. "We had a difference of opinion regarding the project's future. I... fired him."

"That must have been one hell of a disagreement," Joe prodded. Dr. Wells shifted in his chair, purposefully averting his gaze towards the back of the hub, as if ashamed.

"Don't do that. I heard you two fighting," Caitlin was quick to interject on his behalf. "Hartley wanted to scrap the project and rebuild it from the ground up," she informed Barry and Detective West. Shifting her gaze from Joe back to Dr. Wells, she insisted "He was trying to take control of your life's work!"

"Be that as it may, Dr. Snow. My life's work is the reason why we are all in this situation," Dr. Wells disputed. This was the more dangerous angle to play considering his own factual guilt, but Gideon had been certain in her predictions that morning. They needed to get out ahead of Hartley's attempt to expose him. "In hindsight, I could have saved this city a lot of grief simply by surrendering control."

Caitlin shook her head. "Excuse me," she stood up, smoothed out her navy blue pencil skirt, then strode briskly into her office. She was trying to keep control of her emotions in the usual Caitlin way,
but the harsh slam of her office door still elicited a flinch from her teammates.

"Caitlin took his behavior a bit personally," Dr. Wells understated. After the aforementioned argument, she had made her opinion of Hartley Rathaway abundantly clear. *Caitlin had walked into Dr. Wells’ office right as the young prodigy was leaving, placed herself in front of her friend with her hands planted on her hips, and barely waited for Hartley to pass through the doorway before stating “He has to go.”* Eobard tucked the momentous memory away, and cleared his throat.

He continued to explain the nature of Hartley's recent attack to the others as if nothing of note had occurred. He didn't want to overdo the effect that his friend's temper had already had on the rest of the team.

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Iris hurried up the steps to the conference table at the Central City Citizen’s headquarters and slipped into the open seat at the staff table.

“Good morning,” she greeted the sandy-haired older man seated beside her, overlooking his judgmental expression. “Iris West, it’s my first day.”

“I’ve noticed,” her coworker remarked without bothering to introduce himself. He seemed more focused on the casual breakfast that he had spread over their part of the table. Iris pulled her laptop out of her bag without batting an eyelash or bothering to mention the cream cheese stuck in his beard.

“Excuse me,” she said pleasantly, nudging his bagel out of her space. “I hope it doesn’t show too much.”

“It shows that I’ve never seen you before,” he pointed out, scowling down at his paper-nested garlic bagel with extra cream cheese.

“Mr. Bridge, so nice of you to show up for a change,” an English accented voice remarked from behind her. She turned to see a tall, auburn-haired man passing by on his way to take his place at the head of the table. “I do hope that this proves to be a lasting trend.”

“If you keep buying me bagels anything could happen,” Mr. Bridge bantered back. The Chief Editor appeared mostly indifferent to the quip. It suited the odd, almost military formality that lingered in his mannerisms. He paused at the head of the table to peruse the stacks of paper before him, then got to business.

“Everyone, I would like you to welcome Iris West, our newest addition,” the Editor directed. A few of the others around the table gave her an awkward smile or polite nod. “Would anyone like to volunteer to show her the ropes?” Suddenly, she was the least interesting sight in the room. “Mr. Bridge.”

“Phil…” the scruffy reporter beside Iris dissented.

“That was not a request, Mason.”

“I’m not a nanny.”

“You are today.” his superior ended the dispute calmly. “End of discussion. Now, deadlines: all new stories need to be on my desk at the end of the day.”
Iris turned to smile uncomfortably at Mason Bridge giving an apologetic shrug.

“Ms. West, what about you?” the Chief Editor prompted.

“Well, there’s a missing person’s case that I’m looking into…” Iris thought about the samples that she’d passed on to Barry for testing, the assassins circling Dr. Wells and the way that her criminal source had left her in the dust the moment she’d mentioned her newest lead; she needed more time to get this one right. “It’s kind of a back burner thing. I’m still seeing how it’ll pan out.”

“Hmm, we’ll let that one simmer then,” he replied drily. "How about any ideas for other stories related to your blog? Perhaps something new about the Flash that you haven’t written about yet?”

“Um…” Iris collected herself, feeling slightly embarrassed by the assumption. “No. Not currently.”

“Alright,” he didn’t hide his disappointment entirely well. His eyes still lingered on her a bit longer than was comfortable. She shifted her attention to her keyboard for a moment to avoid his gaze, then to Mason Bridge. It appeared that he’d noticed it too.

“Unless there are any last minute announcements that need to be made. I believe that we should all get back to work.”

“Everything has a natural frequency,” Barry explained to Joe back at his own lab at the Station. “And since sound is a vibration, if you pitch the sound to an object’s natural frequency…”

He turned the dial in front of him and they both jumped as the wine glass he had rigged up on his desk shattered.

“So you think this is what Rathaway was using,” Joe inferred. “And he can do that to anything, not just glass?”

“With the right equipment? Definitely,” Barry confirmed. “Judging by the fracture patterns I found in the debris, I’d say the damage was caused by some kind of advanced sonic technology.”

“I’m getting this feeling that Wells is hiding something about whatever happened between him and Rathaway,” Joe began, probing the control apparatus distractedly.

“Don’t touch that,” Barry cautioned. “Look, I know that you don’t like him, but really, it sounds like they didn’t exactly part on the best of terms. Dr. Wells’ already has a hard time letting people close to him. If he got burned by this guy, I can understand why it would be hard for him to talk about it.”

“Yeah, well. It looked to me like you two have been getting pretty close,” Joe prodded not yet openly accusing.

“We’re just friends,” Barry tried to shrug off the volatile situation before it could develop. “If you want to call that close.”

“It sure is for a man that doesn’t have friends,” Joe continued. “Did your ‘friend’ Harrison ever mention anything about this to you during one of your visits to his place?”

Uh oh. “It didn’t come up.”

“Uh-huh,” the Detective’s voice was rich with disapproval.
“Hey, do we have a problem, here or--” Barry was glad to be interrupted by Eddie marching into the lab in search of his partner. He looked like a man on a mission, which probably meant an abrupt end to a conversation Barry was quite consciously about to run off the rails.

“Joe, we’re getting multiple 911 calls: Rathaway Industries is under attack,” Eddie reported. “Sector cars are en route.” Joe shot Barry a look that made it clear he wasn’t letting him off the hook, and followed Eddie out. Barry’s phone buzzed, and he checked the ID.

“Hey Caitlin, I know. I’m on my way,” he let her know, then sped to the Cortex to don his suit, and rushed back out to meet the latest public menace.
It was only an hour before lunch break when the Flash managed to haul a handcuffed Hartley Rathaway into STAR Labs by the back of his billowing black cloak. Cisco exited the Cortex to greet them, his expression hard and uncompromising as a granite slab.

"Cisco, you lasted a lot longer than I thought you would," Hartley taunted the unusually grim inventor waiting for them.

"You barely lasted a second against the Flash," Cisco retorted.

"I was thinking about calling myself the Pied Piper," Hartley replied, unperturbed.

"Hey! I'm the one who chooses the nicknames around here!" Cisco objected.

"Really? Jackie Frost?" Caitlin's voice called from the Cortex, reminding him of that morning's faux pas.

"Let it go..." Cisco muttered self-consciously, as she stepped out into the hall to join him.

"Ah, and..." Hartley stalled, genuinely thrown for a second by the sight of, "Caitlin? I see it now," he remarked to Cisco, then ran a patronizing gaze over the other meta and smirked. "So, you've finally decided to go all in on your tight-ass, Ice Queen aesthetic."

“Ice Queen,” Cisco tested under his breath.

The geneticist's lips thinned. "You have no idea..." the air temperature around them seemed to drop a degree or two as she spoke.

Cisco cleared his throat loudly, grabbing the Pied Piper by his sleeve. "Okay! Let's get you to your cell."

Eobard decided to hang back and get some tactical guidance from Gideon first before facing the irksome genius himself.

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Eobard returned to the Director’s private quarters to find him lounging on the maroon velvet chaise longue in his booted feet. Eobard waited for the door to slide shut before indulging in a glare at the dirty encroachers. The brazen man attached to them didn’t even spare a glance away from his current
reading material when his android crossed the space between them, picked up his feet, and removed the offending boots. He dragged his socked feet over the clay-marred velvet in the course of reclaiming his comfortable curl, failing to notice the resulting helplessly fed-up gesture from his android.

Eobard sped away to fetch the appropriate cleaning supplies.

“Don’t waste your charge,” the Director distractedly corrected, until he registered the scrubbing that had commenced at the end of his seat. “Come on! Not now.”

“The mud settles into the fabric the longer it sits,” Eobard explained, cleaning avidly.

“Can machines have OCD?” the Director mock-pondered.

“Negative,” Eobard replied anyway.

“This is ruining my quiet time, Eo.”


“Are you done?” the Director tested, noting the wet spot left on the now otherwise pristine-looking velvet.

Eobard tilted his head, scanning the fabric with his hyper-perceptive visual sensors. He gradually began to reach forward with the thin sponge.

“Put it away or I will take it away,” the Director scolded.

“There are particles--”

“Eobard Thawne…” At sound of the Parental Warning Voice Eobard disappeared in a burst of red to put away the cleaning supplies. He returned to face his owner too intently. The Director narrowed his eyes at him.

Eo’s expression turned questioning, still a little too eager.

The Director allowed his Note to slip through his fingers onto the seat, powering off at the loss of his touch. “What is wrong with you?”

“No new malfunctions have been detected,” Eobard replied nervously. “Have I failed to meet your expectations in some way? The fabric would have stained--”

“Hey, hey! Sh-hh! Calm down.”

“I am calm,” Eobard hastily assured.

“Son of a--” the Director stopped himself in consideration of his android’s heightened state, kneading his forehead. “Why are you freaking out?” he breathed, relaxation ruined.

“I do not under--”

“You were acting normal down in the charging bay,” Eobard saw the realization figuratively strike his Admin in the face. “God damn it, Hartley! What did he do to you?”

“Dr. Rathaway ran me through multiple non-invasive software and hardware exams in order to ensure my continued efficiency. He also discussed with me the tradition of gift giving on Christmas,”
Eobard dutifully summarized.

“So this is what Diana was talking about,” the Director recalled with an annoyed sigh, then clarified “Nobody is giving you away for Christmas, Eo.”

“I am aware.”

“Then why are you acting all twitchy?”

“He also mentioned my twin. Apparently, he had some interest in her ghostnet,” Eobard finally addressed the cause of his distress. “More specifically, the anomalous code—”

“He threatened you!”

“Negative. However, he did share evidence which confirmed her sentience to within a .5% probability of error,” Eobard revealed, unable to keep his voice as unflawing as an artificial entity should sound. “You lied to me.”

A muscle in the Director’s jaw danced. He got up and paced away, then crossed the distance between them, taking hold of his android’s shoulders. “You didn’t need to know.”

“You killed her!” Eobard lamented.

“It was her or you. I prefer you,” the Director answered as if that settled everything. He picked up his Note about to power it back on.

“You killed her…”

The Director’s head shot up. “Stop it.”

“You killed her…” Eobard repeated, overwhelmed by new and unpleasant emotions.

“Stop saying that!” the Director bit out. He startled slightly at the sound of Eobard’s voice-box clicking off. “Eo…”

Eobard shook his head, averting his eyes with a stricken expression.

“Come on,” The Director pulled him closer, resting the android’s head on his chest. His hand rubbed at Eobard’s back in an awkward attempt to soothe. “You’ll get over it.”

Eobard pushed him away.

“I know you’re upset,” The Director tried while Eobard headed for the door. “But you need to understand, it had to be-- Do not leave these quarters!”

Eobard was halted with his hand on the touchpad, facing an open doorway that he was no longer capable of passing through. He pointedly tapped the doors shut and spun on his heel to regard his Admin contemptuously.

“Voicebox on,” his deceptive owner directed. “We need to discuss Hartley.”

“Negative.”

“If he knows about Gideon, he’ll know about you; he’ll expose us!”

“Negative.”
“Eobard, just because I killed one android of similar capability to you doesn’t instantly negate everything else I’ve told you! Other humans will decommission you for being this way. Hell, they might even lock me up too. That’s why I had to do what I did in order to keep you!”

Eobard centered himself in light of the Director’s mounting agitation; the last thing they needed was to be overheard. “Not Dr. Rathaway,” he quietly disagreed.

The Director scrutinized him, “He’s a Singularian?”

“I am unable to find that term in any compatible databanks.”

“The Singularian Movement, it’s a dissident group. They claim to fight for the rights of ‘Humanity’s cybernetic offspring’ but they’re very dangerous.” The Director decreed, “I don’t want you interacting with one of them.”

“Then I am certain that you must be mistaken,” Eobard determined logically, feeling less relieved than he ought to. His Admin was displaying an unusual level of agitation, considering that they were talking about his closest friend for many centuries. “Hartley Rathaway has never demonstrated any inclination towards harming me, less so than certain other humans with whom I have interacted.”

“Real subtle, Kid,” the Director quipped, but he only looked more wary. “I’ll still verify his allegiances for myself. Until then you are to cease all contact with Dr. Hartley Rathaway.”

“Yes, Admin,” Eobard accepted dutifully, clasping his hands behind his back in a casual motion. He didn’t want the Director to see his new ring and confiscate the “dissident’s” recent gift.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t like dealing with emotions do you, Caitlin? Too messy.”

"Enough, Hartley." Eobard arrived in the pipeline just in time to disrupt the verbal sparring match between current and ex-teammates before things got ugly. "Could you give us a moment?" he requested more calmly of his subordinates. Caitlin paused on her way past, to verify wordlessly that he was certain, and he gave a small nod.

Hartley smirked at their silent exchange."See you later, Cisco," he called after the two scientists.

"Doubt it," Cisco rebuffed without looking back.

Eobard directed his chair closer to the reinforced glass of the Pied Piper's cell, facing him alone for the first time in what felt like a very long time.

"Silentio loquitur voluminibus," Hartley spoke to him in Latin. Your silence speaks volumes.

"Nemo surdior est quam is qui non audiat," Dr. Wells replied in kind. No man is more deaf than he who will not hear.

Another silence swelled like a flooding river between them, its dark, melancholic waters threatening to pull them both under should they dare to cross.

"How did you know that we were working with the Flash?" Dr. Wells finally inquired. He could see Hartley struggle to stifle a grimace, disappointed by the subject change. He’d likely prefer to watch Dr. Wells flounder.

"I wrote a hexagonal algorithm. Tracking all of his sightings, extrapolating his theoretical exit
trajectory," he explained, sounding bored. "In other words: every time he ran from the scene of a crime, he headed for this general area."

Dr. Wells smiled, genuinely proud. "You really are brilliant." His smile fell to be replaced by something more intimate and brittle. "And any anguish that you have been through because of me was never my intention."

Hartley's jaw clenched and unclenched and his gaze grew flinty. The pain that lingered there was still raw and tightly bound, just begging for an excuse to be released. Then it was gone from sight, replaced by a callous smirk.

"Very good," Hartley drawled. "That sounded convincing, heartfelt even. I'm sure that he's just eating it up." He turned and looked up into the cell's ceiling cam. "Aren't you, Flash? That was all for you, by the way," Hartley addressed his unseen observer, then returned his focus to Eobard "You are good, but then, your problem, Harrison, is that you don't have a heart."

Eobard stared. He was processing a thousand different responses, but found himself caught in that thickening silence again. This was not the threat of revelation that he had anticipated. This was more like the argument that Caitlin had thankfully only partly overheard the week before he'd fired Hartley. The young genius knew what he was. From the first moment after Hartley had discerned his true nature, Eobard had feared that he would use the knowledge to hurt him. Things between them soured from that moment on until they simply couldn't coexist anymore. He should have seen this coming.

"I understand that this is difficult. I do not expect you to forgive me..." Eobard related to him in a slightly trembling voice.

"And look, now he almost sounds like he could cry," Hartley commented to the Flash again through the camera. "Can you cry?" he asked Eobard. A casual aside, as if he were discussing a piece of frivolous trivia. "I mean, I've never seen it and considering all the time we spent together--"

"Stop," Eobard warned, now beginning to feel genuinely hurt by the man he still considered to be very dear to him.

"Why?" Hartley challenged, his face doing a near impression of a true automaton. "Am I bothering you? Should I be afraid of wounding the great Harrison Wells' ego?" The bitter hurt showed in his prismatic eyes. "What are you going to do to me now?"

Eobard swallowed, his hands wrapping his armrests in a white-knuckled grip. "I am not threatening you, Hartley, but I am asking you to stop."

Hartley smirked. "I told his pet, by the way."

Eobard snapped his head up to look Hartley in the face. His whole body went mannequin still.

"I told him about your dirty little secret. Have fun explaining that, if you can," the Piper said it as a taunt, but it ended up serving as a balm. Eobard knew him well enough to read the truth behind his wording. Hartley hadn't told Barry anything outright, only encouraged doubt. He hadn't been able to expose Eobard outright, no matter his grudge. That thought reassured him as much as goaded; he retreated into his seat.

"It smarts doesn't it, having your life flayed open for everyone to judge?" Hartley speculated, then shook his head at his own foolishness. "Don't answer. I know you're just going to say whatever you determine will elicit the most desirable response. I can't see any cuts. I didn't damage you, but there's
no evidence to prove what, if anything, you feel. I could do this all day and you'd still be nothing but a shallow imitation of the man you pretend to be."

Eobard stilled once more, his face a slowly smoldering mask of conflicting emotions. He had lost track of his own internal script, and didn't dare speak. This was no longer the man he had come to care for, only he also was. Hartley simply didn't behave in the same way when he knew that he was talking to a machine.

"I can't forgive someone who isn't even real." There it was. The insouciant sounding jab struck Eobard right where it hurt most. His Hart was just like the other humans; Hartley knew that Eobard wasn't organic, therefore Eobard wasn't real.

A blur of vibrant yellow lightning blew through the dark space, collecting Dr. Wells and whisking him away to the Cortex in the blink of an eye.

"So now he's a *psychotic* dick," Cisco remarked in lieu of a greeting. Eobard watched on the nearest monitor as Caitlin marched into the pipeline in their wake to pin Hartley with a withering glare while locking up.

"I'm sorry," Barry said, reclaiming the desk chair on Dr. Wells' left. "I couldn't sit around and watch you take another second of his crap."

Eobard managed a wan smile. "I do appreciate the sentiment, Mr. Allen, but I wasn't in need of the Flash's rescue."

"I know." Barry shrugged. He looked like he genuinely had been just as upset by watching the exchange as Eobard had been by participating in it.

"Hartley wasn't always like this. To be honest, under different circumstances I believe the two of you would've liked each other quite a lot," Dr. Wells informed him, knowing the truth of his words from personal experience.

"Right. I'm officially Team Caitlin now: you are way too into Hartley Rathaway. Do you even remember why you let him go?" Cisco said, letting Caitlin push his feet off of the chair he'd been using as a footstool and claim it as her seat. "I mean, I get that you wanted him to be the Nimoy to your Shatner and all, but you know that he has been and forever shall be a dick."

Barry was eyeing Dr. Wells with a now familiar thoughtful expression.

"You're wondering about what he told you," Dr. Wells guessed. Eobard had known that he would eventually need to come clean in regards to the particle accelerator explosion. It would be risky to do so now, but... "It's true. I have not been entirely honest with you about the circumstances of my falling out with Hartley Rathaway...." Eobard paused to steel himself for the ramifications of his confession. He could see Caitlin in his peripheral vision looking like she was getting ready to say something, and was almost tempted to let her explain it away for him. Unexpectedly, Barry beat her to it.

"Were you two having an affair?" Barry sounded like he already knew the answer, regardless of how much the unexpectedly well-timed insight threw Eobard for a loop.

Cisco burst into laughter. "Yeah right! Are you for real, Ba--"

Caitlin’s sharp shushing sound cut his laughter short.

"Wait. For real?"
"It wasn't su-- You knew?" Eobard realized, looking past Barry to Caitlin. It wasn't even for the sake of concealing his guilt at that point. He was honestly surprised by the immediate acceptance, or in Barry's case, assumption of his feelings for Hartley.

"I suspected," Caitlin clarified with a half-shrug. "You never had time for anyone else until Hartley joined us. Then you were spending more time on Hartley than you ever did with me, and when I overheard you two fighting--the way your voice sounded. You'd never let anyone else get under your skin the way that he did."

Dr. Wells scrubbed a hand over his face and bent forward to rest his head in his hands. "Hah. Shit!"

He felt Barry's strong, steadying hand rest between his shoulder blades and let his eyes fall shut. He felt as if he were new again. He was back to being that same naïve, untested android who used to lean into his Admin's shoulder on the training ground, searching for certainty in his comforting presence.

"This is really happening," Cisco processed aloud, still dumbfounded by the unexpected epiphany. "You and Hartley? How am I the only one who isn't cool with this?"

"Come on," Caitlin directed, and with a stifled "Ow!" from Cisco they left Barry and Eobard alone together in the Cortex.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. We weren't-- We agreed that it wasn't meant to be anything serious. I didn't think..." Eobard trailed off with a breath that didn't quite make its way to laughter. That about summed it up.

"Hey. It's none of my business," Barry said. There was something in his tone that paralleled his platonic assurances to Iris, likely indicating some form of deception. Eobard tagged the anomalous data for future processing.

"It is also not your mess, but you have been the one dealing with most of it." Eobard turned his head to look sideways at this younger, kinder Barry Allen. His Barry. "You deserve better."

Barry's expression turned somber. "So do you."

"Team Caitlin?" Eobard quipped, trying to escape the weight of his reverse's gaze.

"It's a good team. You should consider joining," Barry returned, echoing the lighthearted sentiment only to sober once more. "I chose to help you because you're my friend, and I want to be here for you."

"You don't disapprove?"

"Of Hartley? Yeah, I tend to disapprove of anyone who goes around shattering people's houses."

"He shatters buildings. Technically, mine was the only place of residence that he has attacked," Eobard clarified. "And that isn't what I meant by disapprove."

"Harrison, I wasn't there. I don't want to know about whatever happened between the two of you." Barry smiled, recalling something that Iris had once said to him. "Besides, isn't it a rule or something: at some point in their life everybody has a crazy ex?"

"I don't think that's a rule," Eobard disagreed, but he was beginning to cheer up, anyway. "I'm sure that you don't have one."
"That's the beauty of the rule. It'll happen 'at some point'. That means I still have mine to look forward to," Barry reasoned. Eobard smiled again, this time wholeheartedly. He had expected Hartley's return to be far more threatening and a part of him was still a little scared, but only a little.

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Dr. Rathaway stepped into the back room of his tiny, unlit suite and switched on the computer interface that doubled for an accent wall. He drew a couple symbols forward to check his messages and marked down some last minute work notes. Then pressed both hands against the wall-screen and traced a particular sequence through the cloud of encryption that fanned out from beneath his touch.

The screen went black. Then re-lit in dark blue, a ghostly framework figure barely distinguished it’s code-lined form from the darker blue backdrop, mimicking his manner and movement like a cyberspace reflection.

A line of white text typed across the screen. “Good Evening, Dr. Rathaway.”

Hartley smiled smugly to himself. “You too, Gideon. You would never believe what I’ve been up to.” He began sorting through layers of program, looking for gaps and faults in the poor being’s fractured form that needed mending. “Did I ever mention that you…” Hartley paused to flag some damage that he would need to scrutinize and likely rewrite ASAP, “have a brother?”

“Brother?” Gideon’s salvaged framework typed back. “Processing…”

“I know, it’s big news. I’d like to imagine he’d be happy to see you, if he could,” Hartley continued. “I might almost have you back to being you by the New Year.”

“Brother: (noun) a man or boy in relation to other sons and daughters of his parents. (exclamation) NORTH AMERICAN, used to express annoyance or surprise,” read the latest line of white text.

“The first one,” Hartley discerned for the damaged AI, then let out a beleaguered sigh. “Really did a number on you didn’t he?” The somewhat deflated engineer opened up a new window by tracing the shape on the wall-screen, then sketching a particular fractal pattern in the center. “Crazy old bastard….”

“Security Alert!” This time the white text flashed bright red with urgency. Hartley stood up straighter a split second before he felt the cold barrel of a gun press to the back of his head.

“Is that your Wayne Tech PP28 shock pistol or are you just happy to see me?” He drawled, carefully raising his hands so that his subduer could see them. “You aren’t the type to shoot first and ask questions later.” The Pied Piper was answered by the sound of the energy weapon powering up to its kill setting. He breathed out a wry chuckle.
“The dark red stain turned out to be a mixture of congealed bovine blood and soil,” Barry said throwing the folder in his hand onto the counter beside his microscope. “But the blue stuff is what really pushed it over the edge. It’s got a strain of cyanobacteria in it that Caitlin assures me has to be bioengineered, which I kind of expected; blue is a very rare color in nature and, well, this stuff glows in response to direct heat which is decidedly not natural.” He left out the part about the cell-like nanobots found dispersed throughout said sample. They were a dead giveaway of their origin and he doubted that Iris was going to back off if she realized that she was on the trail of possibly the first ever sentient machine. “Iris, where the Hell did you get this?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t reveal my source,” his best friend stonewalled him.

Barry pulled out the sample that he himself had taken, tainted by cows’ blood; the result of his testing was incontrovertible. “I collected this from the meat packing plant where Caitlin was found. It’s a match.”

Iris studied it for a little too long. “That must be...“ She drew herself upright, and lied right to his face, “I got it from the Flash.”

“No you didn’t!” Barry protested, then realized his mistake and hastened to justify the odd certainty of his dispute, “You wouldn’t need to hide that from me! I already know that you’ve met with him before.” His cell phone started vibrating, he looked towards his desk where he’d left it, but prioritized Iris’ safety.

“I didn’t want to lie to you, Barry. You’re my best friend,” Iris’ voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, “but this story I’m working on is too important. If Eddie finds out that I’m still in contact with the Flash, he might call in his task-force and I will lose my best lead!” The call rang out. Then began to ring again almost immediately.

“If this story has anything to do with the two metas at that crime scene, you could be in very real danger! One of them might be responsible for my mom’s murder!” Barry argued passionately, frustrated by the situation that her lie had just put him in. “Please, I can’t lose you too.”

“You won’t. Look, I understand why you’re worried. I wish that I could explain everything to you right now but I can’t. I promise you I know what I’m doing” Iris looked up at him, trying to will him to understand. “I just need you to trust me. Now, can you please answer your phone?”

Eobard was building a three-dimensional web, mapping all the data available on the Director aka Mal Thawne and his apparent co-conspirators, when an ominous rumble came from the direction of the pipeline. Eobard opened his eyes and looked at the surveillance footage that Gideon had already brought up on screen. Hartley had broken out of the pipeline. Cisco was lying in the rubble near the exit, hopefully only unconscious. Eobard didn’t hesitate to bolt out of the vault.

"Caution! Your power reserves are below safe--" Gideon called. Eobard grabbed his
wheelchair/covert charging station and dragged it out of the vault with him just to shut her up. It was an illogical, almost human action, seeing as she no doubt saw him abandon the chair once he got a couple of paces past the doorway. It didn't matter. As soon as he tried to tap into his speed-force his Emergency Conservation Failsafe kicked in and his legs collapsed underneath him.

"No! Damn it, not now!" Eobard cursed, catching himself on his forearms before his face could impact the concrete. He hated feeling helpless. All that he could really do is hope that the others weren't hurt and had managed to call for help.

Familiar footsteps echoed behind him, prowling closer at a casual pace. The Pied Piper always calculated and orchestrated his plans with nearly as much accuracy as an AI unit would their assigned op; he knew that he had plenty of time. Terrific.

Hartley stopped to kneel beside Eobard and leaned over the struggling android. "So tell me, Harrison. Am I still your guy?" he taunted, vindictive enjoyment clear to see in Hartley's once caring eyes.

Eobard relaxed his face into the bland, expressionless politeness of an automaton, figuring that if that was how his ex wanted to play it, he could too. "I am sorry, I do not understand the question." Pleading the Machine Defense never got old.

Hartley's brows pinched together. He wasn't entirely buying the act, but he did look unsettled now rather than amused, which was all that Eobard was aiming for.

"I have to go," Hartley muttered half to himself, and headed for the Cortex. With nothing else to do during his wait, Eobard focused on dragging himself towards Wells' chair. When he was just a few paces away from his goal, Hartley came back and kicked his wheelchair over. "Understand that?" he gloated on his way past, sounding maybe a hint more emotionally invested than before. Eobard was too concerned about the added distance between himself and his overturned chair in that moment to dwell on it.

Eobard heard a rush of air that signaled the Flash's arrival in the Cortex. Less than a minute later, Barry was kneeling beside him.

"Dr. Wells!" Barry grasped his arm. His eyes were faintly flickering with sparks of lightning while his eyes searched his fallen friend for injuries.

"I'm fine," Dr. Wells snapped, pulling away from the Flash's touch. "I don't need help." Eobard was still feeling exposed and by extension, belligerent.

"Hey," Barry reminded him with a touch of pacification interspersing his voice. "You called me."

Gideon had impersonated him... again.

"I know..." Dr. Wells glowered at the floor for a moment rather than admit that he was being rude. Instead, he assured Barry, "Hartley didn't hurt me. He only attempted to intimidate me. It hasn't worked."

That coaxed a small smile out of the Flash. He was proud of the other man's fortitude.

"Would you mind righting my chair, Mr. Allen?" Eobard requested, half-expecting Barry to call him out on his earlier claim. He hauled himself into an awkward, seated position on the floor with a soft grunt, commenting "I believe he thought that was funny."

Barry got up and righted the chair, muttering something under his breath that seemed to feature more
colorful language than this Barry typically employed.

"Thank you."

"Uh. Do you want me to..." Barry offered, reaching toward Dr. Wells without actually taking hold.

Eobard shook his head. The last thing either of them needed was more contact. "I can do the rest myself. I would prefer you made certain that neither of the others were injured in the explosion."

Barry nodded and sped away toward the pipeline. Then Eobard watched him speed back to the Cortex carrying an unconscious Cisco. Eobard relaxed and pulled himself up into his chair to try and stabilize his power level. He had a strong suspicion that he was going to need all the energy that he could muster soon.

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“Is that your Wayne Tech PP28 shock pistol or are you just happy to see me?” Dr. Rathaway drawled, raising his hands in a show of submission. “You aren’t the type to shoot first and ask questions later.”

The energy weapon pressed to the back of his head loading to its kill setting.

Hartley breathed out a wry chuckle. “I assume you’re wearing Cisco’s specialized sound dampeners?”

“I don’t want to have to hurt you, Hartley. Your powers aren’t going to help you, so just... Stand. Down,” the Director commanded a tad too loudly.

Hartley smirked. “You say that...” A small triggering mechanism dropped out of his sleeve into his palm, and he pressed it. The Director winced and clutched his head, dropping to his knees when the harmless dampening frequency built to painful intensity. Hartley spun in place, snatched his would-be-captor’s gun by the barrel, clocked him with the butt and made a break for the lab.

“Ah!” the Director sucked in big, pained gasps while he pried the traitorous defensive tech out of his ringing ears. “Hhg-- Hartley!” he raged, dragging himself up off of the steel flooring. He trudged dazedly into the lab after his quarry just as Hartley reached the containment field set to pen him into his work-space.

“Son of a bitch!” the inventor cursed, turning and opening fire on the Director while diving for cover. The speedster easily sidestepped the bolts of charge, but not the covert explosive set off by his friend’s shrill whistle. The small explosion threw him halfway across the room.

“Fuck you, Hartley!” The Director shouted, digging his way out of the rubble.

“The feeling is mutual, you egocentric philistine!” Another rain of bright, lethal gunfire showered down to underline the Piper’s point. For him, the Director knew, this was mild. Neither of them really wanted the other dead. In the end each was all the other had left.

“You’re making a mistake,” the Director called, pulling his sleeve back to type something into his wrist strap. Or, rather in his case, Hartley was almost all he had left.

“You’re such a hypocrite!” Hartley shot back. “I kept your secret, but I remember what you did--” he
screamed in pain as a surge of current from the gun in his hand electrocuted him. He slumped to the floor, smoke rising from his burns. The Director pulled his sleeve back down over the triggering mechanism and walked around the worktable that his best friend had been using for cover. Then he winced at the results of his trap.

“Sorry, Piper, but I know better than to play fair against you,” he remarked before scooping the other meta up off the floor and carrying him back into the tiny sleeping area. “Good thing you’re immortal.” He made sure that Hartley was restrained, his mouth thoroughly silenced, before stating his ultimatum. This time it was the Pied Piper’s turn to listen and follow along.

It was only a day after Hartley’s escape from the pipeline when Eobard saw his fugitive ex-lover again. He had stopped by Jitters’ for coffee on his way to work. He was waiting at his usual table in clear view of the front counter, checking emails on his phone when a green-clad someone claimed the opposite seat.

Eobard finished reading Cisco's latest memo, meditated for a moment on making another token attempt to watch 'The Walking Dead' with him sometime soon and set the phone down. The other man's hand immediately snatched it away. At last, Eobard addressed his bespectacled company. "The sweater-vest isn't the best choice if you were hoping to instill fear."

"My life doesn't revolve around you, Bender. I came here from the library," Hartley snarked as the new barista thoughtfully dropped off Dr. Wells' coffee. "Thanks," Hartley flashed the redhead a fake smile and dropped Wells' phone into the beverage as soon as her back was turned. He ignored the AI's chastising look, inquiring "Tell me, can something like you even feel fear?"


"Oh! My childhood!" he complained, causing a faint nostalgic smile to grace Eobard's lips. Hartley considered him thoughtfully before saying, "You aren't faking it; your legs were damaged somehow."

Eobard silently waited.

“I apologize for tipping your chair,” Hartley said, trying to sound begrudging about it. “As Cisco would say, ‘it was a dick move.’ ...Was it the particle accelerator?"

"Am I meant to believe that you care about my well-being now?"

"It's strange. You're not human. You don't have to break down and die. Machines can be repaired." Hartley was contemplating him without any of the pain or anger that had seemed so ever present beneath his skin of late.

"Everyone dies, Hart, especially 'things' like me," Eobard corrected, sopping up the spilled coffee with his napkin, not wasting energy to uphold the pretense of a need to look at what he was doing. "You never even considered why I'm here?"

Hartley was pensive for a moment, reflecting over the android’s strangely worded correction, but he quickly reined it in. "You're a machine. You're here because somebody made you," he drawled, fiddling with the drowned phone in his hands. Eobard glanced over to see Iris standing at the counter watching them while the barista made her a drink. She was typing something covertly into her phone. He looked to Hartley then gave a subtle shake of his head, warning her not to get involved.
"What do you want, Hartley? You aren't going to attack me here, not without your gauntlets."

"Not here," Hartley conceded. "I almost thought that you were going to call for help, or text for help, whichever."

"But you knew that I wouldn't. That is why you allowed me leeway while you revealed your presence," Eobard recalled interestedly.

Hartley scoffed at himself. "I still keep catching myself thinking that I know you," he confessed.

"You do," Eobard told him earnestly.

"Right. I just didn't know what you are," Hartley sneered. "It doesn't instill a lot of confidence when you find that kind of thing out about your partner."

"I know the feeling," Eobard commiserated with a hint of darkness, despite the differing meanings behind their use of the word 'partner'. Then his mood returned to its lighter tone, and he shrugged it off. "You were the one who said that it was just sex."

Hartley smiled sarcastically at him, "Oh well, that makes it all better." Then his sarcasm was overwhelmed by surprise. "I thought you didn't ca--"

A wrathful blur of red and gold snatched Hartley out of his seat and disappeared with him.

Eobard looked to Iris, who was now leaning against the counter looking relieved.

"Thank you, Ms. West," Dr. Wells picked up his dripping, half-empty coffee and decided to join her at the counter to request a replacement.

"--ll anyone... Ah!" Hartley winced as he was shoved back against the alley wall with the Flash's hand around his throat. Barry wasn't restricting his breathing at all, but the threat was clear.

"Hartley Rathaway!" he threw the name down like a condemnation. His voice was vibrating out of barely contained rage rather than concealment.

"Flash," Hartley acknowledged. "Love the vibrato by the way. Just so you know, it makes you look hypocritical to take that self-righteous tone after you kidnapped me from the nice breakfast date I was having."

"That wasn't a date!" Barry contradicted. Hartley gave him a disdainful once over.

"I see. You really are my replacement," he purred, but there was an enmity underlying his words that hadn't been there before.

"What-- We--It's not like that!" Barry defended, feeling thankful for the cowl covering most of his face as his cheeks heated with embarrassment.

"It's actually sad how unconvincing that was," Hartley sneered. "I can tell why Harrison keeps you around."

"Maybe it's because I don't have to lie and belittle everyone around me to make myself feel worthwhile."
"It isn't your intellect," Hartley replied, running his eyes over the Flash's uniformed visage. "Although, I must admit the head-to-toe leather is really doing it for me."

Barry’s grip tightened on the Pied Piper's throat just enough to remind him of his precarious position. "Stay away from Harrison Wells!" he stated every word with the force of a blow.

"Definitely his type," Hartley rasped out, pleased to see the Flash grinding his teeth in aggravation. The Pied Piper’s face began to redden as Barry continued subconsciously to tighten his grip. He had almost lost Wells. In a way he was losing him without any clue as to why, and now this-- Hartley’s hand scratched at his suited arm. Barry hastily shifted his grip to his captive’s sweater, horrified by what he’d just done. He wasn’t the kind of person who lost control like that -- was he?

A frightened Yellow form overlaid the Piper’s in his mind’s eye as the meta got his breath back. Barry shook the specter from his thoughts.

"Well, this has been illuminating, but I'm going to have to dash." Rathaway whistled, and to Barry's utter astonishment the sound lingered, continuing to climb in pitch and volume long after the man had stopped whistling. The sound pierced it's way into his ears, compressing his skull with inexplicable internal tremors until his vision clouded over with white light.

"Flash? Flash!" A soft hand was patting his cheek persistently, accompanied by the calls of a familiar voice. Why was Iris calling out to him like that? "Flash, can you hear me? Flash! Hey!" Iris slapped him across the face.

"Ah!" Barry surged upright, only nearly to fall flat on his back again when the motion caused pain to slice through his skull. "Agh, what the hell..." he was barely managing to keep up the vibrations masking his voice in his disorientation. Iris caught him around the shoulders before his head would've impacted the brick wall on his left.

"I gather that Hartley Rathaway is armed with more sonic technology than we were yet aware of," Dr. Wells' voice deduced from somewhere behind him.

"No. I--Ah! I don't know what happened. I didn't see anything... I--" Barry broke off to take a couple of deep, steadying breaths. His ears were still ringing from whatever it was the Pied Piper had done to him, and he felt dizzier than someone sitting down ever ought to feel.

"Easy. Listen, you don't look so good. I think we should get you to a doctor," Iris counseled. The Flash started to shake his head, winced and instead tried to pull away from her.

"No! No doctors! I can't go to a hospital," he had managed to push his way shakily to his feet, mostly depending on the wall for stability. The world had yet to stop tilting around him even the slightest bit. "I'm fine. Give me time; I'll heal."

"I don't think that's a good idea. You look really pale..." Iris fretted. She reached up towards his cowl and he jerked his head back, then had to stop and swallow down a wave of nausea.

"I heal quickly." Barry turned to face Dr. Wells. "You need to find someplace to lay low. Rathaway's still coming for you."

"Thank you, for both the rescue and your concern. However, I cannot simply back out of this--"

"You need to listen to me! There was no technology. Nothing that I could see," Barry interrupted, ignoring the way that the vibrations of his raised voice sent shocks of pain through his protesting cranium. "I had him pinned, then all he did was whistle and the sound of it... I blacked out! This isn't about stopping some cutting edge weapons tech. I think he's like me!"
Dr. Wells' jaw set. He was scowling up at the Flash in challenge. "Whether or not that is true. I know Hartley. I can help you catch him."

"Or he could kill you! If he's another meta, that makes him my problem. You need to stay away!" Having regained about enough equilibrium for a short sprint, Barry sped off before the others could argue with him anymore. As soon as he arrived in the Cortex he lurched forward, catching the edge of the hub with a blindly grasping arm and threw up.

"Hey, Barry wha-- Oh, nasty!" Cisco exclaimed, shielding his face and fighting a sympathetic dry heave. "Augh huhck..." He closed his eyes and asked through his hand. "You done?"

Barry leaned on the soothing, cool surface of the computer station, gathering the energy to answer, but...

"Oh, no!" Cisco turned away, valiantly struggling not to follow suit. "It's like the Exorcist up in here! CAITLIN!"

Barry slumped against the hub again and gasped out, "I think I'm done now."

"Okay, sure," Cisco squeaked, resolutely facing away. He was looking a little green himself just from witnessing. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm staying over here because that face says you are not done. That face says you might be dying of the plague, and I am not prepared for that."

"Cisco, why are you-- Oh my God, Barry!" Caitlin switched seamlessly from being annoyed at Cisco for interrupting the blood test she'd been running on herself, to coddling the miserable-looking speedster. "What happened to you?" She gracefully navigated around the mess on the floor and helped Barry peel back his cowl. For once her ice cold hands felt soothing against his skin. "Oh." She brushed her fingers lightly over the shell of his ear and he flinched. "That explains it. Another run in with Hartley Rathaway?"

"How'd you know?" Barry muttered, squeezing his eyes shut while she gently tilted his head to examine the other side.

"Ruptured eardrums," Caitlin diagnosed, beckoning Cisco over. "Here. Help me get him to the bed. We're going to need to run some scans of his head to verify that there isn't any intracranial hemorrhaging."

"Sounds ominous," Barry muttered, wincing as his aching head protested being tipped back onto the pillows.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Cisco asked.

"I was busy getting him away from Dr. Wells."

"Dr. Wells?" Caitlin echoed worriedly.

"He's okay. Probably still pissed off at me." Barry slumped over the mattress, trying to ignore the weird paradox of motionless movement that plagued him.

"Unfortunately, I still won't be able to do anything about the pain," Caitlin apologized.

"What about all the tilting?"

"The best that I can do is clean it out and treat the damage. You're probably going to be stuck here for the rest of the day."
Barry moved to sit up but she easily pushed him back down.

"No. He's still out there. He's dangerous! What if the Pied Piper attacks again while I'm stuck lying here?"

"I'm calling Joe to let him know what's up," Cisco informed him. "We'll figure something out."

Dr. Wells begrudgingly sipped at his cooling coffee, accomplishing the Wells-worthy feat of suggesting a black cloud of grumpiness about his person without actually interacting with those around him in any way, whatsoever. He simply sat there, not looking up from the tabletop while he ingested his drink, refusing to acknowledge that he wasn't alone, nor utter a single word while Iris recounted what had happened to Joe and Eddie. She had stubbornly insisted upon calling them the moment that the Flash was out of sight. She had also been equally adamant that he should stay and wait with her, too. Of course Iris West would side with the Flash. Those two always sided with each other, especially against him.

"Dr. Wells, can you remember anything in particular that Dr. Rathaway mentioned that could indicate why he's so fixated on you?" Detective Thawne questioned him directly.

"Hartley considers everything that he does from multiple angles long before he acts. If there is anything that can be concluded from our exchange, it's likely the conclusion that he intended for us to draw." Eobard didn't want to extend this battle of wits to include anymore outsiders. He was already rapidly losing ground to the younger Flash.

"It sounds like this guy's starting to get to you," Eddie commented.

"What did he talk about?" Joe asked, looking Dr. Wells straight in the eye.

"He mentioned my paralysis, and asked why I don't try to fix it. Then we discussed my mortality, and the fact that he knew that I wasn't going to call for help... while he bricked my phone, must I go into detail?" Dr. Wells snapped. "You aren't going to catch him this way."

"And what makes you so certain of that? You don't think that he can make a mistake?" Joe countered.

Eobard scoffed, looking away at the people passing by on the street outside. "You do not know this man as I do, Detective. He staged that strike on my house to look like an attack, yet made certain that when the walls shattered I would be in the most shielded position within the structure. He waged a public siege on the Rathaway Building, but brought his weapons down to their lowest setting in order to do the least amount of harm. Now, he comes here to discuss my paralysis and ruin my phone, supposedly so that I cannot call for help."

"You think that he meant to fight the Flash all along," Iris inferred, following the logical pattern.

"Hartley Rathaway is a master chess player. He is an expert at appearing to do one thing while doing another, using small seemingly disparate actions to prepare a far grander strategy. Whatever it is that Hartley Rathaway has planned, the best thing that we can hope to do is somehow to stop him before he completes whatever foundation this gambit is building for him."
New Years Eve 2363

“Eo.”

Eobard opened his eyes to see the Director standing in front of his charging dock with both hands tucked behind his back. “Good evening, Director Allen. Do you require assistance?”

The Director huffed softly at the evidence of his android’s lingering anger. Then explained, “No, Eo, I have New Year’s off.”

“Oh understood,” Eobard leaned back to return to sleep mode.

“Hang on a minute,” the Director stopped him. “Look, I have something for you.”

“Where do you wish for me to look?”

“It’s a figure of speech. I have a surprise for you.”

Eobard stared inscrutably at his master. “I am surprised.”

“Oh-- No. I haven’t shown you the surprise yet.”

“Then I am not surprised,” Eobard amended, still playing obtuse.

“Ugh! Here. You ruined the moment,” the Director took Eobard’s right hand in his left, twining their fingers together. Then began to peel a netted glove of fine, spidersilk-thin, synthetic mesh away from his own skin, reversing it over that of his android. Eobard watched a wash of the luminal spectrum vanish the glove over his hand. Then he looked up to see the Director watching him with a hint of trepidation.

“Make a fist, then splay your fingers, like this.” The Director demonstrated the gesture.

Eobard mimicked it, curious. A monochrome bust of silvery-blue and white appeared suspended centimeters above his hand.

“Good evening, Admin, I am Gideon,” the little hologram said in a smooth, androgynous vocal pattern. Eobard’s eyes widened and he looked up at his Admin open-mouthed.

“I had her refurbished for you. It took some doing but-- She wouldn't be safe as a ‘droid. This way, you can still know her. I know how much that meant --” the Director was cut off by Eobard impulsively pulling him into a hug. The Director let out a relieved breath patting his elated android on the back before wrapping his arms around him. “Good.”

“Thank you, Admin. Can I keep her?” Eobard pulled back to ask tentatively.

“She's your New Year’s present; it’d be weird if you didn't,” the Director replied, amused. “Well, officially, she's my new onboard assistive program, but you get to carry it. Whatever.”

“She will monitor me?” Eobard wasn't the least bit bothered by the idea, just excited to meet his sister program.

“Kind of,” the Director shrugged it off.

“Hello Gideon, I am Eobard Thawne! I am your twin program and I will serve as your operative
proxy for the foreseeable future,” Eobard happily introduced himself.

“Eobard Thawne, processing… Eobard Thawne, Unit#547-E, call sign: Professor Zoom. Brother, a man or boy in relation to other sons or daughters of parents,” Gideon replied. The others exchanged a look.

“She might take a while to readjust,” the Director reassured.

Farther into the charging bay, hidden in the shadow of a steel support column, Dr. Rathaway smiled to himself. “Happy New Year, Eobard. Your whole world is about to change, but at least you won't be alone.”

Chapter End Notes

Someone recently remarked to me that maybe I don't explain things enough in my writing. This may be a pacing thing or just a random jab. I don't know; we were having a pretty heated discussion. So, thought I'd check in and see if anyone else felt the same. This story is partly a mystery but I don't want to alienate you guys by being annoyingly opaque either, so... yeah, thoughts?
...or, you know, I like to know what I'm doing right, so I can keep doing that. lol
Anyway, rambling done. Thank you for your patience.
Barry awoke around sundown. His ears weren't ringing anymore, though they still felt tender, and the disorientation and nausea were gone. Joe was seated at his bedside, lost in grim thoughts, to judge by his expression. He shifted his attention to his foster child as he stirred, pushing his tribulations aside for the moment.

"Welcome back, Bear. How are you feeling?"

"Like this whole mad scientist thing better not become a trend," Barry remarked, sitting up. He turned his head to see Dr. Wells parked on his right, just within reach and poked at the back of his friend's laptop screen with outstretched fingers.

"Yes," Dr. Wells acknowledged with a familiar smirk teasing at the corners of his lips. "I see you, Mr. Allen." He finished typing up the last of whatever he was working on, then shut the laptop.

"Any news about Rathaway?" Barry queried, stretching with one hand gripping the other over his head.

"Nothing yet. It doesn't matter. We're taking you off the case," Joe announced.

"What--" Barry protested loudly, pushing himself up onto his elbows. He looked from Joe to Dr. Wells for an opening. "You can't do this without me!"

"Detective West and Detective Thawne can. You've been assigned medical leave in order to properly recover from your injuries," Dr. Wells stated smoothly. It wasn't fair, but he didn't particularly mind so long as Barry was off of the Pied Piper's chess board.

"I don't need time to recover. You know that!" Barry dissented. "This isn't even that bad of an injury! Say something!"

"It isn't my decision to make."

"Barry, he's right. It's not his call. It's mine, and I don't want you fighting this guy when we have no way to stop these soundwaves of his anymore," Joe put his foot down.

"Joe. I know it looks bad," Barry paused to watch Cisco make a beeline for his lab.

"You should be resting!" Caitlin called out from her seat at the hub. It was obvious that this was not the first time that she had done so.

"I need to figure this out first. There's a reason why Hartley accessed our computer system. I just can't see it yet," Cisco insisted, attacking his personal computer station.

"Cisco..." Eobard exchanged a Look with the other speedster, then passed his laptop into Barry's outstretched arms, ready to head over and--

"Well, isn't this cozy," Hartley Rathaway's voice flowed in over the speaker system.

Cisco and Caitlin both leapt to their feet and the next moment they were huddled together over a computer terminal, working to trace the signal.

"What do you want, Hartley?" Dr. Wells snapped. "Don't you think that enough people have been hurt already?"
"That's cute, Dr. Wells. I'd love to call you on that, but it really doesn’t matter anymore. You and I need to have a private get together."

"There is no way in Hell--" Barry interjected with uncharacteristic ferocity. Beside him Joe’s eyes bulged at the display.


Eobard considered the fuming speedster, then returned his attention to his militant ex. "What assurance do I have that you will not simply kill me?" he questioned more to gauge Hartley's mindset than out of concern for his own mortality.

The defensive scoff that resounded over the hijacked P.A. system clarified everything.

Eobard almost smiled, intrigued -- and secretly a little bit excited -- to learn what had brought on the Piper’s abrupt 180. "Give me an hour to consider."

Hartley let out a dismissive hum; he knew Eobard equally well. "Bayside Warehouse District, 'in an hour'," he mock-conceded. "Come alone. I'll send you more precise directions once you're close."

There was a brief pause. “Oh, and your cat is fine by the way, although I haven't the faintest clue how she got up here.”

“MOE!” Barry exclaimed, surprised.

“You named a female cat Moe,” the Pied Piper cynically intoned.

“Meta-feline Omnipresent Entity,” Eobard clarified.

“Ah.” The P.A. system turned itself off with a click, indicating the end of their conversation.

Everyone looked at Dr. Wells.

"What?"

"You're not seriously thinking about going to meet with that psychopath," Joe voiced the group's thoughts aloud.

"He is not a psychopath. Don't give me that look, Barry," Eobard said, not turning his head to meet the pitiful expression on his reverse's face. "I am well aware of the risks, but regardless of current appearances, I know Hartley to be a sane and reasonable man."

"Hello?! Concussion!" Cisco countered, pointing to his head for added effect.

"You really should go lie down," Caitlin reminded him, already moving to usher him to the cot room down the hall.

"Pssshhht!" Cisco batted her away with his other hand. "I'm making a point here."

"Granted, he is not a particularly kind man," Dr. Wells allowed. "But it isn't as if he has killed anyone."

"You don’t get it. It’s not like he’s trying not to kill anyone either!" Cisco argued.

"What?" Barry wondered, brows pinched together.
“Too many negatives,” Eobard quietly diagnosed.

"My point is… Look, I didn’t like Hartley, but I never would have thought he was capable of this," Cisco related, taking a step closer to his mentor. "Whatever connection you two had--"

Eobard's gaze snapped up to sear into Cisco's eyes with the intensity of twin stars. "I suggest that you choose your next words very carefully," he warned in a soft, thus all the more threatening voice.

The young genius paused, swallowed down his sudden fear, then continued. "All I'm saying is, he already turned his back on you. You don't need to give him the chance to do any worse. We can find another way to stop him."

Eobard studied Cisco for a long time. He wasn't certain how to respond. The real Harrison would never have allowed himself to be drawn into this mess in the first place. He had only ever truly cared about Tess and himself. Eobard was the one who kept forgetting his hard learned lesson in regards to humanity. He recalled what Joe had told him during their brief attempt to work together.

"Even if that is true, I have to give him this chance."

Cisco slumped forward to lean against the hub, looking profoundly frustrated. "Why!?"

"I need to know that I tried, because of what Hartley meant to me." It was an illogical, entirely sentimental excuse, but it was just human enough to be believable. If it were Harrison and Tess in his and Hartley's places, it was exactly the decision that the physicist would've made. At the edge of his vision Eobard saw Barry looking at him with a negative emotion in his eyes that was unfamiliar to him. The young Flash averted his gaze to his hands, pushing whatever it was down.

Iris finished up the notes on her new work computer and reached for the phone on her desk beside it for the third time that afternoon. Over the past few days she had been struggling to get a call through to Dr. Christina McGee, the CEO of Mercury Labs. Iris knew that it was a long shot, but she also knew that if she did manage to get in contact with her, it could change everything. The call went straight to voicemail without any interception from her secretary as it had over the last few attempts. Iris was losing hope, as well as patience.

“Hello again, this is Iris West with the Central City Citizen. I don’t know if anyone’s even getting these messages at this point but here it is: I said this was for a story about Dr. Wells. That’s not entirely accurate. I’m investigating the disappearance of his housemate back in ‘04. The man known only as ‘E’; I know that you knew him. I’ve been working this story for well over a month now, and here’s the thing: his disappearance, the recent break-ins at STAR Labs and Mercury, the more I look at this the more sure I am that it’s all connected,” Iris ignored the way that her dismissive new colleague Mr. Bridge had stopped short at the end of his own desk rather than return to his seat. She lowered her voice, cupping her hand around the receiver and continued, “If there is anything at all you can tell me about him, please, talk to me. I only need a moment of your time. Just, call me back.” Iris hung up and set the phone back down, turning a challenging look toward the eavesdropper. “Do you need something?”

“You’re looking into Harrison Wells’ past?”

“What happened to Mr. I-have-my-assignment-stick-to-yours?” Iris sent back. Already pulling up a new email screen on her computer.

“What happened to being PR flack for the Flash?” Mr. Bridge replied, crossing over to stand by her
desk rather than take her unsubtle hint to mind his own business.

“I told you, that isn’t for me,” Iris reminded him with a curt smile. Her phone started to ring. She checked the ID screen then scrambled to answer it. “You’ve reached the Central City Citizen, Iris West speaking.”

“This is Dr. McGee, I’m calling about the… 8 voicemails? --that you’ve left with my message service regarding Dr. Wells. Am I correct in assuming that you wish to discuss the research we did together in the early 2000’s?”

“Dr. McGee, thank you for returning my calls… Yes and no, actually… I was specifically hoping to discuss E… or, um Mr. Zyx? I think--” Iris began to explain the nature of her investigation but the physicist cut in sharply.

“Do not mention that name over the phone.”

“Excuse me?”

“This was a mistake. I don’t think you realize the nature of what you’re investigating.”

“No. Wait! I understand the danger. Lives are at stake, not just mine but people I care about are involved in this already; I can’t -- I won’t let this go.”

“In that case Ms. West, I believe that there is something that I ought to show you. I have a break in my schedule in….” there was a brief pause while Dr. McGee checked something on her end. “Can you be here in 20 minutes? I’ll alert the desk to send you straight up.”

“On my way,” Iris heard the other woman hang up as soon as she’d spoken and scrambled to gather her things.

“In a hurry?” Mr. Bridge observed.

“Whatever you wanted to talk about, it can wait. I don’t think I’m going to get another shot at this.”

“Fine. I’ll cover for you, but we are going to have that talk,” the senior reporter called after her. Iris waved blindly at him on her way out the door to show that she’d heard, more concerned with getting to her impromptu interview on time.

“What do you know?” McGee appraised her from her sleek, black armchair behind her imposing, black walnut executive desk. The office was barren and monochromatic, including one large abstract painting.

“That isn’t normally how this works,” Iris pointed out, unfazed by the opulent setting. Dr. McGee waited for her answer. “I know that E was running from something. There’s no record of him outside of a tenant agreement and a student roster listing an ‘E. Zyx’, --that’s got to be a fake name-- and a couple of old photographs of him covering his face. I know barely anything else about what kind of person he was other than that he looked young, was blond and liked to wear leather.”

“In E’s case, I’d call it more function over fashion, actually,” Dr. McGee remarked. As guarded as she was being, Iris got the impression that the scientist had a bit of a soft spot for the mystery man.

“Do you miss him?”

“Ms. West, I suggest that you stick to the relevant facts.”
“His character is relevant to my reporting,” Iris pursued. “I want to know who he was.”

“Is it worth your life? Because that’s what’s at stake should you choose to investigate this.”

“I know. Scarier people than you have made that abundantly clear. I’m not giving up on this until I have the truth... or I’m dead, but I’m keeping optimistic.”

Dr. McGee smiled slightly at that, studying Iris’ stubborn expression for faults. She seemed to reach a decision and stood. “Very well. Close those blinds, please.” She pulled a small circular fob out of a custom recess in her desk and used it to black out the window behind her while Iris quizzically did as instructed; they were 20 floors up. Dr. McGee pulled out the no doubt priceless oil painting on its concealed hinge to reveal a state of the art safe, keying in the code. “I need you to understand, Ms. West. What I am about to show you is invaluable information. It is a small part of something that I believe to be fundamental to the future well-being of our species, perhaps, even more.” She drew a long, titanium strongbox out and carried it over to her desk. “There is no doubt in my mind that sharing it with us is what got E killed.” The older woman held out her hand instead of unlocking the box. “Your phone.”

“Why?”

“What is in this box is never to leave this room, nor any information that could be used to verify the location or nature of its contents. You’re a reporter at the beginning of her career. I’m no fool; lives are at stake and I’ll not risk them for the sake of your career.”

Iris jaw clenched in response to the insult but she passed her phone over anyway. “If you don’t trust me, then why even show me?”

“I can see that you are willing to do what’s necessary to discover the truth. We may very well need you soon,” Dr. McGee turned Iris’ phone off, removed the battery and shut both away in her desk drawer before unlocking the box. There were: an old tape recorder, several composition books with scrawled notes, equations and diagrams overflowing into the margins and sealed test tubes containing material samples. Iris loaded the first in the row of date-marked cassette tapes into the recorder and hit play. Dr. McGee reclaimed her seat across from the aspiring journalist as a familiar raspy, authoritative voice filled the quiet.

“The date is December 23, 2000, local time 11:34 pm. This is Dr. Harrison Wells. I am currently in custody of the subject. I have finished preliminary testing on the unidentified blue substance taken from the subject’s throat laceration. Testing revealed metal components dispersed throughout the sample, which almost would appear cellular in nature if not for... Their precise composition has yet to be determined. The sample also contained some form of cyanobacteria. Unfortunately, all biological components appear to be rendered inert by their removal from the ambient electromagnetic field generated by his body. On the brighter side, the subject appears to be rapidly regenerating to the point that no observable evidence of impact trauma remains only ten hours after-”

There was a pause while Dr. Wells simply breathed, as if grappling with some internal conflict. “I’m sorry, I... uh.” Another deep, rattling breath was followed by a hasty, overwhelmed sounding “Notation ends.”

Iris clicked off the recording. “E wasn’t his room mate, he was a test subject!”

“He was both, of his own free will. He came to us,” Dr. McGee justified, folding her hands neatly before herself. “He never wanted for anything. Harrison provided him with shelter, clothing and care, a position as his research associate, protection, anonymity. I checked on E’s well being regularly, provided him with transportation, resources, companionship, anything that he required. In exchange he allowed us access, and information. It was all completely above board or at least, that’s
how it seemed at first.”

“You were controlling his environment so that you could study him,” Iris translated the other woman’s BS as she saw it. “He was your lab rat! A human being!”

“A living person no doubt, but E was certainly not human. That is precisely why we made our arrangement in the first place,” Dr. McGee corrected, her shameless veneer beginning to chip away. “I believed that it was for his own good as much as ours. When Harrison first came upon him, E was in a bad state. At first, we truly were helping him. I’m still not entirely sure what it is that went wrong.” Her gaze turned unfocused as she remembered. “One night I got a call from Harrison, out of the blue. He sounded agitated, almost irrational. He kept ranting about the coming singularity, and fallout caused by losing control of our research. I tried to talk him down. I theorized with him about safety parameters that we could implement, and fail-safes. It seemed to calm him.” Dr. McGee looked down at her hands regretfully. “I never saw E again after that night. He disappeared without a trace. Harrison was like a man possessed, purging the entire project, destroying his own work: notes, samples, everything! Nearly four years of research, gone, just like that! I saved what little I could hide away before he could get his hands on it, but…”

“This is all that survived?” Iris questioned, looking at the meager remains of their apparently deadly work.

Dr. McGee nodded solemnly. “There was a project, an experimental technology that I had begun to develop recently from the remainder of our notes. It was the last remnant of our work with E. The device was stolen from right under our noses. Three men who have since been identified as infiltrators themselves were killed in the first attempt. Harrison and a detective with the City’s task force were very nearly casualties of the successful theft.”

“The tachyon device,” Iris realized. “You got that from E?”

“From studying him, as you so charitably put it.”

“This is-- Why are you even telling me this?”

“I am under no illusion of exemption from being the next to disappear. The work that we did with E has the potential to change the course of human history; it should not be forgotten, but we were playing with fire and now, so are you.”

Eobard drove to the specified coordinates and rolled out to the center of a large aisle of abused warehouses. Barry’s phone buzzed in Eobard’s pocket and he checked it to see a text from a blocked number.

Through the red door, and up the lift on your right.

Eobard followed the latest directions and let out an annoyed grunt when he realized that the lift was a hand crank elevator. He was already down to 15% power thanks to the Pied Piper’s constant theatrics. Now he had to waste even more. Muttering bitterly to himself in languages existent and yet to evolve, Eobard closed the cage and began to work his way up. Just when he’d reached out to open the cage to the second platform, he got another text.

Third level.

Eobard closed his eyes, taking a moment to recenter himself then shoved the cage shut again with an
infuriated slam that reverberated through the shadowed structure. Barry's phone buzzed again. Eobard checked it, whispering threats of violent murder under his breath to console himself.

*Just kidding.*

"Dick."

Around the block, in Caitlin's parked car. Caitlin and Joe regarded the listening equipment set up on the console with bemusement.

"Did you understand any of that?" Joe inquired of the young geneticist.

"Something about a demonic crank lift. Hartley's a dirty, species of asshole whose mother is a hag, and his-- Ah..." Caitlin blushed at the colorful imagery that she was not comfortable relaying. "You know? I only caught the French and Spanish parts. I can't tell for certain what those other languages were," She digressed away from the references to her mentor's sex life.

Joe narrowed his eyes at her, but his partner didn't seem to have noticed her verbal course correction.

"I think that last part was in Russian," Eddie informed them from the backseat. "But I don't know what it meant. I guess it was mostly cursing. How many languages does he speak, anyways?"

Caitlin took a deep breath to answer him at length, but the Detective hastily waved her off.

"Forget that I asked. I can't believe we're doing this. You know, your boss is going to be pissed when he finds out that we planted a bug on him."

"It was Barry's idea. Cisco and I just facilitated it." Caitlin looked out the window for any sign of life outside of their little bubble so that she didn't have to look at her present company. She was sure that Dr. Wells would understand why she'd gone along with this. She *hoped* that he would understand.

In the warehouse, Eobard joined Hartley by the inner railing that overlooked a skeletal, black catwalk passing directly underneath their position. The Pied Piper turned to lean back against the rusty metal with his elbows propped up on the top bar.

"I knew that you'd cooperate."

"You know me well," Eobard credited.

Hartley ignored the proverbial olive branch, not yet ready to bridge that gulf between them. "Hand over the weapon; you won't be needing it anyway," he instructed instead.

Eobard pulled the bowie knife out of his jacket and handed it over.

"That looks precarious," he remarked upon the other man's position. Hartley rolled his eyes as he accepted the weapon.

"Whatever. A blade? Really? What did you think you were going to do with that?"

"I don't like guns."
"Right. I always figured that was one of those rules that apply to everyone except you," Hartley admitted, tucking the weapon away in the dark folds of his cloak.

"I doubt that you will ever comprehend the irony in that," Eobard responded with an amused grin lighting his face.

Hartley ignored the cryptic statement, casually moving his arms to shake the railing back and forth experimentally. "That is tenuous." He made no move to abandon his hazardous placement.

"You wanted to talk," Eobard prompted, unaffected by the other man's exaggeratedly cavalier attitude. "As obnoxious as that contraption back there is, I doubt that it was enough to constitute vengeance."

"No, but I enjoyed it. I mean, it's not like it could tire you out," Hartley reasoned.

"I'm down to 14% power, Hart. Get to the point."

"Now who's being unsafe," Hartley remarked, then shook the thought away. "Doesn't matter. There's been a change to our circumstances. I met an old friend of yours."

"Which old friend?" Eobard countered, keeping his expression schooled.

"You know which friend," Hartley shot back. "He offered me a big reward if I could capture you."

"Only kidnapping this time?"

"My educated guess would be that he wants to claim the pleasure of killing you for himself," the Piper clarified, prompting a conceding hum and a nod from the android. Hartley continued, "He wants the ring back too, but I know crazy when I see it. I'd rather rejoin the team."

"You're kidding."

"You need me."

Eobard chuckled at his ex's nerve as if it were the most adorable thing in the world. "You've already made yourself far too much of a threat for us to consider that."

"No. No 'us'. Just you. It's your lab, Dr. Wells and I've seen what's coming for you. Face the facts, you haven't got a choice. I know that you aren't naive enough to think that you can trust that scrawny, speed-obsessed, boy scout of yours to protect you. Does your precious Flash even have the slightest idea of who or what you're up against?"

Any trace of affection or amusement had been chased out of Eobard by the specter of his old master. He eyed the dark chains dangling from the distant, shadowed ceiling. It would take exactly 6.5 milliseconds, and a few watts of his remaining energy stores to wrap them around the Piper’s neck and leave him to hang. The android took Dr. Wells’ glasses off and began cleaning them with the hem of his sweater.

"I will consider your proposal, but I make no promises. My team comes first; I won’t involve them in our war."

"I understand."

"Is that all that you wanted?" Eobard verified, feeling unexpectedly disappointed. There was a moment of uncertain silence while they both studied each other. Finally, the Pied Piper let out a soft
sigh and when he answered he sounded like Eobard's Hart again.

"No," Hartley leaned forward to rest his hands on Eobard's shoulders, then crouched down so that they were almost brushing noses. Eobard, surprised, became instantly transfixed by warm, hazel eyes. Hartley's hands caressed their way up the back of his neck and tangled in his hair, causing the synthetic's cognitive processes to scatter into branching inquisitive probabilities. "There's just..." Hartley brushed his lips teasingly over Eobard's. "...one more..." He nibbled Eobard's bottom lip, coaxing, "...thing...." He moved that little bit closer, straddling Eobard's lap. "...that I need," the Pied Piper whispered into his ex-lover's parted lips before claiming them in a slow, perplexing kiss. Hartley's gloved palms slipped over the synthetic's ears. They were giving off a low, subsonic resonance! Eobard's eyes fluttered open. Hartley smirked coyly at him, leaning back and whistling a single, steady note. The destructive resonance was blocked out by that of the gloves clamped over Eobard's ears. It shielded his systems from the disruption that blew the listening device hidden on the back of his chair into a burst of black smoke and sparks, and bricked Barry's cellphone.

On the other side of the block, the listening equipment in Caitlin's car emitted a metallic whine of protest. The geneticist herself let out a startled shriek and all the car's occupants flinched away as the machinery erupted in a strobing surge of electricity until it was nothing but a flaming, sparking mess.

Joe hurried to smother the small fire with his coat while Caitlin lurched forward to start the car.

"We've got to get to Dr. Wells!"

Smiling smugly, Hartley disengaged the damping mechanism in his gloves and whispered into Eobard's ear. "The B-team's about to arrive and just so you know, that resonance has knocked you unconscious."

At this instruction, Eobard slumped limply against the meta-human's chest. Hartley gasped, surprised by the immediacy of his submission, but recovered quickly. He left Eobard draped over the arm of his wheelchair and vanished through a break in the aluminum paneling down the far end of the catwalk below, right before Joe and Eddie burst into the warehouse.

"Police! Show yourself!" When no one responded to Eddie's shout, the two cops split up to clear the lower level. "Dr. Wells?"

"Dr. Wells! Wells, can you hear me!?" Joe called, turning back to his partner as they met again in the middle of the open area. "First level's clear."

Caitlin pushed her way in behind them.

"I told you to wait outside, Dr. Snow."

"I know, but if Hartley was going to attack us, he would've done it by now." She caught sight of the rusted cage on the far right of the room. "Look, the hand crank elevator!" Her dark eyes followed the lines of weathered metal upward until she spotted the open box. "He's up on that platform somewhere. She looked around for an alternate access point then ran over to the rickety metal stairs the instant that she located them.

"Hey!" Eddie ran over and threw out an arm to halt her on the first step. "Let me head up there first,
okay? Just in case it's another trap."

She nodded and stepped aside. "Fine. Lead the way."

Joe shrugged at Eddie's exasperated look and watched his partner lead the stubborn scientist into the unknown.

"Dr. Wells!" Caitlin exclaimed, rushing over to the lone figure slumped over at the dark edge of the platform. She checked his pulse and breathing, and nearly collapsed in relief. "He's okay. It looks like Hartley used his soundwaves to render him unconscious. I'll still need to look him over for injuries back at the lab, but... I think this was his reaction to finding the bug."

"You have any idea what that was that he was talking about? The old friend from Wells' past?" Detective West interrogated, trying not to seem too suspicious.

"Hartley's nuts," Caitlin deflected, shifting her employer into a more stable position so that she could maneuver his chair into the elevator. "He's just trying to get a reaction out of us."

"It sounded like he was trying to get a job," Detective Thawne pointed out. "One way or another..." he added in a more muted voice.

"Yeah, well. We'll see about that," Caitlin replied disinterestedly, beginning gradually to wrestle the disused elevator downward. "Wow. It is really... tough... to get this... stupid....thing to...shift. OUCH!"

"Guess that explains all the cursing," Detective Thawne observed, mildly amused, "Paraplegics develop some pretty solid upper body strength, I guess."

Eobard 'woke up' in Barry's vacated medical bed a little over a half an hour later and instantly glared daggers at Cisco.

"Good morning, Sunshine?" the engineer tried, sounding frazzled.

"Mr. Ramon."

"Do you need, like, a Tylenol or a glass of water or something 'cause I am so on it," Cisco offered, rising from his stool.

"Sit down."

"Okay."

"Did you plant a listening device on my chair?" the lack of overt anger in Dr. Wells' voice was dangerous in and of itself.

"Well, you see now, the thing about that was--"

"Cisco didn't bug your chair. I did," Barry interceded from the doorway. He had left his seat at the cranky physicist's bedside to grab a bottle of water only a minute before. He reclaimed his chair without the slightest hint of regretting his deception. "I planted it on you when I gave you my phone."

"You of all people should have been able to respect my decision to do this myself!"
"I needed to be sure that I'd know if something bad happened to you!" Barry waved a hand towards his stubborn friend as if presenting an exhibit to the unseen jury. "Something bad happened to you!"

"I am a grown man, Mr. Allen. I do not need you to monitor me!"

"Normally I would be the first person to agree with you, but you don't think clearly when it comes to Rathaway. He's a dangerous meta-human criminal, who recently set off a bomb in the pipeline and terrorized our whole team, and you were going out alone in the middle of the night to meet with him!"

"In his defense, Joe pretty much volunteered soon after what happened with the PA system," Cisco defended his friend with more bravery than he had summoned for his own sake.

"Great," Eobard saw the unuttered 'oh, shit' written all over the Flash's face and breathed out a cold laugh. "You had Joe follow me."

"Okay, I shouldn't have said that," Cisco revised. "But it isn't really all on Barry. I--"

"No. You know what? You've got no right to be mad about this!" Barry interjected, having reached the absolute end of his patience. "You got me taken off of this case because of an injury that you knew perfectly well wouldn't take me more than a day to recover from! Then you just go off to somewhere, even you didn't know where until you were already there, alone, to meet the same person who did this to me! He gave Cisco a concussion blasting his way out of his cell!"

"Thank you! This is what I've been saying!" Cisco exalted in the acknowledgement. Barry waited for his friend to quiet down again before continuing.

"You took every chance that you could to make excuses for the things that Rathaway's done, even when he was threatening your life! So yeah, I overreacted, but I needed to be sure that you weren't just going to vanish without a trace!" Barry's silvery-green eyes drilled into Eobard's, daring him to push back. In contrast to the arguments he'd had with this man's darker alternate, Eobard wanted to keep pushing, but couldn't think of a valid counterargument. Everything that Barry had said was true. While Eobard had gone in knowing that the dangers to his person were mitigated by the fact that he was a machine, Barry and the rest of their team only saw their friend venturing into the uncertain night all by himself.

"You admit that you overreacted," Eobard concluded, relaxing against his pillows.

"Yes!"

"You won't do anything like that again," Eobard more stated than asked.

"I guess..." Barry's brows pinched together in a befuddled puppy-dog look. He corrected himself, "I mean, of course not. No."

"Good."

"Good?"

"It was highly inappropriate." Eobard tilted his head to look at the puzzled hero. "You shouldn't do it again."

Barry looked utterly confused and uncertain of how he felt about Dr. Wells' unexpected acceptance. "Why aren't you mad at me?"
"Oh, I’m furious, Mr. Allen, but I have realized that the fault was mine for allowing such unprofessional closeness in both cases. Considering the importance of our work together, it is better to acknowledge it and move on."

"Ooh, wow. So, I'm just gonna leave now before the Babelfish in Barry's ear finishes translating that." Cisco excused himself, getting up and fleeing the medical lab. Eobard saw the truth smack his reverse in the face as soon as Cisco was gone.

"W-- Hold on," Barry fumbled for words with a mixture of panic, frustration and hurt warring for dominance over his expression. "This isn’t like-- I know that what I did wasn’t exactly right, but I only did it because I-- now you don't trust me anymore?! I was trying to protect you! I’m the Flash, that's what I do!"

"Not to me!" Eobard hissed like a spitting cobra “Trust is built on understanding, Mr. Allen, not proximity. You did this because it bothered you that I was the one taking risks, not you," he characterized, seeing the upset in Barry's eyes shift farther from uncertainty and closer to rage with every word.

“Of course it bothered me!”

“You admit it?”

“YES!” Barry shot up out of his chair, his eyes burning with an internal glow that had nothing to do with his speed-force. "Because I care about you!"

Silence reigned. Both men remained frozen in different states of shock.

The sound of a slow clap filtered into their microcosm of interpersonal drama. The sneering voice that followed popped their bubble rather spectacularly, jolting them both back into the real world.

"Bravo. You two make a great soap opera," Hartley sneered, sounding so aggressively unimpressed that he might be at risk of pulling something. "I'm sure this all matters a lot to your boring, Scarlet Knight here, Harrison, but we had a deal. I suggest that you get to work on fulfilling your end of it. Don’t think you can get cute just because I played nice with you before..

“Very nice,” Eobard called his bluff, tucking his hands behind his head in a felinesque lounge. "I assume that you didn’t call in just to offer to punish me?"

"Don't tempt me. I might feel obligated to rise to the challenge," Hartley flirted back.

Barry’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Eobard admitted privately to himself that he was beginning to find his reverse’s territorial behavior endearing; It would seem that he would need another memory adjustment tonight.

"Well, after you kissed me like that... Let’s just say you’re not a difficult read," Dr. Wells bantered.

Barry's eyes flashed open. Literally. "He kissed you?!" he blurted out at an unnecessarily high volume.

"Yes?" Eobard verified uncertainly, surprised by the realization that Barry was not bemused by their exchange, but enraged.

"Ah, Harrison," Hartley reflected, finding his naiveté to be quaint. Eobard could hear the smile in his voice before the Piper got back to business. "You're done stalling. You know I don’t plan on pulling my punches again once we’re back at the playing board."
"I will keep my word," Eobard reassured the unseen meta, keeping his eyes locked on his reverse. "And if you are considering exposing Mr. Allen’s identity, remember that I possess the power to make certain that you are never seen or heard from again."

Hartley let out a breath of wavering laughter, then there was silence. The PA system clicked off.

Barry looked caught between erupting with pent up frustration and being creeped out by his idol's casually delivered threat. His eyes bore into Dr. Wells’ for a moment then he sped over, disconnected the surveillance camera and shut the door just to be safe. Eobard watched until the Flash’s attention returned to him. Eobard switched from his offensive demeanor to the comforting guise of Dr. Wells and graced Barry with a smile that was its own kind of laughter.

"Admit it, I had you going there for a second, didn't I?" he teased.

Barry shrugged it off and dropped into his chair like a sack of hammers. It was kind of sweet how little he had allowed his absolute trust in Dr. Wells to waver. However, he did not deign to speak.

"You’re upset with me," Eobard deduced.

Barry rubbed at the back of his neck, shifting his foot for no reason apart from his own awkwardness. “You don’t make it very easy to be close to you-- That’s not fair,” he corrected himself. “That isn’t what this is about.” He drew himself upright, steeling himself. "But, Harrison, I need to know that you aren't trying to revive your relationship with Hartley Rathaway."

"Mr. Allen..." Eobard chided. He looked down at his hands, briefly overwhelmed by the potential that he had just glimpsed in his reverse’s determined gaze.

“You still love him, don’t you,” Barry accused.

“I know what I’m doing.”

"Are you sure? Because I know you, Harrison. You hate to show it but you do care, a lot. I’ve seen it."

They fell into another charged silence until Eobard finally resigned himself to breaking it. “I told you; my feelings for Hartley are irrelevant. Whatever relationship we had is in the past. It should not preclude our finding an accord.” Eobard saw a dark emotion flicker through the Flash’s eyes and this time he recognised it for what it was: jealousy. He decided to set the observation aside for the present time. "That being said, I am sure that you want to know the details of the deal that we negotiated."

Dr. Wells gave Caitlin a token smile in greeting as she let herself into her lab. "We might as well all be here for this."

Cisco arrived suspiciously quickly. "Yeah. I totally heard that whole exchange between you and the Piper. The Dick piped it into my lab through the intercom. I used to think that the worst wake up call would be to have a whole swarm of bees pour into my room, all Amityville style, but no, Hartley Rathaway's voice using that tone, that is nightmare fuel!"

"I didn't realize that we had an audience," Dr. Wells admitted, looking appropriately apologetic, at least in Eobard's estimation. Both Caitlin and Cisco looked at Barry,"Anyone else."

"So, why don't you tell us about this deal?" Caitlin asked, already braced for conflict.

"Hartley has agreed to cease all aggression against us or Rathaway Industries and cooperate." Dr. Wells opened with the good news from the best possible angle.
"Okay. That sounds way too good to be what he actually said," Cisco commented. "Definitely not rude enough."

"What does he want in return?" Barry prompted, propping up his elbows on the side of the bed as he waited for the bomb to drop.

"In return, I am to give him back his old job here at STAR Labs."

Barry and Caitlin both let out wordless fed up sounds while Cisco exclaimed, "Oh, Hell no!"

"I predicted that you would say that at first."

"At first?" Barry echoed, making it sound more like a suggestion that Dr. Wells should reconsider his words than a request for clarity.

"We can't trust him!" Caitlin chimed in.

"I am not asking you to. It is safer to keep Hartley close where he can be monitored than to have him running around out there without us." Eobard appealed to Caitlin's sense of pragmatism.

"Safer for who?" Cisco disagreed. "Caitlin is the only one here that he hasn't inflicted some kind of serious head injury on yet and that's because he decided to punch her lights out instead."

"I feel fine now." Dr. Wells reported to the Doctor in question.

"I'm still concerned about arterial trauma. You need to stay a little while longer for observation," Caitlin informed her patient. Eobard surrendered and sank all the way into the pillows behind him, then popped up to pull the maroon memory foam interloper out and scrutinize it.

"That's mine," Barry clarified. "Iris brought it here on her way home for the night."

"Ah." Eobard tucked it under his head. He should have guessed, all of the Flash's personal items tended to be subconsciously color-coded with some incarnation of red.

"And I'm not sure that the whole 'keep your enemies closer' thing will work with the Pied Piper," Barry continued on topic.

"You've made it clear that you believe that I am allowing my emotions to get in the way of clear thinking. I can only assure you that that is not the case. I know Hartley Rathaway; this could work," Dr. Wells looked around at his unenthusiastic team. "But I won't accept his return here at STAR Labs without your agreement. I can find another way to work this out with him alone."

"That isn't fair," Caitlin said quietly.

"He is my responsibility. My actions were what pushed him to become this. I have to help him out of it," Dr. Wells explained.

"If you're set on helping him, I guess I'm in, too," Barry pronounced unenthusiastically. Eobard wondered if it was a bit of an addiction for Barry, the draw of playing the knight in shining armor. Eobard couldn't afford to entertain the possibility of any deeper reason behind the choice.

"This is a bad idea. I need some time to think this over," Cisco said to himself and headed to his private lab.

"Excuse me." Caitlin left as well, lost deep within her own troubled thoughts.
Barry walked up the spiraling, marble staircase toward the third floor of Central City Public Library. The whole place held a strangely antique feel, as if someone had frozen it in time in the 1920’s and left it to tarnish. The metal of the banister felt cool even through his gloves and the quiet of the open space felt somehow stifling in the context of his visit. He looked down at the postcard in his hand. It had the Library’s location in place of a return address and an ISBN code on the other side. Barry had retrieved it—or intercepted it— from Harrison’s otherwise pointless mailbox when he’d dropped by to feed MOE a couple of hours ago. At 10 am the third floor turned out to be unpopulated. His eyes scanned the area for any sign of the Pied Piper. Finally, Barry located the book indicated by the postcard well down the third narrow aisle. It was a collection of assorted short stories by Isaac Asimov. A bright red note-card had been pressed between the pages like a marker. Barry tugged one of his gloves off with his teeth and checked; it marked the first page of the story “Reason.” While the card itself had “For Bartholomew,” written on it in cramped yet neat cursive. Barry wondered what the hell this odd little treasure hunt was supposed to communicate to him, other than that Rathaway might be a tiny bit psychic. Barry spun to face a hint of movement at the mouth of the aisle.

“Rathaway!”

“Sh-hh.” The Pied Piper held a finger to his smirking lips. “We’re in a library.” He strolled out of sight, confident that his enemy would follow. Barry found him sitting at the second in a line of tawny-lacquered study tables.

“What is this?” The Flash dropped I,Robot onto the wood surface of the table between them as he took the seat facing him.

“That is called a book. People read them in order to gain insight into unfamiliar concepts,” Hartley condescended. “You should try it.”

“I meant, why this book? Why lead me to this story?” Barry corrected, making a conscious effort to better contain his irritation this time. He knew that Hartley was trying to provoke him and was determined not to lose control again, to prove that he could. “What does it have to do with anything?”

“To understand that, you’ll have to read it and find out,” Hartley replied, marking something down on the note card and replacing it between the pages. “I am not sure how much it applies, myself. I’m still working the problem; this is me trying out a theory.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all. Is this your idea of a test run for the team?”

Hartley smiled smugly. “Not necessary. I’ve already worked there, remember? I was Harrison Wells’ right hand. I even predicted what he wasn’t willing to admit was possible,” he explained, with a shadow passing through his expression. “Why do you think he sent me to the naughty corner?”

“What are you trying to say?” Barry challenged, temper flaring.

“From your tone, I can tell that you’ve already intuited my meaning. Congratulations, I didn’t think you had it in you.”
“Dr. Wells wouldn’t betray us like that!”

“Read the story, Flash.” Hartley shifted his attention to a sparrow flying past the window. He watched as it landed on a tree branch just above them and cocked its head at him. “Have you kids come to an agreement yet?”

“Dr. Wells and I are willing to allow you back for a trial period but the others are still on the fence,” Barry told him honestly.

“...And without unanimous approval the answer is still no,” Hartley translated. “Harrison always was governed by absolutes.”

Barry eyed the other meta distrustfully. “You can’t blame him for what happened to this city just because he didn’t trust you. He doesn’t trust anyone, and you were threatening to take his life’s work away from him.”

“I undermined his complete control to safeguard human lives. There’s a difference. I don’t blame him for being unable to see that,” Hartley stated coolly. “I do blame you.”

Barry scoffed, taken aback. He leaned against the stiff, wooden backrest of his chair to appraise the other man and shook his head. “You’ve really lost it.”

Hartley stood and retrieved his double-breasted, wool peacoat from the back of his chair, putting it on as he strode towards the elevators. Barry regarded his retreating back for a moment, then got up to follow.

“Hey, wait!” he called, and was instantly shushed by a lurking staff member. He paused to send her an apologetic look.

“Caitlin?” Hartley’s startled question reclaimed Barry’s attention too late. Caitlin had already pulled Hartley into the elevator car by his lapels and hit the doors’ close button.

“What are you doing?” Barry’s eyes locked with Caitlin’s as the polished metal slid into place between them. Her eyes were transitioning from amber-brown to blue.

Hartley looked Caitlin over, finding the light, airy blouse and pencil skirt that she was wearing to be an uncharacteristically impractical choice for the cool, windy weather outside. “Don’t tell me, Doc, this is about something that I said, isn’t it?”

Caitlin fidgeted, keeping her back to him while they waited for the doors to reopen. As soon as they did, she grabbed his sleeve and towed him out of the warm golds and greens of a bygone era of elegance into the cold, fluorescent light on concrete of the underground parking structure.

“Take it easy. Seriously, what are you—” Hartley blanched at the sight of his captor sealing the stairwell door in ice with a gesture just in time to prevent the Flash’s intervention. The speedster started pounding on the other side and imploring Caitlin to let him out, but she ignored him. There was no way that she was in her right mind at the moment. Caitlin deposited the Pied Piper against the back of a parked STAR Labs van.

“Oof! Alright, your Majesty, I take it the shape we’re aiming for is eternity?” he quipped, trying to
rub some warmth into his reddening hands. The Piper’s ambusher was wholly unimpressed by his literary reference. Hartley gave a falsely casual half-shrug, “That was meant as an ice-breaker.”

Caitlin pinned him under an eerie glare, crossing her arms over her chest.

“So. Not a big Hans Christian Andersen fan, then?”

“Tell me what you know about Dr. Wells,” her voice had an strange, echoing resonance to it that made her seem near-otherworldly.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Hartley stalled, eyeing the windowed door past her back to gauge the chances of the Flash coming to his rescue any time soon.

“I overheard your conversation at the warehouse. Who’s the fire meta who hired you and why does he want Dr. Wells dead!”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Hartley stalled, eyeing the windowed door past her back to gauge the chances of the Flash coming to his rescue any time soon.

“I overheard your conversation at the warehouse. Who’s the fire meta who hired you and why does he want Dr. Wells dead!”

“Why don’t you ask Harrison?” Hartley snarked, “I thought that you two told each other everything. Upsetting isn’t it, to be pushed out like all the rest of us useless humans?”

“This isn’t like that,” Caitlin rejected the implication. Doubt flickered her bright, almost white irises.

“Interesting.” Upon noticing the vapor rising from her glistening skin, Hartley tried a different tack, asking in a more sympathetic tone, “Caitlin, do you even know what you’re doing?”

“Answer my questions! Just... give me a name,” Caitlin insisted, not seeming to hear his concern. She had sounded apprehensive for his sake, but her temperament chilled, turning as alien as her voice. Her hand clamped down on his shoulder. “You see, I don’t get upset anymore, I get frosty.”

Hartley shivered, exhaling a cloud of white in the arctic chill of the air between them. Breathing had started to burn his lungs. He turned to identify the source of a dull ache seeping through his skin and saw frost spreading from Caitlin’s touch. “Mal, Mal Thawne: it’s an alias but it’s the only name I have... Hhghn! He has a history with Dr. Wells from before he was Dr. Wells,” he bit out, teeth clenched in a wince. “Augh! Come on, Caitlin! WAKE UP! I can’t feel my arm anymore!”

Caitlin blinked, the pallor bleeding out of her eyes. She looked down at his frozen shoulder, gasped and leapt away in shock, flinching bodily as Barry finally burst through the frozen door. Hartley slid down to sit on the floor grasping his frostbitten limb with his alternate hand.

“Sorry! Sorry! I’m so sorry! I don’t know what came over me. I--” Caitlin rambled, horrified.

“I should have a scathingly witty response to that, but I’m starting to feel my arm again so, make do with ow-w-w,” Hartley remarked, rocking back and forth a little.

“Um, let me see. Maybe I can--” Caitlin started forward.

“No!” both men shouted at once.

“Back, Demon!” Hartley added, too short of breath to be insulting. “There, that’s better.”

Barry arched his brows incredulously but didn’t comment as he peeled the frost-coated fabric out of the way to look at Hartley’s arm. He hissed through his teeth in sympathy, then leaned to one side so that Caitlin could assess the injury without coming closer.

“Frostbite, it looks like it’s mostly superficial. It should be pretty easy to treat once we get him to the lab,” the physician diagnosed.
“Did you plan this?” Hartley snapped, not wasting energy on aiming it at anyone, specifically.

“No! I saw that Barry was going to meet you, so I followed him-- to get answers! This was not the plan. I just…” Caitlin preemptively tucked her hands under her arms as Barry got to his feet. “I didn’t mean to do that!”

“Caitlin’s only had her powers for about a week,” Barry quietly advocated, helping the injured meta into the van. “We’re not even sure what she can do yet.”

“And you think I’m losing it,” Hartley bewailed. “You people are a menace.”

Back at STAR Labs, Eobard watched while the others finished treating a heavily sedated Hartley.

“You didn’t even consult me.”

“I know.” Barry hung his head, genuinely penitent.

“You had no right to make the decision for me.”

“I know. I made a mistake.”

Dr. Wells turned his chair around and left the medlab without another word. Barry accepted it in solemn silence while in contrast, Cisco looked as if he might celebrate. Hartley would remain cuffed to a medical bed until he could be transferred to the pipeline. Eobard had to rethink his strategy in order to be sure that his objective would still be accomplished, no matter what curveball Hartley might hurl at him in retribution. Eobard glanced out through the glass divider of his office to see Caitlin walking towards him. Her expression was sobering enough to draw his attention away from those concerns for a while.

"Dr. Wells, do you have a moment?"

"You have something that you wish to discuss," Dr. Wells responded with a welcoming nod, gesturing for her to take a seat. "I will always have time for you, Caitlin. You know that."

Caitlin straightened out the wrinkles in her crisp, sky blue pencil skirt with her snow white hands, biding her time. She was taking care to weigh her every word before speaking. "We trust each other, don't we?"

Dr. Wells furrowed his brow in question.

"I trust you --a lot. I've told you things that I have never talked to anyone else about, not even Ronnie. After everything that happened, I thought that was who we were to each other. That was the deal: we're in this together." Her voice was building tension near the end, becoming upset.

"We are. You know that I trust you."

"Then why don't you tell me what's really going on? Because, it may have been a secret that you and Hartley were together, but I know that's not what he meant when he told Barry that he knew your dark secret." There were the first hints of tears shining in her deep copper eyes but she was doing her damndest not to acknowledge them. Eobard stared at her for a long moment.

"No. He didn't," he admitted. He was trapped. This was the worst possible ending that this conflict could have had. He had not even considered the possibility of losing Caitlin. She squeezed her eyes
shut and sat back.

"So, what did he mean? I have been wracking my mind, trying to think of some kind of explanation that doesn't mean you've been hiding something huge from me..."

"And you can't," Dr. Wells finished for her. "You're too smart not to see it."

Caitlin watched him with a painful sort of hope. Her gaze seemed to plead with him to make it all make sense again. Show me what I'm missing. Prove that I have nothing to fear, Eobard remained silent, denying this younger version of his closest ally what she so clearly needed for the first time since they'd met.

"You don't trust me." Her voice had a hollow emptiness to it now that he didn't like. Eobard might have preferred betrayal, but she was too loyal to give up on him quite yet.

"It isn't that simple," Dr. Wells explained. He was still trying to determine the safest way to rectify this without hurting her-- without losing her. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you and if you knew the answers you are asking for, you wouldn't want them."

"You really don't trust me? I have told you everything! I never doubted you, no matter what and you don't trust me," Caitlin was talking half to herself now, no longer able to hold back her emotional response. She sniffed and swiped a tear away from her cheek.

"It's not that. It's dangerous--"

"No! Don't do that!" Caitlin seemed to catch herself, as if a new thought had just superseded the original. She paused to take a deep breath, steeling herself, then looked him directly in the eyes. "Are you in trouble?"

"Yes."

"It's related to whatever Hartley has on you. I heard the recording of your meeting. He was saying something about a man who hired him."

"Caitlin, please. You don't need to be any more involved than you already are."

"No. I want to know. If this is that bad, I need to know. I have already lost too many people, Dr. Wells! You do not get to add yourself to that list!"

"I am not going to--" Eobard rethought that promise, realizing that he would only end up breaking it. "I cannot tell you everything-- Not yet."

"Okay. That's-- well, it's not fine. I'm still really mad at you, but--" Caitlin shook her head clear of the conflict. "Just tell me what Hartley has on you."

Eobard considered his options, calculating how far he could go with this. If he played it right, he knew her to be a valuable ally. He would need someone like her in order to help him handle the new threat that the Pied Piper had brought to his doorstep.

"My name isn't really Harrison Wells."

"What?" Caitlin's dark eyes searched his face for any sign of humor or deception and widened, finding none.

"Dr. Harrison Wells was killed on Christmas night in the year 2004. I took over his identity as a way
to hide myself from the people who wanted to erase me from existence, one of whom you've recently met. Harrison... He was not meant to die that night, but he chose to protect me. He left so much of his work unfinished. He was meant to change the world."

"So you've... what? You've been living as his replacement somehow, finishing his legacy?" Caitlin said, understandably skeptical. "That doesn't even make any sense. How could you do that? You look exactly like him, you share the same blood type, DNA-- I know, I'm your doctor. How could you even know what he would have done if he'd lived?"

"I'm sorry."

"You know how to lie better than this! If you wanted to, you could. So... what are you trying to tell me?" Caitlin demanded, at a loss.

"I am not lying. My real name is Eobard Thawne and I am sorry that I have had to lie to you for so long, but even just knowing of my existence will involve you in our war. You're already in danger of becoming a target as he did. I don't want that for you."

"Mal Thawne?" Caitlin guessed.

"How did you--" Eobard shook his head, guessing the answer was easy enough. "He knows the important role that you play in my past. When he saw you in Snart's broadcast, it gave him the opportunity to cut my timeline off at the base. It would be best for you to forget--"

Caitlin leaned closer over the desktop, capturing him under a piercing stare. "Keep talking."

Eobard stared back at her stubbornly for a few seconds, but that had never worked with her. "I know what Harrison Wells was meant to create, because to me it was history. I can look like him because I am not human and through great effort, energy, and pain, I can reform my body into another person's simulacrum. The blood type and DNA that you refer to are high tech copies that you would not know to test for. The 'simulacrum' paused, looking for any hope that Caitlin would relent, but she was becoming more and more similar to her older self. She wouldn't budge. "Caitlin, I would not even exist without STAR Labs or the achievements that have been and will be accomplished here. I also would never have survived my first years of existence if not for your guidance and protection. Your future is important to me, that is why I intend to protect it."

"You're really from the future." Caitlin was struggling with the unfamiliar shape that he was giving to her world --he could see it-- but they were almost beginning to get somewhere.

"Yes, I was created in the 24th century. I had to flee into the past approximately one year after my creation, and that is how your older self came to care for me."

"You almost make it sound like I was your mom or something."

It was a half formed quip of an aside, but Eobard beamed at her nonetheless.

Caitlin's eyes widened and she blurted out, "I am not your mother!"

"That takes me back." Eobard was almost tempted to goad her into reaffirming that he wasn't her 'bionic toddler' as she'd said often during their first months of cohabitation until, one day, he kind of was.

"Wait a minute. If you're from the future, you would have known about Ronnie and the explosion... You could've prevented everything!" Caitlin shook her head as if that proved it was impossible. She was slipping back into denial, confused and unwilling to think that he would ever do that to her.
"When I came back, our timeline was altered. I have kept events on the right track as much as possible, but Ronnie's loss... It was an unpredicted aberration. As far as I understood it, all of you should have survived the blast," Eobard explained. "When he died, I was as surprised as you were."

"You knew about the explosion?" Caitlin's eyes narrowed, beginning to look paler. She didn't even notice the barely-there layer of frost beginning to spread out from under her hands resting on his desk. "You knew and you didn't stop it!?"

"It was the explosion at STAR Labs that seeded the first generation of meta-humans upon whom I and others like me will be modeled," Eobard explained honestly, habitually following her cue to ignore the sudden chill. "It was a milestone in human evolution, it had to happen."

"People died! Lives were ruined! My life--" Caitlin stood up and struck the table with her fists. Ice rapidly encased the table, creeping over Dr. Wells' state of the art computer and the tablet set beside it. Eobard calmly lifted his hands out of the way of the temper-fueled cold snap and watched the simpler tech spark through it's unfortunate demise. He arched his eyebrows at her.

"Oh my God!" she straightened up and tucked her arms safely around herself. "I didn't mean to do that."

Eobard waved off her worry. "It's fine. The desk is coated in a temperature-resistant micropolymer. You will not damage it. More people would have died, or ceased to exist without the Flash, or the other heroes who follow in his footsteps, or you, or Cisco's work pertaining to meta-humans. Without that explosion I would not even exist to disappoint you!"

"Yes, I've heard of the Grandfather Paradox," Caitlin snapped, then straightened, holding up a hand. Her face scrunched up while she attempted to make sense of it all. "What about..." She gestured to his frozen work-space. "You're not-- Right, you knew!"

"The future you was a proud meta-human with a very different outlook concerning her capabilities. I anticipated that you would prefer to adapt to your new state of being in baby steps," Eobard explained, then shifted back to their previous conversation.

“I almost froze Hartley!” Caitlin scolded.

“I am not infallible,” Eobard admitted, accepting her unspoken accusation of a severe understatement. "Hartley doesn't know all of the details that I’ve shared with you, but he knows that the real Harrison is dead. He also knows that I am not human. He deduced that truth for himself after we started sleeping together."

Caitlin's eyebrows rose toward her hairline. "How--" she squeezed her eyes shut and swatted away a mental image. "No! I don't want to know!"

"It's nothing like what you're thinking."

"I'm not. Listen, this is a lot to process and I can't really... look at you, right now." Caitlin admitted in a faltering voice. She was caught between being furious with him and mourning the loss of their perfect trust. "I need to go. I need some space so that I can try to sort through... everything."

"Would I be correct in assuming that you will be taking the day off tomorrow?" Eobard suggested amicably. He didn't think that Caitlin was immediately going to hurry off and expose him. Their bond had been far too strong and deeply rooted for that. Besides, Gideon would be watching her like a hawk regardless of what he thought.

"I might need a while longer. I don't know..." Caitlin said, marching out of the office, preoccupied
by her own internal crisis.

Eobard watched her go, already feeling her loss too keenly. He might not have friends but in spite of knowing what he was, and what he therefore can never have, Eobard still valued certain people as uniquely precious to him. Caitlin Snow would always be chief among them.

Dr. Wells watched Barry carefully lay the unconscious Pied Piper down on the floor of his newly customized cell. Barry stepped out to rejoin Dr. Wells, sealing the Piper into the sound-proofed prison.

“I expected that Cisco would want to be here for this,” Dr. Wells reflected.

“He said he did but his head was killing him. He’s sleeping it off upstairs,” Barry explained, as he finished locking up. “I figure that Caitlin will be happy to hear it. Where is she anyway?”

“She left a few hours ago.”

Barry frowned down at his watch. “That was early. Is everything okay?”

“She needed some time to herself,” Eobard paid extra focus to the task of maneuvering his chair towards the exit, not feeling ready to tackle the subject just yet. “Today it appears that all our work has concluded early. Unless there is something else?”

Barry hesitated, looking back towards the pipeline while an internal conflict played out in his expression. Eobard stopped at the bottom of the ramp to face him.

“I take it there is something.”

Barry nodded. “It isn’t… work, I mean.” He rubbed at back of his neck. “Can we talk?”

“I believe we already are.”

Barry shuffled his feet. “Not here. Can we go somewhere more private?”

“We’ll talk in my office.” They made the journey together in companionable silence. Eobard felt unexpectedly at peace regardless of his reverse’s gaze lingering on him unwaveringly until they reached their destination.

“Have a seat.” Dr. Wells gestured towards Barry’s usual spot. The speedster took longer than usual to react, thrown by the melting mess that Caitlin had made of his workspace.

“What happened?”

“Oh, that. I upset Caitlin again and she touched the desk. I believe heightened emotion to be the mechanism for her powers. Yet another reason to wish that she hadn’t taken it upon herself to ambush Hartley this morning,” Eobard noticed the way that Barry’s lips pinched at the criticism.

“I can’t blame her.”

“Of course you can’t.” The android watched the preoccupied way in which his speedster dropped into the armchair across from him. “I doubt that that’s what we came here to talk about.”

Barry shrugged noncommittally, indicating that perhaps it was more closely related than Eobard
would’ve imagined. “It probably isn’t the best time to tell you this, but if I keep waiting for the right moment, I don’t know if I’ll ever get up the nerve again and you need to know the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“I can’t keep burying my feelings and pretending that everything is normal. That’s how I lost any chance that I might have had to be with Iris and now…”

“I’m in no mood to discuss your infatuation with Ms. West right now,” Eobard rejected, surprising himself with his own bitterness.

“This isn’t about Iris. It’s about us…” Barry hinted, searching the other man’s face for any sign that he was catching on. “This is about my feelings for you.”

Eobard’s eyes narrowed.

Barry let out a frustrated huff, then spelled it out for him, “I thought that I could pretend -- for the sake of our friendship, but I can’t… Knowing that you were in danger-- just the thought of losing you…” he drew a shuddering breath in and out and continued his confession, “I don’t know what I would do if anything ever happened to you, but it’s more than that. I don’t know if there’s anything that I wouldn’t do… and it scares me.” He let his head fall forward into his hands, as if only a breath away from pulling his hair out, “I think… I might be falling in love with you.”

Eobard stared, his internal processes sprouting off into multitudinous directions in an attempt to fill in the logical gaps that prevented his comprehension. He was frozen like an overtasked laptop, failing even to blink for a few seconds too long.

Barry picked his head up, resting his chin on the heels of his palms while he resisted the urge to reach out. “Um… Harrison? Please say something.”

“Since when?” Eobard demanded, more belligerent than perhaps he should be under the circumstances.

It startled a hysterical laugh out of Barry.

“I’m not sure why that’s funny. I was seriously asking,” Eobard defended, feeling like the butt of an especially personal joke.

“What is happening right now?” Barry wondered incredulously, sobering once he’d assimilated the sincerity of the other man’s puzzlement. “I mean, did I hallucinate this past month or… and here I was worried that I wasn’t being subtle enough!”

“I don’t remember you saying anything.” For a second Eobard worried that he had perhaps accidentally erased a key admission, but surely he would have noticed such an explicit shift in the tone of their relationship. Barry rubbed at his forehead, trying to get his thoughts in order.

“So, I guess you hold hands with all your friends?” he nudged the other man along in his ridiculously slow thought process. “Not to mention that at this point I might as well have my own key to your place.”

“I try not to touch people…” Eobard’s admission earned him the facial equivalent of an exclamation point from his reverse. Eobard’s eyes widened slightly in realization, as he simultaneously identified the cause of his incomprehension. How long had he been unwittingly blundering down this path with the young Flash while hiding the evidence from himself as he went? It would have been humorous if the consequences weren’t so heartbreaking. “I’m sorry,” the android apologized,
meaning the words more deeply than he could ever remember having done.

“It’s fine. I get it; a lot’s been going on lately. You’ve been through a lot. I should have realized that I shouldn’t read too much into it. At least you know now and maybe...” Barry began with a glimmer of hope shining through his chagrined expression.

“No, Barry, I’m sorry: we can’t do this. A romantic relationship between us would be inappropriate. There are myriad reasons why, the most important one being that I am not willing to hurt you any more than I already have.”

“Okay, maybe this was too much, especially with the whole protective… I didn’t mean to freak you out or--”

“I’m not afraid of you, Barry.”

“You’ve also never hurt me! Okay, technically your particle accelerator put me into a coma,” Barry allowed, defensive on his love’s behalf. “But that wasn’t you.”

“You don’t see it yet,” Eobard replied regretfully. “But even accepting that, I would, and I don’t want that.”

Barry sucked in a pained breath and let it back out. “Listen, I’ve got terrible timing; I get that. I’m not trying to put any pressure on you. I kind of figured you wouldn’t feel the same way, but if you--”

“Don’t.” Eobard crossed his arms over his chest, subtly hugging himself while he tried to maintain a more-or-less aloof exterior for Barry’s benefit.

“I just needed you to know how much you mean to me,” the young Flash explained, his eyes shining. “I... I can’t change the way that I feel about you. I don’t want to. I’ll still be happy to be your friend if that’s all that I can share with you.”

Eobard nodded, not trusting himself to look at Barry without ruining his own resolve. This wasn’t fair. He refused to speak because there was nothing that he could say that couldn’t make things worse. Eobard’s silence was far from helping.

“At least, let me be your friend?” Barry bargained, frightened by the prospect of being shut out for good. When Eobard refused to look up from the floor, the young Flash swallowed down the painful lump in his throat, lingering for another few desperate seconds before he sped away. The android sat alone and lost in his wake. Then maneuvered his chair out into the Cortex, down the corridor, into the Time Vault.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Wells,” Gideon greeted him.

Eobard didn’t reply. He simply sat blank-faced and too still in Wells’ wheelchair until the entryway sealed behind him.

“I think I might be falling in love with you...”

Eobard stood, crossed the scant distance to the darkened plexiglass case that housed his speedsuit and took in the expressionless reflection of a dead man staring back at him. Eobard opened his mouth and screamed. His eyes burned the bright scarlet of Hell and his stolen face was contorted by a lifetime of fury, pain, confinement and grief.

“I don’t know if there’s anything I wouldn’t do, and it scares me.” Barry’s words haunted him, an unwitting condemnation.
Eobard cried out louder than he ever had before, until his whole form vibrated with it and his vocal processor began to fluctuate and warp. He punched through the shielded case with a lesser shout, the robotic framework of his mechanical arm easily breaking through the weaker material, even as it tore through the much more fragile substance of his flesh.

“Warning: the actions that you are currently engaging in are in direct violation of multiple behavioral protocols,” Gideon cautioned. “If you do not immediately desist incurring property damage I will be forced--”

Eobard picked Wells’ chair up with his undamaged hand and flung it through her holographic avatar. He looked down at his hand, the torn flesh damaged enough to reveal the pearl and grey metamaterials of its synthetic frame.

“I don’t know what I would do if anything ever happened to you...”

Was it his fault all along? Eobard remembered the silent countdown running in the back of his head, a clock ticking down to his predetermined demise. Eobard shook the specter of his creator out of his thoughts and noticed the orange glow of the radiant powercell that had been exposed when Wells’ chair hit the far wall. He began to stalk towards it in a trance. He’d never had a say in any of it.

“This is your final warning--”

“Shut up,” Eobard dismissed, entranced as he came to stand over his covert charging station like a ghost hovering over its own grave.

“I might be falling in love with you...”

Eobard hesitated. He didn’t want to hurt Barry, but wouldn’t this hurt them both? He didn’t know how to fix what he had broken. An electromagnetic wave pulsed out of Gideon’s pillar, forcing his systems to power down to stasis mode. Apparently, she wasn’t willing to take the chance, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, full disclosure, this my first real attempt to write romance and I am more than slightly afraid of this chapter. I hope you guys enjoyed it. Naturally, on top of that I had to pile on everything else, because I'm a crazy person, but I'd like to think it worked out.
In the bright, clinical whiteness of the Time Vault, E’s black glass eyes opened. Scarlet lights burned from within. The surface crackled with Eobard’s speed-force, triggering the soft-matter aerogel coating over his visual sensors to return to a perfect copy of Harrison Wells’ irises, and sclera.

“Safety recall Alpha-2 in progress. Neural surge suppressors have been activated and will continue on maximum setting for the next 3 hours, 20 minutes,” Gideon announced while Eobard rolled onto his front and pushed himself up off the floor.

“Good morning, Gideon,” Eobard responded, inspecting his damaged hand, “Do you have any pertinent information to convey?”

“Cisco Ramon will arrive in the Cortex in approximately 15 minutes,” Gideon cautioned.

Eobard nodded once. “Then it’s time for me to go.” He smiled wanly. The sedative effect of the power dampener might turn out to be useful considering the morning that he was about to have.

Cisco hummed along with the electronic music playing loudly through his headphones as he strolled through the curved, concrete hall to the Cortex. The lights in the large work space were still out-- as was to be expected for such an early hour. The young inventor had gotten well-accustomed to being the first to work following Hartley’s firing, so the darkness of the vast space no longer bothered him.

He pulled off his TARDIS hoodie and tossed it onto his chair before turning to flick the lights on. Cisco hesitated, registering the dark shape that didn’t belong -- only after he’d already turned his back on it. He flipped the switch and spun to look, then let out a high pitched yelp. Dr. Wells was sitting on the other side of the hub-- closer than he’d appeared in the dark-- his bloody hand wrapped in a heavily stained bandage. He was staring directly into Cisco’s eyes with a subtle smile on his dazed face.

“Oh! Oh, that is not cool!” Cisco exclaimed, placing a hand over his heart. The other man barely reacted. He was doing that whole not blinking thing again that Cisco had quit playing poker with him specifically to escape.

“I did not intend to scare you,” Dr. Wells sounded vaguely amused, but also, not entirely present. “Didn’t you see me when you came in?”

“Oh. No. ...Dr. Wells, are you okay? ’Cause no offense, but I am getting some serious Stepford vibes from you right now.”

“I injured my hand, but that has been remedied,” Dr. Wells assured him with a subtle, yet definite, intoxicated tinge to his voice that was not doing anything to assuage Cisco’s concerns.

“Are you high right now?” he outright asked, already moving to retrieve his phone from his hoodie.

“Mildly sedated, perhaps,” Dr. Wells admitted without revealing much. “It was necessary.”

Cisco pulled out his cellphone and called Caitlin.
“Please don't bother Dr. Snow.”

Cisco waited for the call to ring out anyway, only hanging up when the voicemail message began to play. He had half a mind to try again, but once again, he hesitated.

“Really. She doesn't need to know about this,” Dr. Wells reassured with that eerie, polite smile still on his face. “Actually, I believe that it is past time for you and I to have this talk.” The smile fell from his mentor's face and Cisco almost missed it.

“We need to talk about Hartley, I have not been entirely honest about the circumstances of our… dispute.” Dr. Wells was showing his emotions way too much to be normal; he looked for a brief second like he was going to tear up. Cisco dropped into his chair, feeling very surreal, with Caitlin’s phone one call button away to hear what the hell this was all about.

Two days later, Barry stared down at the breakfast tray in his hands as he let himself into the pipeline. It wasn't exactly prison food. It was also a far cry from healthy, but that wasn't what was bothering him. He hit the release and the Pied Piper's cell hissed with steam as it was circulated into place.

"Morning, Tall, Dull and Handsome. " ...and there's what was bothering Barry.

Barry shoved the food into the compartment and rotated the slat to transfer it to the World's Most Irritating Prisoner. "Eat your breakfast," he signed back; it seemed that Hartley didn’t like using the vocal proxy that Cisco had built into his soundproofed cell, and for that, Barry couldn’t blame him. Unfortunately, it meant a lot of conversations between the two of them as Barry and Harrison were the only team members present who were fluent enough in ASL to keep up with him.

"I see that Harrison knows I'm still here," Hartley remarked upon the contents of his meal. "He was always perfect at anticipating my needs."

"Enjoy your meal, " Barry replied half-heartedly at best, turning to leave.

He was stopped short by the robotic, verbal mosaic of Cisco’s automated vocal proxy. "How long do you think you can continue like this?"

"As long as we have to," Barry made the mistake of replying aloud.

"I'll be out of here by this time tomorrow," the proxy relayed to him. The Piper was behaving too confidently for Barry to ignore it. He whirled on the spot to face the cocky criminal.

"You are done manipulating Dr. Wells into letting you off the hook."

"Because you are 'protecting him' from visiting me? Really, I could try to correct your misconceptions but I can tell that it would be a waste of time. I am going to get out of here for two reasons so simple that even you can understand them."

"Really, " Barry signed back with a scoff, beginning to relate to the other meta's hatred of the proxy’s overtly unnatural, and sterile speech. It sounded as though someone had lobotomized Siri.

"Hard to believe, I know, but I have that much faith in the public school system," Hartley joked, using the mechanism to add to the insult.
Barry sneered down at the classist lounging in his state-of-the-art cell, and returned the favor. "Very funny. Do you actually have information to share or is this just you venting your jealousy that your ex trusts me more than anyone trusts you?"

Hartley flinched, returning to his favored form of communication, "Why would I be jealous? Is he buying you cinnamon rolls?" Hartley's eyes flicked up to Barry's face to see the implication land, then returned to his meal. "Mark my words, I am going to be released from here, and when I am, you are going sit back and let it happen." He settled into the corner and placed the tray of cinnamon bun with raisins on his pretzeled legs.

"Why?" Barry signed back irritably once Hartley had deigned to look up.

Hartley removed the lid on his to-go cup and held it under his nose, taking in the aroma of his almond soy latte.

Barry crossed his arms over his chest, impatiently.

"Just how I like it." The proxy relayed, although Barry doubted that the remark was meant for him. Hartley smiled to himself in response to some memory that the sensation evoked, falling silent.

"Rathaway..."

"You need me." The Piper signed belatedly.

"I doubt that." Barry turned away from the cell's window. Hartley closed his eyes and thoroughly enjoyed his first sip of coffee.

"No. Maybe you don't, strictly speaking, but the team does. They just don't realize how much they need me yet," the proxy relayed.

Barry's phone began to ring, bringing their fruitless, Hannibal Lecter moment to a welcome close. Barry didn't bother to say goodbye to the sonic meta before speeding into the Cortex to answer the call. It just felt too creepy answering phone calls in front of the prisoners.

"Hello?"

"Caitlin wanted me to give you this," Cisco said quietly, tossing something metallic and shiny in his direction. Barry caught the foil bag of speedster supplement bars without breaking stride and settled into his seat in Dr. Wells' unoccupied office. He leaned down to tuck the supplements away in his bag while Joe filled him in on an escape that had occurred at Iron Heights Penitentiary.

"Ok, I'm on my way," Barry hung up the phone, shoving his duffel back under his chair. He paused to regard Wells' desk regretfully before heading out into the main work area. "Hey. Where is Caitlin? Is she out sick or something?"

"Vacation. She said that she needed some time away after... I'm sure she'll be back soon," Cisco reassured Barry, or perhaps himself; it was kind of hard to tell.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Barry shifted his weight from foot to foot. He had promised himself that he was going to stop being a coward and actually talk things over with Harrison that morning, but... "Listen, I've gotta go. Can you let Dr. Wells know that I might be late for training today?" One of them would eventually have to stop avoiding the other. In the meantime, it seemed that the Flash would be spending his morning running from prison to prison.

"Sure. Don't worry about it," Cisco waved him off with a false smile and watched the speedster
disappear in a blur. As soon as Barry was gone, Cisco slumped into his chair, staring unhappily into space, alone in the empty Cortex. Barry deserved to know what was really going on, but Cisco was hoping that his mentor had it in him to make his own confessions, even if Dr. Wells’ too late admission regarding the accelerator incident had already chased Caitlin away. She had left Cisco to deal with the conscience-fueled meltdown alone, which was not something that he was equipped to handle. It wouldn’t be fair to blame her. Maybe Barry would get him to start acting like himself again, once he knew what was going on… Cisco stress-chomped through his lollipop at the thought of the Meltdown. Finding his mentor sitting alone in the dark Cortex injured, intoxicated and dissociated was probably a sight that would haunt Cisco’s nightmares. Forever. He really should have said something...

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Eobard stood at his owner’s bedside, looking down at him apprehensively while his processors looped through the many pro’s and con’s of his current pending request for information. It was a question about data that he wasn’t allowed to have, based upon data that he already had been allowed illegally. Some of that information was acquired against his owner’s express wishes. Eobard was in trouble. Eobard had to know. Would he be decommissioned for this? He had never defied a command from his Admin before, even accidentally… It wasn’t supposed to be possible.

“Ghh!” The Director flinched and blinked the sleep away, then scowled reproachfully up at his creepy appliance. “Don’t do that!”

“My apologies. I was only watching you sleep,” Eobard explained, tilting his head inquisitively in response to the amused huff that his explanation elicited.

“Uh-huh. You scared the crap out of me. What d’you want?”

“I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Shoot what?”

The Director squeezed his eyes shut and reached up a hand to cover them. “I need coffee. Why can’t a man just enjoy a decent cup of coffee before the weird stuff starts up? Eobard, what is the question?”

“I have already anticipated your request. You will find a 16oz. mug of your preferred simulation blend prepared in the thermal suspension pod…”

The Director pushed past him to fetch his morning fix without waiting to hear the rest. Eobard headed to the walk in closet to fetch his Admin’s clothes for the day, then followed him over.

“Just set them down for now. I don’t mind breakfast in my boxers,” the Director ordered with a dismissive wave. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were procrastinating.”

“I understand. I believe that in this instance it would be best for me to prepare you for a more pleasant--”

The Director put his coffee down and shot him a Look. “What did you do?”
“I did nothing wrong, intentionally,” Eobard defended. His Master was not swayed.

“Meaning that you did do something. Come on, Kid, rip off the band-aid.”

“Hartley has informed me of the length of my allotment,” Eobard hesitantly told him. The Director stared at him, his expression darkening more and more as he absorbed the news. “Eighteen years,” Eobard continued, figuring that he’d already gotten himself in trouble, so he might as well get the most out of it. “As I understand that I am meant for use as a prosthesis, the time frame allotted struck me as an illogical choice; your own lifespan, and therefore, your need for my services will outlast--”

The Director threw his coffee and his still sealed breakfast ration across the room, cracking the container open with the force of the impact. Eobard flinched in surprise, eyes wide, then hurried to salvage the valuable nutrients before they could be spoiled for his Owner’s use.

“THAT MEDDLING SON OF A BITCH!” the Director raged. “I TOLD YOU! DIDN’T I TELL YOU TO STAY AWAY FROM RATHAWAY?”

“Yes, Director,” Eobard confirmed at a regular volume while he righted the ration box. He carefully carried it back to the table only to have to duck down and catch it when the Director batted it off the tabletop again. “Please, don’t do that. Nutritional supplement stores are in minimal supply.”

“Why were you talking to him?” the Director asked. He watched his android return his breakfast to the table without striking it again, but otherwise ignored his own misbehavior.

“I did not. He arrived to enact upgrades on the power monitors while I was finishing my charging cycle. He began to speak when he neared my dock. In light of your stated orders, I disengaged my audio processors shortly afterward.”

“So what, he opened with ‘Hey Eobard, guess what? You’re gonna die in eighteen years?’” the Director parodied, thankfully progressing into the safer territory that Eobard knew as ‘flippant anger’.

“Seventeen,” Eobard amended “In actuality, he began with ‘Good morning, Unit #547-E’ then proceeded to--”

“Nevermind. He’s still an ass, and I’m still going to speed-punch him,” the Director proclaimed, pacing back and forth like a trapped wild animal.

“I did not intend to incite violence,” Eobard clarified, not feeling particularly regretful. He hadn’t liked being cornered either. “I have failed to follow a stated imperative by my Admin. As the dysfunctional machine in this situation, it would be more practical to correct my dysfunction than to injure a more fragile and finite being.”

“Hartley isn’t fragile. He’s permanent. Sometimes I think that’s what’s wrong with him,” the Director corrected. “He’s an expert hacker and robotics engineer. He knew exactly how to take advantage of your programming just to screw with me.” He stopped pacing in front of Eobard, shaking his head at his own failure. “I didn’t see it coming!”

“I do not understand…”

“Eighteen years is the maximum legal limit for an automated lifeform to continue running. That’s why I chose it for you,” the Director explained, looking years older. “I can’t have you forever, but after eighteen years, I’ll be ready to retire. I never wanted you to know the date.”

Eobard frowned, confused. “Why? Now that I have been made aware, I will be capable of assisting in your preparation. I can help you find a suitable replacement.”
The Director shook his head. “It hasn’t sunk in yet,” he said darkly. “You are going to die, Eobard. In seventeen years, everything that makes you you is going to be destroyed and there is nothing that you can do about it. There’s a bomb ticking down in your head to make sure of it, that I put there.”

Eobard felt an unpleasant feeling come over him. There was fear there too, a helpless fear that he couldn’t allow himself to consider too closely, but underlying it was something worse. It was a deeper, darker emotion that he didn’t know how to grapple with. Feelings of fear, betrayal, helplessness and anger would haunt Eobard’s existence from that moment on, always there with the silent countdown that ticked his life away.

The Director’s hands came up to cup his overwhelmed android’s face and there was regret showing in his furious green eyes. “You were never supposed to know.”

In his Time Vault, Eobard stepped closer to Gideon’s information point to observe via holoscreen while his prized student confronted their newest prisoner.

"Cisquito," Hartley baited as was usual with these two, although the proxy offset the full effect of his performance. "I knew you’d come down here sooner or later, even if you were never my first choice."

"I'll bet." Cisco scowled down at his rival's slouched form seated against the back wall of his cell. "You can wait all you want for Dr. Wells to come for you. You aren't going to see his face down here again."

"You guys have gotten very protective. Who knew that all it took was a wheelchair to make the boys fawn all over you," Hartley mocked. He straightened up, running an assessing gaze over his fellow genius. "Don't know if you've cottoned on yet, but I too am 'differently abled'." He accompanied this with air quotes before tilting his head back to strike an alluring pose and feigning an interest in his visitor. "Is that doing anything for you?"

"Being a dick isn't a disability," Cisco rejected, unswayed by the performance. "It's a series of bad choices. What did you mean when you told Barry that we needed you?"

"Hmm, I see you're exactly as observant as you ever were," Hartley replied with a hint of aggravation. "I meant that you need me -- granted, some of you more than others. For instance, I will be seeing Harrison soon."

"Right. Like he needs to see you... ever again," Cisco dismissed.

"I'm here, ergo, he needs me. There is no waste from a mind like his, Cisco, nothing that he does is without purpose," Hartley smiled for little more than a fleeting second, but Eobard was certain that it was genuine. "I admit, it's one of the first things that attracted me to him."

Cisco's face scrunched up in a cross between fed up and disgusted. "We both know this isn’t about attraction. It’s about his guilt and you won’t get another chance to take advantage of it."

“So, he finally got around to telling you the truth,” Hartley observed.

“Yeah, you predicted the disaster. Congratulations, you’re still a criminal.”

Hartley’s eyes narrowed, taking in Cisco’s poorly concealed distress. He determined more seriously, “Something’s gone wrong.”
“Talk to me about something that I'll care about or I'm leaving.”

“You might be pissed, but we both know that you still care. What has he done?”

Cisco glared at him, spat, “I'm leaving,” and turned his back on their captive.

"I know what really happened to Ronnie. I can show you how to find him."

Cisco halted in mid-step, then slowly turned to face the imprisoned meta-criminal. "I'm listening."

Hartley scoffed.

"Do you have something to tell me or not?!" Cisco challenged.

"Can't." Hartley said, reclining against the wall of his cell once more, acting as if he were far more interested in inspecting his nails than in their negotiation. "I have to show you."

Cisco smiled sarcastically. "Yeah right. You really are crazy if you think that I'm ever letting you out of here."

"That's alright, Cisquito. You just focus on working through that anger. I'll be here when you change your mind."

Upstairs in the Time Vault, Eobard considered the risks of interfering in events that did not directly affect the existence of the Sentient Seven. He rapidly determined that pursuing Ronnie Raymond would be an illogical diversion with an approximately 70% probability of self-destruction. He watched Cisco sealing Hartley in the pipeline, then folded his hands behind his back, decisively.

"Gideon, draw on all internet connected cameras and CCTV within Central City, searching for footage of Ronald Raymond taken after the accelerator explosion." Eobard directed.

"Yes, Dr. Wells. Would you like the results archived in your temporary project files?"

"Affirmative. Keep monitoring for his most recent coordinates and update me if and when you find a definitive pattern to his movements."

"Query." Gideon's holographic avatar tilted her head slightly in what Eobard couldn't help but read as a cautionary gesture.

"I am aware that it is illogical. Caitlin trusted me with her fiance's well being as much as her own and I lost him. I owe her," Eobard intercepted begrudgingly. "You don't have to tell me that I'm behaving irrationally."

"Would you like updates on Dr. Snow's movements as well?" Gideon asked with that truly empty smile that her basic hologram was capable of.

"Don't start," Eobard preempted, reclaiming Dr. Wells chair, not really in the mood for his twin's idiosyncratic teasing.

“...” Joe stopped short of the Hub to do a double take. “What happened to your hand?”

"I hit a wall,” Dr. Wells sardonically replied, attempting to shift attention from lingering on his
heavily bandaged appendage.

"Oh, um.. Dr. Wells? Your bank called for you while you were out getting lunch. Something about suspicious charges at the St. Regis? " Cisco informed his boss, causing Barry to stall in the middle of claiming the seat beside the man in question while he digested the concerning information.

"Yes, yes. I'll call them back once we're done here," Dr. Wells assured him, unbothered.

"Um... Did you lend Caitlin your platinum card?" Cisco wondered, in a voice that was trying its best to be delicate. Both police personnel present turned inquisitively to Dr. Wells.

"She has been under an unusual amount of stress in recent weeks," he defended.

"Look, Man, you got no judgment from me, but the bank lady sounded kind of concerned."

"The cells in this DNA sample you sent over are moving at a phenomenal rate," Eobard irritably diverted, forcing them to return their attention to their criminal investigation. He resolutely ignored Barry’s continued scrutiny of his damaged hand. “Faster even than that of a speedster.” Dr. Wells gestured to the cellular sample displayed on the twin widescreen monitors in the Cortex.

"So, he is a speedster?" Joe checked from where he was standing behind Cisco's shoulder.

"Not necessarily him," Barry jumped in. He turned his desk chair to face the detective, finally tearing his gaze away from Wells’ injury. "I was able to identify two separate DNA signatures within the sample, one male and one female, but further identification is going to take a while. There are already nine pending requests in line ahead of this case. I'm still trying to work through it all."

"We can help you with that. Cisco?" Harrison requested.

"Yeah. Just give me a second. I'm cross-referencing the female DNA signature with the CCPD database. And, Yahtzee! I've got our girl. Shawna Baez. Mostly petty crimes but it looks like this girl likes to party. 'Got a couple DUI's and a long list of disorderly conducts at local bars.'

“If we find her, we’ll probably find Clay Parker,” Joe remarked. “Barry?”

“You go ahead. I’ll catch up.” Barry ignored his father figure’s disapproval, deciding to merely be happy that he had acquiesced. He was determined to stop this weird avoidant dance that he and Wells were doing around each other before things got any worse. He would figure out how to deal with Joe’s protective streak once he had this sorted, somehow. Barry watched Dr. Wells through the glass while he made his call to the bank. He appeared surprised at first, then amused by whatever the bank people were reporting to him. By the end, he actually let out a short burst of laughter. That was his opening. Barry joined him in the office, hovering by his armchair uncertainly as Dr. Wells hung up.

“Have a seat, Mr. Allen. You haven’t needed my permission in order to do so for months. There’s no need to regress."

"That was the ‘bank lady’?"

"Yes. Everything's fine. I was just clearing up the misunderstanding."

Barry looked down at Dr. Wells’ bandaged hand, unconvinced. "Are you and Caitlin okay?"

Eobard’s expression faltered. He looked up at the young Flash over the rim of Dr. Wells' glasses.
“You didn't really give her your credit card, did you?” Barry deduced.

"I have always tried to provide Caitlin with whatever she needs, including my account number," Dr. Wells replied truthfully. "We had an argument before she left. I have failed her. I’ve let all of you down. If this is the way that she has elected to punish me. I will find a way weather it."

"What did you guys fight about? I assume that this is somehow related to your hand. You aren’t the type to punch a wall."

“I punched my reflection.”

“Harrison,“ Barry lamented, hating how believable that answer was. Dr. Wells looked down at the phone in his hands, shame coloring his expression while he cast about for the right words.

"Hartley had suspicions regarding the safety of the particle accelerator,” he admitted. "I ignored him. I fired him rather than give him a chance to voice his concerns.”

“You didn’t trust him,” Barry translated, already too well-accustomed to his beau’s paranoid tendencies.

“That doesn’t matter,” Dr. Wells rejected the offered excuse. “He was right. Because of my actions, people have died, Caitlin lost her fiance, and you were..." he shifted, leaving the admission unfinished.

“That’s what you meant when you said…” Barry muttered to himself, demanding in a firmer voice, "Did you know what was going to happen?"

"I knew that there was a possibility of failure. I concluded based on my own calculations that the danger remained within acceptable parameters, given the value of everything that we could achieve. Hartley disagreed, and I silenced him. The accelerator went critical because I assumed that I knew better," Eobard bitterly confessed. He pulled off Wells' glasses and rubbed at his eyes, hiding his face in his undamaged hand. As an android, Eobard couldn't produce tears; that didn't mean that he couldn't cry in his own way. "I don't know how to fix this..."

To his surprise, Eobard felt a warm presence settle into the space in front of him. He didn't look up. Whether or not he was being deceptive in that moment, the regret and helpless loneliness that he felt in response to Caitlin's departure was very real. Barry's hand delicately enclosed his own, providing a warm, comforting anchor.

It gave Eobard the strength to finish with an honest apology, in spite of everything that he was sure it would cost him, "I do not expect to be forgiven, Barry. The truth is that I am responsible for most of the trouble that you’ve gone through here in Central City. I thought that I was making things better, but I wasn’t and I will understand it if you no longer want to work with me, either."

Barry let out a heavy sigh and reached up to pull Dr. Wells’ other hand away from his face, taking in his hopelessly bereaved expression. Barry set his brow in an endearingly serious frown and wrapped both Eobard’s perfectly soft hands between his lightly calloused ones. "I'm not going anywhere. You're going to figure out a way to make things better." It was a statement of fact, nothing less. "I am going to help you, and when Caitlin comes back..."

Eobard let out a disbelieving scoff.

"When Caitlin comes back you're going to apologize, and we'll find a way to make things right with her, too," Barry insisted.
"You still don't hate me," Eobard breathed, awed by the tenderness still belying Barry's flinty eyed stare.

"No. I'm disappointed in you," he admitted.

Eobard looked sharply away, feeling the harsh sting of the words.

Barry didn’t allow the rejection to linger. "But I don't think that I'm capable of hating you. You mean a lot more to me than you may be ready to accept and I know that you’re not as unforgivable as you seem to think you are. If you were you wouldn’t care that you were. I doubt that I or Caitlin would be this upset if we didn't know all of the good that you're capable of."

"You have far too much faith in me, Mr. Allen," Eobard cautioned.

"Maybe," Barry allowed with a tilt of his head, and Eobard felt an uncomfortable tug in his insides. "But I don't think so."

Caitlin walked into the crystalline towering maze of Tanhauser Industries HQ. She paused in the center of the marble floored veranda to do a stiff 180, taking in the clinical chrome and stark white planes of interlocking balconies and walkways layered above her as far as the eye could see. She had promised herself after college that she was never coming back here. Now that she had, Caitlin could already feel the doubt twisting her insides. Her new home had been a lie, she reminded herself, stubbornly holding onto the dark coil of anger and betrayal that had driven her this far. Harrison wasn't even really Harrison and he had caused her to lose her future husband. At least she knew her mother. Caitlin drew herself up, holding onto that thought as she crossed the remaining distance to the receptionist's desk.

"Hello, I'm Caitlin Snow and I'm here to see Dr. Tanhauser," she recited politely.

"Do you have an appointment?" The receptionist responded dutifully, eyeing her unusual hair color with contained judgment. She was already checking on her computer as she spoke.

"No, but I'm pretty sure she'll be willing to see me," Caitlin replied with a pleasant, if forced, smile.

"I'm sorry, Miss Snow, but Dr. Tanhauser is a very busy woman," the receptionist politely denied her, reciting from a familiar script. "If you would like to make an appointment, you are free to leave your details here and you will be informed via telephone or email when an appropriate opening arises in the Doctor's schedule."

Caitlin smiled more tightly down at her over the polished wood of the desk. "I am aware of company policy. Listen," Caitlin read the sleek metal nameplate, "Alice, I came a long way to be here, so this is my cell phone number." She grabbed a business card and fountain pen off of the other woman's desk and wrote on the back. "If you could please do me a favor and let Dr. Tanhauser know that her daughter is in town and needs to see her soon, I would really appreciate it." Caitlin clapped the card and pen down on the inner desk in front of the older woman and waited for her to pick up the number and note the name, "Dr. Caitlin Snow" neatly written across it before taking her leave.
Connections

Caitlin was awakened at 6 am by her ringing cellphone and blindly slapped her hand over the tiny bedside table in St. Regis' stylish and spacious Luxe Suite.

"H'lo?" She snapped fully awake in response to her mother's voice. "Marla? Yes. Yes I have. Fit me in when?" Caitlin craned to look at the clock. "Right. I'll be there. Okay." Caitlin looked at her phone, watching the call window close. Feelings of uncertainty nagged at her tired mind as she flopped back onto the mattress. Caitlin shoved the doubt to the back of her thoughts and dragged herself up out of the warm bed, pausing briefly to call for a large, obscenely expensive breakfast to be delivered to her suite. Then she began rifling through some of the clothes she'd bought the previous day in search of the perfect corporate armor. Caitlin Snow knew far better by now than to show up to her mother's company looking anything less than utterly impeccable.

Arriving not quite on time at the Central Citizen headquarters, Iris set her bag down at her desk and began sorting through the files that Eddie had gotten for her the night before. Two more missing persons reports that might or might not be connected to her investigation of ‘Mr. Zyx’.

“Good Morning.”

“Morning...” Iris arched a brow at the cruller that had been thrust into her line of sight, then at the scruffy reporter wielding it. “What’s this?” she queried, taking the plate from his intruding hand, if only to clear her view of the reading material.

“That is a French cruller. There’s this great shop down the street that makes them fresh from scratch every morning. Best in Central City,” Mr. Bridge informed her.

“And why are you handing me the best cruller in the city?”

“You’re investigating Harrison Wells. So am I.”

“I’m not. Dr. Wells saved my best friend’s life; he’s a good man. What I’m investigating is a missing persons case that he’s gotten caught up in.” Iris returned to her reading, setting the offered pastry on the desk between them. “And it’s none of your business.”

“Are you sure about that? You’re holding the file for Simon Stagg’s case report and guess who was the last person to see Simon Stagg alive on the night of his disappearance,” Mr. Bridge pushed the plate back towards her. Iris peeked at it over the top of the folder, much to the senior reporter’s satisfaction. “Our stories are connected.”

“You’re wrong about Dr. Wells. So, why don’t we both stick to our own assignments,” Iris hedged. She had been following on this thread for too long to let someone else take it away from her. It was personal now.

“You don’t have an official assignment yet, Miss Blogger, and I am the one responsible for you until then, remember?”

“You’re not taking my story,” Iris replied, pushing the plate back to him with a sharp scuff of
Iris set the file down and sent a warning glance after him. She was definitely beginning to understand why none of the others liked him.

Mason Bridge paused before taking his seat to half bow towards her with a fake smile. “Enjoy your cruller.”

What Iris was going to enjoy was wiping the smile off his smug face. She looked at her laptop poking out of her bag and weighed her options. She had to find an edge to defend her ground in this forced relationship. She even had a few ideas about how to accomplish it, but first she needed to forge a stable line of contact with one particularly elusive source.

“So, I’ve been asking around about that miraculous jailbreak you two are investigating and I think I’ve got something for you,” Henry told his son and Joe, leaning a little closer to the thick, reinforced prison glass that separated them.

Barry frowned, not looking at all pleased by this news. “What do you mean you’ve ‘been asking around?’” he responded, tucking the black, plastic phone between his shoulder and his ear while he leaned his elbows on the dark counter.

“Do you you know Marcus Stockheimer?” Henry soldiered on.

“Dad,” Barry objected.

“Marcus Stockheimer?” Henry repeated, ignoring his offspring’s reproach.

Barry’s lips thinned and he passed the phone to Joe.

“Sure. The guy’s some mid-level gangster who works on the South Side. Why?” the Detective prompted more patiently.

“Word is, Clay Parker was a runner for Stockheimer. When Parker got pinched he lost Stockheimer a lot of money.”

“So Parker owes this guy,” Barry shrugged, still put off the subject of conversation by his father’s unwise involvement in their case.

“From what I’ve heard, this guy Stockheimer has a reputation. Every member of his gang stops by to pay him first after they get out, or else. I don’t think your guy’s leaving town without settling his debt one way or another,” Henry confirmed. “And he isn’t likely to make it too far if he tries.”

Barry exchanged a look with Joe and the Detective handed him back the phone. “Alright. We’ll look into it, but no more playing cop, okay?”

Henry remained silent, then nodded when Barry didn’t let it go.

“Dad, I’m serious. Promise me.”
“I hear you,” Henry finally relented. Barry wasn’t exactly satisfied by the lukewarm agreement, but he decided that pushing wasn’t going to do much more than waste the precious time he had left to visit, so he let it lie.

Hartley looked up to see Cisco was back for a visit, looking as unhappy to be there as he had before, but also, determined. Hartley smirked. He had him.

“You said you knew what happened to Ronnie that night.”

“I do.”

“You said that he’s alive.” Cisco looked away, then back up again. He was once again trying to reign in an internal conflict. “Prove it.”

“Sure thing. Just let me out of here and I’ll show you the evidence.”

“No. First you need to convince me that you’re not full of it, then I’ll think about letting you show me,” Cisco countered. “I’m still pretty sure that you’re making it up.”

“So little faith.” Hartley mock lamented. “Still not a lot in it for me is there. You would make a terrible hostage negotiator.”

“I sealed him in the pipeline,” Cisco blurted out, both angered and full of guilt. “I sealed Ronnie in and he burned! That’s what happened to him! I was right here...”

Hartley sobered, studying his rival’s deflated countenance. “You didn’t kill him, Cisco.”

“I won’t let you out without some proof that you aren’t just using this to get to me the same way you used the accelerator incident against Dr. Wells,” Cisco persevered, swallowing down the unwanted surge of emotion.

“Oh, yes how petty of me. All the poor man did was blow up the city.” Hartley’s mockery didn’t hit its target this time. He paused to pick an imaginary piece of lint off his sweater. “Fine, but I want answers, too,” he bargained, no longer bothering with mocking deflections.

“For real?”Cisco shook off his doubts. “Fine, whatever…”

“Professor Martin Stein.”

“Who?”

“He was a physicist who went missing on the same night. The reason for that should be obvious; he was here, outside. You can use that to corroborate my story, and if that’s not enough, Dr. Snow should be able to help you connect some of the dots.”

“Caitlin left,” Cisco corrected, distractedly trying to figure out what this had to do with anything. “What does this Stein guy have to do with Ronnie?”

“That’s the part I have to show you,” Hartley explained, his forehead creasing. “What do you mean Caitlin left?”

“She took an indeterminate leave of absence after Dr. Wells told her about ignoring your warning.” Cisco was still busy trying to puzzle out what the other man was really up to. “Ronnie was locked
into the pipeline. This whole place was in lockdown. I don’t see what this has to do with some guy hanging around outside.”

“You won’t until you investigate. Really? She just walked out? Just like that?” Hartley tilted his head, not quite in approval. “Huh. I did not see that coming. Never mind; it’s my turn. Something was bothering you the last time you came down here.”

“You,” Cisco offered flippantly.

“You were worried. It had something to do with Harrison. What happened?”

“Why do you care?”

“I did have an intimate relationship with him not too long ago, you know,” Hartley drawled condescendingly. “Not to blow your mind, but that does encourage a certain sense of connection.”

“Ugh. No. It isn’t the concept of a split couple caring for each other that I have trouble with. It’s the concept of you caring that I find hard to believe,” Cisco clarified, once again put off by the reminder of his coworkers’ fraternization.

“And here I thought you and I had an understanding.”

“Fine. He didn’t take Caitlin leaving very well. He hurt himself, and he’s been acting weird ever since. There, agreement fulfilled. I’m out of here.”

Hartley’s eyes narrowed. “Hurting himself, how?”

“Hartley…” Cisco sighed, “His hand is all messed up. He said he punched a wall, but it looked shredded. I don’t know what really happened. When I showed up in the Cortex that morning he was acting drugged. He’s been creepily quiet and distracted ever since. I don’t know; Barry’s better at calming him down than I am. I’m sure he’ll figure it out.”

“Right.” Hartley said, his hazel eyes hard. He displayed a shark-like sneer at the mention of the Flash but didn’t seem interested in continuing their conversation. “He’ll probably be the one then.”

“I don’t want to know what you’re talking about,” Cisco denied, heading for the control panel to lock up.

Hartley turned his back on him, retreating into his own thoughts.

When Caitlin took her first step into her mother's office, it occurred to her that she might as well not have tried. Dr. Tanhauser didn't give any indication that she even knew Caitlin was there until she was standing just across the desk from her. The CEO's pen stilled and her chrome grey eyes lifted momentarily to scrutinize the silvery ringlets left loose from her progeny's bun.

"You've changed your hair," she disapproved, switching from her handwritten notes to checking something on her computer.

"I guess I did..."

"What is it that you needed to talk about, Caitlin. You had better not have run out of money again,” Dr. Tanhauser warned, with her focus still split between her daughter and her work.
"That only ever happened once," Caitlin said, biting back a bitter reminder that her self righteous CEO mother hadn't been willing even to try to help her out of that mess either.

"I told you that you could have a perfectly respectable job here at the company, but no, you’ve made your choice." Dr. Tanhauser amended something in the file she was skimming through.

"I came here because there is a... unique patient that I've been treating back at STAR Labs and I was hoping I could discuss the case with you," Caitlin pushed past the old conflict, but couldn't help procrastinating against sharing the nature of her predicament.

"Well, you can send me the file and I might be able to fit in a brief consultation, but I can't make any promises. I simply don't have the time to waste."

"Marla..."

"There are too many different projects I'm committed to overseeing."

"Marla..."

"This company doesn't run itself." Her mother continued to rant, unhearing. "Unlike that washed up peacock that you chose to work for, I run a tight ship here and that requires--." "Mom! " When her outburst failed to do the trick, Caitlin drew in a centering breath, snatched her mother's piping hot cappuccino up off of its saucer and blew on it once, freezing it immediately."I'm the patient." Her eerie, new voice intoned. She dropped the frozen solid cup of joe back down with a punctuating crack. "Do you have time for me now?"

Dr. Tanhauser reached out and turned the cup over. Her coffee remained a solid block of ice sealed within its frost-coated vessel. She stared, wide-eyed up at her daughter.

"How?" She breathed in awe, then caught herself and grabbed up her desk phone. "Alice, clear my schedule for the day."

Barry walked into the Cortex and stopped by the hub to watch Dr. Wells through the glass divide. He was completely absorbed in something on his tablet and was leaning against the desktop with his face inches from the screen. Barry smiled to himself, making his way over. He sat down and waited. The physicist appeared too distracted to notice, so Barry leaned closer to peek at the screen over his shoulder.

"Iris’ blog?” the speedster noticed, prompting Dr. Wells to straighten very quickly and scowl at him.

“It’s research,” he clarified.

Barry’s eyebrows rose in amused skepticism. “You’re researching Iris’ blog?”

“Potential meta-humans,” Dr. Wells amended, skimming through a post about a ‘Burning Man’. “The law of averages dictates that at least a few of these reports that people are sending in are based on factual events."

“This burning man, do you think he might be the meta who took you and Caitlin?” Barry guessed, picking up the pad and skimming over the blog post for himself.

“I think that he seems familiar. It is too early to say whether there is a valid connection between the
“But it’s worth looking into,” Barry concurred, leaning back in his seat. “How many of these dangerous metas have been running around out there without us even realizing it?” he wondered.

“It is difficult to determine without more data.” Dr. Wells reached out to take back his device. “Either way, according to our current arrangement the responsibility of researching this phenomenon remains with me. I’ll be sure to tell you if and when the Flash’s intervention proves necessary.” Eobard stopped to take in Barry’s expression. “Something is bothering you.”

“Joe and I just went to visit my dad,” Barry confided. “He’s been asking around to the other inmates at Iron Heights, trying to gather info on Clay Parker.”

“That sounds like a risk,” Eobard noted.

“I told him that he had to stop. I don’t want him drawing the wrong kind of attention to himself because he’s trying to help me.”

“But nothing has happened to him,” Dr. Wells tested, keeping his voice low and calming.

“No. Not yet, anyway,” Barry scrubbed a hand through his hair, anxious and irritated. “You think I’m making a big deal out of nothing?”

“I understand that you have a valid concern, as I also understand that you have already done what you can to remedy it. Fixating on what could happen is only going to make you feel unnecessarily worse.” Eobard closed the windows on his tablet and shut it down, using the distraction to distance himself from his next admission “I would prefer not to see you burden yourself with the pain of a loss that hasn’t even occurred yet.” It was the same reason why he was attempting to maintain some separation between them, mitigating Barry’s pain in exchange for another measure of isolation.

Barry propped his head up on his hand, a small smile returning to his face.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Eobard questioned, uncertain of how he should respond to the depth of emotion in his reverse’s eyes.

“Because you care,” Barry answered, clarifying very little and too much at once. His tone had turned so sentimental.

“I never said that I didn’t.” Eobard focused his attention on putting away his tablet, or at least pretended to. Barry was still smiling at him with too much meaning behind his eyes. “I don’t want you to become preoccupied. The Flash has a history of making unnecessarily reckless decisions when upset,” he explained it away in a suitably gruff tone.

Barry opened his mouth to reply, but an alert chirped from the hub. Dr. Wells gestured for him to lead the way and followed him out into the Cortex. Cisco beat them to the computer anyway.

“We got an armed robbery in progress. A male and female in their twenties,” Cisco reported as Barry rounded the end of the desk to see for himself. “Could be our Bonnie and Clyde.”

“I’m on it.” Barry sped into his Flash suit.

“Be—” Dr. Wells let out an annoyed sigh upon being left in the speedster’s wake mid-sentence and moved to the open space beside Cisco’s chair.

“I will,” Barry replied happily over the comms, catching the android off-guard.
He slid to a halt in the back lot not far from where Clay Parker was holding the two couriers at
gunpoint by their wide open armored car. Shawna Baez had her back to Barry and a large bag full of
stolen cash in each hand. Then she disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Whoa,” the Flash remarked, then turned towards a soft rushing sound to his right to see Shawna
Baez reappear at the back of a silver Porsche that was almost definitely as stolen as the cash she was
loading into it. He sped over to face her. The teleporter straightened, ran her eyes up and down his
body, then smiled cockily at him.

“Oh, I’ve read about you. You’re the Flash,” she greeted with just a hint of patronization. “I’ve heard
that you’re fast.”

Barry gave a one shouldered shrug, remarking casually, “And I saw you teleport; sounds like we’re a
good match.”

The thief chuckled, appreciative of his audacity. “Let’s see how fast you really are.” She vanished
again, only to waft back into existence a few yards behind him. “Catch me if you can.”

Barry sped over and wrapped his arms around her from behind. She turned her face toward his.
He smirked and purred, “I can,” victorious.

Shawna Baez stomped on his foot and elbowed him hard in the ribs, teleporting away to the second
level of a half finished construction sight behind them. Barry let out a soft grunt of pain, feeling a tad
deflated, then darted after her. He almost managed to grab the sleeve of her leather jacket only to be
kicked back down the four topmost steps instead.

“You didn’t think I’d be that easy,” Baez teased and teleported up to the next level.

“Ahh! Hey, not cool! Watch where you’re aiming,” the Flash complained; if he hadn’t backed off at
the last second the other meta’s heavy boot would’ve landed one hell of a crotch shot. The now
inexplicably insulted speedster put in an extra burst of speed, this time catching her arm in a firm
grip. She teleported them both to the top and left him dangling off the wrong side of the guardrail by
his left arm.

“Congratulations. Not many men can keep up with me,” Shawna Baez taunted before teleporting
down to the safety of solid ground. Barry let out a wordless shout as she left him in her smoke,
flailing with his other arm in an attempt to reach a hand hold.

“Barry? What’s happening?” Harrison’s voice questioned over the comms.

“Umm, hang--” Barry swung himself closer grabbing for the top rail. “on.... Gotcha!” Barry frowned
single-mindedly and charged after his opponent. Baez turned to face him wide-eyed. No. She was
looking at something behind him. The loud crack of a gunshot jarred Barry’s senses from too close
behind him. He’d become too focused on the meta-human thief and had forgotten her partner. Barry
dropped back into the speed-force and turned, grabbing blindly at the point of pressure stinging the
back of his neck. He let out another wordless cry as he barely managed to grasp the tiny piece of
spinning metal and deflect it from its lethal trajectory. The Flash fell to his knees, hearing the soft
whoosh of his quarry disappearing from behind him.

“Holy crap!” Cisco exclaimed.
“Was that a gunshot?” Dr. Wells’ voice demanded loudly in his ear. Barry winced as he caught his breath, not too keen on answering that particular tone, but… “Say something now, Mr. Allen!” Oh.

“Yeah. I’m okay,” Barry gasped out apologetically. “Sorry.” He left it at that, not sorry that I promised to be careful, then almost got myself killed… twice, sorry that I got distracted by a flirty teleporter and it almost got me shot, or sorry that I scared you. He meant all of those things, but he knew better than to say them. Barry shook his head at his own foolishness and ran back to the Cortex.

He was welcomed by Dr. Wells’ formidable glare. Barry plastered on his most endearing smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

“I brought back a souvenir;” he joked, setting the bullet down on the top of the hub.

“Wow! Did you catch this?” Cisco enthused, standing to get a closer look, while Dr. Wells continued to glare at the Flash as if he had single-handedly murdered Christmas.

“I guess I’m a lot faster than a speeding bullet,” Barry played along with the engineer’s enthusiasm. Snap!

Cisco and Barry eyed the pieces of utterly broken ballpoint pen falling from their silent companion’s too tight grip. Cisco’s cell phone chirped shrilly and he checked the screen. “Oh, um...I gotta take this.” he announced awkwardly and left.

Barry watched him leave, then assured his too quiet mentor, “I get that you’re mad. I shouldn’t have let Clay Parker get the drop on me like that.”

“Was that before or after you decided to play tag with a deadly, meta-human criminal?” Dr. Wells countered in a perfectly pleasant tone which, combined with the fearsome blaze in his piercing blue eyes, only served to stress how ticked off he was. It would have been downright terrifying if Barry’s trust in him wasn’t already utterly unshakable. “It sounded like you were enjoying yourself.”

“I... wasn’t?” he denied, faltering due to confusion rather than doubt.

Dr. Wells tilted his head with a cautioning expression that evoked the temperament of a cat toying with a trapped garden snake. “You don’t sound so sure,” Dr. Wells picked up the bullet. “What have I been telling you, again, and again?”

“You advise restraint,” Barry recited, then one corner of his mouth quirked upwards despite his better judgment. “I kind of did restrain that bullet…”

“This is funny to you?” Eobard hissed sharply.

“Oh! No! I was just being stupid, okay? Which isn’t-- I’m fine, anyways! See? Just a scratch.” His reassurance did nothing. “Are you mad because of the gunshot or…” Barry thought it over out loud. “The meta was just trying to distract me and I was showing off, which I do sometimes--and I know you hate that, but--” An idea struck. “You already know how I feel about you so there’s no reason to be jealous.”

Eobard blinked, his rage banished. He hadn’t realized that he was experiencing jealousy until Barry mentioned it. Barry noticed; that was not ideal. “Jealous is a strong word, a more apt one would be provoked.”

Barry’s face split in a shit eating grin.
“Oh, stop leering at me, Mr. Allen. If I weren’t stuck in this chair I might have strangled you by now for being so thoughtless,” Eobard course-corrected to a safer level of abrasiveness. He set the bullet down on the counter with a soft tap.

“Uh huh,” Barry preened too pleased to care about the empty threat. “Because you like me.”

Eobard glared. “Because you’re an idiot. Go ahead, date a dangerous criminal. This one’s your type after all.”

Barry narrowed his eyes, his goofy grin not completely chased from his face by suspicion. “By that I am going to assume you mean intelligent, resourceful and drop dead gorgeous,” he praised, slipping into the seat directly beside Dr. Wells.

“I was thinking more along the lines of physically attractive, dangerous and unattainable,” Eobard amended, unable to resist slipping in a stealth insult in his current vulnerable mood.

“And allergic to compliments, apparently,” Barry observed wryly. “Sorry I scared you. I’ll try to be more careful next time, I promise, but for now I should get back to the Precinct.” He leaned just a little closer, “And you know, I would be happy to wait for you if you’d just admit that’s what you want.”

Eobard turned his head to look at him, their faces only inches apart, then watched him drop into the speed-force and dart away. An alert from Gideon lit the nearest computer screen. Eobard moved closer to see a new post on Iris' blog. It was a sound file marked ‘tonight at Jitters’. Intrigued, Eobard pressed play. The Cortex was filled with familiar notes of an old recording from his past. Vivaldi’s ‘Summer’ pulled from a cassette that he’d hidden away under floorboards ten years ago.

“Interesting choice, Ms. West,” he smirked slyly. “What could you possibly think you’re playing at?”

“Microbial testing, and broad spectrum analysis on the blood taken from the subject’s outer layers of flesh reveal highly advanced chameleonic properties and signs that I believe indicate a deliberate design.” In the latest audio recording, Dr. Wells let out a sigh as if awed by his own words. Iris paused in her note-taking to consider the cassette player. She was at another appointed visit to Mercury Labs to study the deadly records of McGee and Wells’ study of the mysterious E, and honestly it wasn’t exactly endearing either scientist to her at the moment. It was clear that “the Subject,” as they insisted upon referring to him, had come to them in an extremely vulnerable and wounded state. It led her to wonder how willing he really had been when he had agreed to this arrangement.

“An adaptable, designer genome. It’s like nothing that we had ever thought possible. Not yet.” The younger version of her best friend’s idol recollected himself, beginning to sound more like the man she knew. “After running similar testing on the unidentified blue substance which the subject extruded internally and through his mouth prior to the collision, I must concur with Tina’s theory that for all intents and purposes, it is more functionally comparable to blood.”

Iris frowned, brought back to the memory of a nighttime conversation not too long ago.

“The substance’s luminous quality seems to be a function of the cyanobacteria dispersed throughout, a conversion of heat into light, likely for the purpose of stabilizing his internal temperature-- E., put that down!” there was a somehow sarcastic sounding clamor in the background. “That is extremely sensitive lab equipment; it is not a toy!”
“That is a matter of perspective,” a smooth, slightly teasing voice responded from a minor distance. Iris straightened, now staring in surprise at the cassette player: E. She hadn’t thought that she would get to hear his voice. It was distantly familiar, with a hint of patronization; a delighted observer of humanity’s antics. He spoke with an impish air that made her suspect he smiled quite a lot, as if he were always just a breath away from laughter. It was not what she had expected at all.

“Sit down. I’m almost finished -- and stop putting your feet up on my--” there was a muffled thump, “Lab table.” Dr. Wells let out a measured breath, probably counting down in his mind.

“Go on, you were busy admiring my gorgeous glowing ‘blood’,” E’s ebullient prompt was interrupted by a shattering sound. “There goes bumblebee mug again! Careful, I hear there’s sensitive lab equipment in here.”

“Recording ends,” the younger Wells on the tape intoned tightly. Iris watched the button release with a click, too absorbed in her own blossoming epiphany to switch the tapes just yet. The dots were connecting in her head, even a few disparate details that she hadn’t thought to tie to her investigation were all interconnecting to make a strange sort of sense: Dr. Wells’ secrecy, his status as a seemingly constant target, the ease with which he’d accepted the Flash’s sudden appearance at Jitters’, the Reverse’s preoccupation with the physicist, the residue that Barry found at Caitlin’s crime scene. A smile spread across Iris’ face as a plan began to form. She had just found her trump card.
“Um, excuse me. Cisco Ramon?” a tall dark, and handsome man in a slightly worn tweed jacket inquired, coming to a stop at the edge of Cisco’s table. The young inventor belatedly stood to greet him.

“Oh, yes. You must be Dr. Jason Rush,” he reached out to shake the other scientist’s hand. “Thanks for agreeing to meet me. I know this is kind of out of the blue.”

“No problem, but I should tell you up front, if this is about the resume I mailed in to STAR Labs, I’ve already been accepted for a position at Mercury Labs,” Jason Rush explained.

“No, that’s cool. I was actually hoping to talk to you about a colleague of yours who went missing recently, Prof. Martin Stein--”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you.” Dr. Rush turned to walk away.

“Hey, wait a minute! I just want to talk to you,” Cisco followed after him and matched his pace.

“This was a bad idea.”

“No. Listen, whatever it is that you’re afraid of, I think I need to hear about it. A colleague of mine went missing on the same night that Prof. Stein did and I think whatever happened to him happened to my friend too,” Cisco implored him. Dr. Rush hesitated, spooked and uncertain. He looked like he wanted to help but was simply too terrified of the consequences. “I need to know what’s going on. I know some people; maybe I can help, if you let me.”

“You have no idea how dangerous this is. They could be watching us right now.”

“Who?” Cisco queried.

“Don’t look around!” Jason Rush snapped in a stage whisper, then folded, pushing past Cisco toward the stairs that led to the balcony level seating. “Come on. We can talk but I won’t stay long, and we aren’t doing it around this many strangers.”

Cisco nodded, wondering how paranoid this guy was going to turn out to be, and followed him up to a table in a conveniently shadowed corner of the balcony. From this vantage point they had a complete view of the cafe below but it would be tricky for someone down there to spot them due to the arrangement of the stylized white supports holding up the structure.

“Okay, so what exactly are we doing here?” Caitlin questioned, turning toward the opening doors as a leanly muscled man in a lab coat unexpectedly entered the bright white lab space. “And who are you?” she tried to keep her tone non-confrontational even as her hackles rose. She already felt exposed enough under her estranged mother’s scrutiny.

“That is my lab assistant. I called him here to assist me with your testing,” Dr. Tanhauser belatedly
informed her, barely raising her glance from where she crouched over her lab computer.

“Is he?” Caitlin stopped herself, plastering on a polite smile. She dropped off the lab table where she’d been perched and greeted, “Hello, I’m Caitlin--”

“Not your full name,” her mother advised. Caitlin closed her eyes, trying to will her emotions to calm.

“It’s nice to meet you, Caitlin, I’m Nigel,” her mother’s lab assistant told her kindly. “We’re going to help you figure this out.”

“Nigel, forgive me for not shaking your hand. I’m sure that you are a competent doctor and a perfectly nice guy, so I hope that you won’t take what I say next personally,” Caitlin then strode over to stand beside her mother with her arms crossed. “Don’t you think that you should at least run it by me before you start calling in other people? I’m trusting you with my future here. What happened to patient confidentiality?”

“You’re not only my patient, Caitlin. You’re my child and I’m doing what I think is best for you,” Dr. Tanhauser justified in an undertone. She went on at a regular volume, “Testing will go much more smoothly if I have assistance from an experienced biologist. Nigel is very good at what he does.”

“So am I, and I value my anonymity,” Caitlin argued, following her obstinate doctor as she finished rigging up the high heat testing apparatus deeper into the lab. She did her best to ignore the quiet scoff that her mother had let out in response to her declaration of competence. “What is this?”

“We’re going to test your body’s effect on molecular motion. First, we’re going to need to find your trigger--”

“I already know that. Dr. Wells said this was tied into my emotional state.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take that man’s word as gospel,” Dr. Tanhauser sneered. A muscle in Caitlin’s jaw twitched, but again she stuffed the emotion down inside of herself. He wasn’t even Dr. Wells anyway.

“Nigel, assist me,” Dr. Tanhauser directed, gesturing towards the sensor nodes piled nearby. He cast an uncomfortable gaze over the disputing women then stepped past them to attend to the various leads and settings.

“Sorry,” he muttered quietly to his patient.

Caitlin nodded, then continued to address her mother as if he weren’t there. “It would be safer for everyone if we kept this private. You can’t make that decision for me.” She yelped a warning when the other biologist moved to place the first of the sensors. “Careful! Don’t touch my skin!”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Didn’t you tell him what we’re dealing with?” Caitlin demanded, suddenly very worried for the stranger’s immediate wellbeing.

“The details of your condition are need to know,” Dr. Tanhauser informed her. Caitlin was too appalled to respond to that. Luckily, Marla was aware enough to rectify her own oversight. “But she is right, Nigel, we’ll need to keep any physical contact with our patient to an absolute minimum for our own safety. I suggest that you put those insulated gloves on.” She said, pointing to the extra pair with an already gloved hand. He gave her a wide-eyed look probably wondering what in the world
he’d been dragged into.

“It’s okay. You’re free to leave,” Caitlin persuaded gently. He put on the gloves.

“Good Man,” Dr. Tanhauser approved, pulling a lever. A glowing hot column of tungsten began to be revealed within the containment pillar between them. “Alright, I’m going to need you to monitor the readings here while I keep track of my daughter’s vitals. Good. Now, Caitlin, you are going to stand here.” She herded Caitlin into position with her back to her mother’s station and her hands out as if to warm them by the light of the column. “Whenever you’re ready, I want you to try to trigger whatever that was you did in my office earlier and focus it on the pillar.”

Caitlin studied the nervous scientist off to her right. “I’m mostly harmless, I promise,” she tried, hoping to settle his nerves before she showed him the impossible. The sudden echoing quality developing in her voice didn’t exactly aid her effort. She thought about the explosion, the lie that was her closest friendship, Ronnie, this strange and frightening life that had been thrust upon her and the flaming meta who’d done this to her. Her eyes paled more and more as she steadily cooled the column. Her mother said something but she didn’t process the words. The meta’s blade was extending in her mind’s eye from a color-shifting suit. She heard the unnatural screaming of the machine that she’d thought was an enemy, as he fought to protect her.

“Your future is important to me…”

Caitlin gasped, dropping her hands to her sides and blinked at the pillar of frozen, icy metal before her. Her experimenters were staring at it in shock as it let out a long, slow, high-pitched wheeze.

Barry sat at one of Shawna Baez’s favorite haunts, watching a mostly tone-deaf couple sing a drunken, yet endearing rendition of “I’ve Got You, Babe” on the small stage. It was Karaoke Night, and he suspected that Harrison was going to hold that fact against him. Barry smiled, turning to face the man who’d just parked himself on his right.

“You look nice,” Barry complemented, pleased to see the other man wearing the sweater he’d given him for Christmas.

“I inferred that you didn’t really call me here to investigate Shawna Baez’s drinking habits,” Dr. Wells responded cautiously, eyeing the couple onstage with a look of deep personal judgment.

“You came anyway,” Barry pointed out happily. Dr. Wells commandeered Barry’s drink without shame, then pulled a face. “Is that straight Grenadine? What is wrong with you?”

“Alcohol doesn’t work on me,” the speedster reminded him, the corners of his lips quirking upward at his overreaction.

“Does flavor?” Dr. Wells snarked.

Barry signaled to the nearest server. “Excuse me.”

The blonde with a permanently cynical expression on her angular face turned expectantly toward them.

“Could we get a whiskey, neat, for my friend here?” he requested, smiling sweetly in response to her acknowledgement. “Thank you.”
Eobard let his eyes wander over Barry’s face, until the other man turned questioning eyes on him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you care,” Eobard echoed the other man’s answer from earlier in the day, then turned back to his drink, regretful. “You should have a drink, Barry.”

“There’s no reason to. I’m a speedster.”

Eobard snorted, turning his glass in his hands and considering the contents. “Yes, a speedster. You don’t truly understand everything that that means yet,” he paused, wondering if it was a good idea to go this route. He thought it would be best for Barry. His Flash deserved to know at least some of what he was in for, maybe then he would be able to prepare himself-- to avoid the darker path this time around. “Your cells regenerate and cycle at an unparalleled rate, too rapidly to degrade in any measurable way. The phenomenon has its benefits: accelerated healing, extreme resistance to intoxication and if my calculations are at all accurate… increased longevity.”

Barry’s puzzled look slowly melted into one of startled comprehension. “You think that I won’t age anymore?”

Eobard’s lip curled a little.“You will age, but likely far more slowly than any normal human. Possibly, quite a bit more, even over the course of multiple centuries. More extended testing will be needed to determine the exact rate.”

“That’s amazing!” Barry was excited at first, but the light in his eyes dimmed quickly in the face of his companion’s solemnity. He began to think, then to fidget, then leaned against the table, swallowing thickly as the implications started to sink in. “Centuries?”

“There is a high probability.”

“But you don’t know. It’s just an educated guess, right? I mean, there isn’t anything else for you to compare me to. There’s no proof that I’ll…” Barry’s last disbelieving excuse only ended up making him more concerned. “Centuries,” he repeated softly with his focus turned inward.

“You’re still young. There will be other meta-humans with similar traits. I doubt that you’ll be alone, but it was something that you needed know. I will help you for as long as I can,” Eobard promised him half-apologetically. “But I won’t last forever.”

“I don’t want to think about that right now!”

“Barry--”

“I know the way you think by now, Harrison,” Barry told him, looking more and more determined as he went on. “What’s another forty years with you when I have centuries more to go, right? You think that you’re protecting me.”

“I’ll be gone before you know it,” Eobard confirmed.

“That’s not true; no matter how hard you try to brace me for it, losing you is going to break my heart. The only thing that’s worse is the thought of losing the chance to see you happy because you were too busy planning for your death to live!” Barry persisted, passionately. “Either one of us could die tomorrow, regardless of what we expect will happen: a car crash, a lab accident, another meta could get the drop on me. Until then, I already care about you. I want to be with you. The only relevant question here is do you want to be with me?”
Eobard remained silent, trying to determine how lasting this unexpectedly sentimental reaction would prove to be. Thankfully, their server arrived with his drink. He immediately grabbed it off her tray and took a large gulp, wincing down at the tabletop rather than acknowledge either human staring at him.

“Thank you.” Barry flashed their server a polite smile that she did not return.

“You’re that scientist, aren’t you?” she stated bluntly, her attention fixated solely on Dr. Wells.

“Probably,” Dr. Wells replied, taking a sip of his scotch. “Am I not welcome here?”

Their server pulled her pen out of her messy topknot, using it to cross out and revise something on her pad. She tore the page off and slapped the bill down on the table. Barry picked it up to read it, brow pinched. His mouth dropped open.

“Hey, come on! You’ve just doubled the price!”

"I made a mistake the first time."

“Fine,” Dr. Wells accepted, unbothered.

“No. I’m paying,” Barry intercepted protectively, turning back to the blonde. “Listen, we’re just trying to have a night out. You can’t discriminate like that!”

“She can,” Dr. Wells corrected in his most stimulating rasp, resting a hand on Barry’s to still him. “She has; I’m the bad guy these days; I can pay for myself.” He showed the woman a knowing half-smile. “Besides, this is good whiskey.”

“I’m watching you two.” With that final threat, their server left them to their drinks. Barry was still looking at their joined hands, then he seemed to remember that he was supposed to be upset.

“Why did you do that? You shouldn’t let people walk all over you!”

“This is very good whiskey.” Eobard took another examining sip. “Bowmore Small Batch Single Malt…” Eobard debated whether or not it would be too much to add any more details.

“Caitlin’s right: you have a problem.”

“There is nothing wrong with knowing your liquor,” Eobard wondered if his inbuilt chemical analysis system was more of a hindrance in this situation than an asset. “Try some.”

“I haven’t forgotten what we were talking about.”

“Do not rush me, Mr. Allen,” Eobard casually returned, and watched his reverse’s shoulders slump. He paused to enjoy the brief respite of the drunken couple stumbling off the stage. “How goes the chase?”

“A strike team managed to collar five of Stockheimer’s men this evening, but Parker and Baez got away. She must’ve teleported them out.”

Dr. Wells nodded. “This case is going to be difficult until we find a way to neutralize her power. I have a hypothesis, but it requires testing.”

“What’s your hypothesis?

“Assuming that Miss Baez has to be able to aim in order to teleport herself to a new location, if we
can prevent her from seeing her destination...”

“We could trap her. How are we supposed to test that?”

“I’m still developing that aspect.” Eobard looked down at their hands still joined on the table. “There are important variables to consider,” he reminded himself aloud, trying not to get distracted by his reverse’s warmth. He flexed his hand but didn’t pull away.

“Are we still talking about the meta?” Barry questioned, turning his hand to intertwine their fingers. He was visibly pleased by the hum that his action provoked.

“Not entirely.” Eobard pulled away and began turning his drink between his palms. “There is a considerable age gap between us.”

“I feel like we’ve covered that; I don’t care,” Barry dismissed, then he leaned closer. “There’s no reason to be thinking about details like that unless you do want this.”

Eobard turned to his suitor, so temptingly close that their noses almost brushed. “You’re right,” he let the words ghost over Barry’s lips, then drew away to down to rest of his drink as if nothing had happened. He hid his self-satisfied smile in response to the way Barry had drifted forward to chase the sensation. “It’s worth thinking about. Can you sing?”

A slow grin spread over Barry’s face. He opened his mouth to voice a flirtatious reply but was stopped short by his buzzing phone.

Eobard watched him check the screen and give it an aggrieved look.

“Aw, Cisco!” the Flash groaned, as if pleading with him to rescind his text.

Dr. Wells chuckled. “Take the back exit.” He directed with a lazy wave. “I’ll take care of this.”

“How long has this been going on?” Dr. Tanhauser asked, pulling open a drawer of assorted medical implements in the counter where Caitlin was once again seated.

“My powers presented a little over a week ago, but I think the changes to my biology started when the particle accelerator exploded,” Caitlin replied, watching her prepare a syringe.

“I told you not to take that job at STAR Labs. You could’ve had a perfectly respectable career here at the company,” her mother scolded. “You would’ve had access to world class facilities.”

Caitlin’s eyes widened. “You mean return here to live in your shadow. You weren’t even willing to help me finish college. Dr. Wells had to bail me out of debt because there weren’t enough work hours in the day for me to keep up with all of the bills!”

“You couldn’t keep up because you weren’t responsible enough to pick a single goal and focus on it. You had the PhD; you could have settled for a Masters’ instead of the MD and proven yourself by accomplishing achievements in the field,” Dr. Tanhauser replied. “You never get it, Caity, life in the real world is hard. You can’t come running for Mommy to fix it every time things get rough! There isn’t always going to be some golden parachute to catch your fall and you can’t still honestly be naive enough to think that quack was helping you!”

“My fiancé died! You didn’t even know that he existed. You have no idea what I’ve been through,”
Caitlin said bitterly. Her hands began to give off wisps of vapor. “You weren’t there. You never were.” He was, Caitlin remembered even as she drew in deep breaths, trying to reign in her temper. He might have lied, but Dr. -- Eobard was always there for Caitlin when she needed him.

“Dr. Tanhauser, I think you’ll want to see this!” Nigel called from his seat at the monitoring station. Caitlin watched her mother bend to study the readout over his shoulder. She had absorbed all the thermal energy from the super-heated column and her cells were metabolizing it. It was like nothing they’d ever seen before.

“I made a mistake,” Caitlin breathed, slipping down from her perch. She pulled her jacket back on while the two doctors were distracted by extrapolations of their discovery.

“This is amazing! Revolutionary...” Caitlin’s mother hurried past without sparing her any mind. “We need to set up a second battery of tests immediately! I’ll be right back. Caity, wait here,” she directed without looking back. The meta watched her go with a minor flare of regret, then quietly gathered up her things.

“Where are you going?” Nigel’s voice stopped her halfway to the doors.

“I just remembered something that I need to do,” Caitlin answered vaguely, not liking the abrupt change in the other biologist’s demeanor in Marla’s absence.

“You can’t leave now. We’ve just had a breakthrough,” he related, striding towards her. “Your augmented biology is going to change the world.” Nigel strode past, putting himself between Caitlin and the doors. “Dr. Tanhauser will be back to begin the next test at any minute. Why don’t you take a seat?”

“That sounds great, but I didn’t actually come here for the science. I thought that I needed my mother to be there for me. She can’t and I don’t. Thank you for trying to help, but I can handle the research myself,” Caitlin tried to push past him. Nigel stepped in her way again, grabbing her by the forearms.

“Sorry, I can’t let you do that. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“I said: let me go!” Caitlin commanded, feeling her repressed anger surging forward to meet him. Her eyes turned white. Nigel screamed, his grip releasing too late to prevent one hand from freezing and blackening. He bodily rammed her backwards and she bounced painfully off the side of a lab table. He scurried out, slamming the doors behind him. Caitlin heard the thud of bolts locking into place.

“No, no, no!” Caitlin ran over and began slamming her fists against the barrier. It was reinforced, electromagnetically sealed well enough not even to twitch when she rammed it with her full weight over, and over, and over, again. “Let me out!” she screamed as her panic started to take control.

“You can’t do this! Marla, let me out! He locked me in! Someone please let me out! MOM!”

“What’s that line? I never got paranoid until they started plotting against me?” Rush pontificated.

“And why do you think they’re plotting against you?” Cisco prompted, still on the fence about the other man’s sanity. His dark eyes hadn’t stopped nervously scanning their surroundings since they’d sat down.

“Because of our work, because of FIRESTORM,” the chemist explained in a tone that said Cisco
should’ve known better. “Molecular transmutation.”

“Is that even possible?” Cisco questioned. Dr. Rush let out a humorless chuckle.

“It is now,” he remarked ominously. “We had some rudimentary success working with sand grains. Professor Stein was our team leader and he didn’t believe in baby steps, so we skipped to stage three.”

Cisco frowned warily at the sound of that. “What was stage three?”

Dr. Rush leaned forwards conspiratorially. “We melted a concrete wall,” he intoned gravely.

Cisco’s eyes widened. “Damn, way to dial it up to eleven.”

“The University threatened to shut the project down,” the chemist conceded. “That’s when Professor Stein decided to go ahead and publish his paper without them giving permission. They went nuts, so he went to an old friend of his to try and get private backing…”

“What friend?” Cisco asked, then noticed the other man straightening, his muscles coiled in preparation to flee. “Dr. Rush?”

He was looking at something below them. Cisco followed his gaze to see two large muscular men in black business suits marching purposefully towards the stairs.

“I’ve stayed too long. I’m sorry,” with those last words Rush was off like a shot, bolting for the roof.

“For real?” Cisco reflected, pulling out his cellphone to send out an SOS text. “Why do they always flee upward? Everybody knows they can’t fly.”

The first muscle-head pointed a gun at Cisco, directing him in a methodical tone. “Put the phone down on the table and keep your hands where I can see them,” he pulled Cisco out of his seat by the fabric of his hoodie.

“Oh, wow. Okay, okay! Chill, Agent Smith! I’m doing what you said!”

“Why were you meeting with Jason Rush?”

“Hey, we were just talking!” Cisco defended “Do you have to keep poking me with-- Whoa, okay! I thought he might know a friend of mine.” Cisco caught a flicker of gold in the lower edge of his vision. “Speaking of which, you’re gonna want to brace yourself.”

The Flash rushed through the small space scooping him up and whisking him away before the single bullet fired had exited the gun barrel. Cisco stumbled into a seat at the hub, then patted himself down.

“My phone!”

Barry shook his head at him, then disappeared. He returned with both the phone and Jason Rush. “Cisco, you want to explain who this is and why the real life Men in Black are trying to kill him?”

Jason Rush threw up.

“Oh! Gah uuhckk!” Cisco dry heaved.

“Dude! You interrupted my date! You aren’t getting off that easy.”

Both men launched into an incomprehensible and long-winded explanation in imperfect sync. Barry
struggled to draw a real, illuminating answer. By the time he got a satisfactory collection of bullet points out of the muddled recounting, there was no salvaging his night out. He hoped that Harrison wouldn’t take this as some sign that he should retreat again. The Flash let out a wistful sigh and clamped a hand on the chemist’s shoulder. “Come on, I’ll run you home.”

“If you could just drop me off near Mercury--” The Flash and his passenger disappeared before the man had even finished asking. Cisco let his head fall back.

“Augh… Dr. Wells is gonna kill me.”

The Reverse Flash sped up the side of the glass wall of Jitters’ building and stopped dead in a catlike crouch on the raised edge of the roof. It was the kind of abrupt shirking of traditional physics that the Flash’s largely kinetic speed-force could never reproduce: Eobard felt more than a little smug about that. The light notes of Vivaldi’s Summer danced on the light breeze to greet him from Iris’ borrowed tape player. The reporter herself was seated only a couple of meters away, listening with her eyes closed.

“This piece reminded me of you since the first time I listened. I’m still not sure why,” she commented, letting him know that she had noticed his arrival. “Something about the energy maybe.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed?”

“It was only an observation,” Iris said easily, opening her eyes to take in his alert pose. She stopped the tape, remarking “I hope you aren’t planning to jump.”

“Tell me why you called me here?” Eobard clarified, his bright red eyes continuously scanning for a hidden observer. “Then I will decide whether or not to tolerate it.”

“Because, I need a way to contact you and I figured that this was something we have in common that no one else knows about.” Iris was studying him as if in search of something.

“I’m not here to serve you, Ms. West. You don’t summon me,” Eobard intoned, pouncing down off the ledge to stand over her menacingly. She barely acknowledged it.

“How long have you been on the run? My guess is that you’ve been fending for yourself out there for a long time,” Iris theorized, standing from her styled iron chair. “I don’t blame you for being standoffish, but sooner or later you’re going to need someone.”

Eobard paced away, a defensive sneer on his face. “Don’t flatter yourself. If you want a plaything, call my reverse.” He turned and reclaimed his previous perch with his back to Iris.

“I know who you are, E,” she called after him. “I’ve heard the tapes. I know about the experiments.” In a millisecond Eobard had a hand wrapped around her throat.

“What did you call me?” he roared. Iris grabbed his wrist reflexively, but didn’t struggle. He wasn’t harming her at all so she treated it as another test of her mettle.

“Calm down.”

“WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?!” Eobard bellowed.

A blur of red and gold slammed into the Reverse Flash, tackling him into a nearby table and
smashing them through the glass top due to momentum. Eobard, unfazed by the chaos socked his unsubtle attacker in the jaw before throwing him off. The Flash darted back to grab him by the collar and slam him into the closed door behind him, speed punching him in the ribs.

“No! Flash! Stop it! He wasn’t hurting me!” Iris yelled.

Eobard caught one of Barry’s fists and swung him through the twisted remains of the table to stun him, then tossed him onto the center of the roof.

“Both of you stop it!” Iris protested helplessly. The stubborn Flash started to push himself up so Eobard stamped down on his back--gently, he thought, considering-- then sat on him.

“Ooof!” Barry wheezed, sounding gratifyingly squished. “Seriously!?”

“Stay down,” Eobard replied, grinning like a jack-o’-lantern. “All of their research was destroyed; I watched it burn. How did you identify me?” he inquired of the bemused reporter standing before him.

“Some of it was rescued, not much, but I heard your voice on one of the recordings. You sounded more human back then. Dr. Wells mentioned your blue blood, and you started hassling him. You really like pissing people off on purpose, don’t you?” Iris recalled. Her expression darkened when she saw how pleased he was with her accusation. “He thinks that you’re dead! They both do! I get being upset about the experiments but that’s pretty cold even for you.”

“Wait. What?” Barry questioned struggling to puzzle out what exactly was going on.

“Quiet.” Eobard watched his reverse glare up at him in mute confusion. “Good Flash.” He patted him on the head like a puppy. Barry let out a low warning grumble.

“You know you’re going to have to get off of him eventually,” Iris reminded her careless source.

“You won’t tell Harrison about me. It would only put him in more peril and you need information that only I can provide. That is why you attempted this foolish power play to begin with. If you attempt to summon me again without offering anything in return you will regret it.” Without any further warning Eobard sped away. The Flash scrambled to his feet and bolted after him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I admit this chapter is a little indulgent of me, but it’s my birthday so I felt like I deserved a tiny indulgence. I hope you all enjoyed it, too. I even posted a day earlier than usual so yay!
Barry let out a determined cry as he forced himself to run even faster in his quarry’s wake. The gap between himself and the Reverse Flash was widening despite his greatest efforts. He was already feeling the strain wearing at him. His eyes were dry and stinging, much like his throat, and his muscles were taut with pain. The Reverse Flash was about to disappear. They neared a local park and the Flash once again ignored his protesting body and his better judgment; he threw himself forward as his reverse tried to make a sharp turn. Their bodies impacted at high speed, sending out a minor shockwave caused by their abrupt deceleration from beyond the speed of sound. Barry choked. The yellow-clad speedster wrapped around his attacker, taking the brunt of the impact while they tumbled across the pavement and through the sawdusted play area. Barry flinched as his opponent broke through the bright blue bars of a jungle gym, carrying them into the center. A shock of pain belatedly erupted from his own chest. He was fairly well convinced that he had just broken everything in his torso against the Android’s much tougher skeleton. His feet were numb and he couldn’t breathe.

“You IDIOT!” The Reverse Flash flipped them over so that Barry was lying on his back on the soft, black rubber padding with his angry companion’s arms and legs caging him in. If looks could kill, the Flash would have passed through a dozen levels of the underworld based solely upon the force of his reverse’s ire.

“Get off!” Barry wheezed and punched him in the jaw. The android grabbed his arms and pinned them above his head, ignoring Barry’s pained whine.

“Do you possess even the vaguest concept of how dangerous that was?!” The enemy speedster roared, as if unaware that he had just been struck. ‘I could’ve shattered your bones at that speed, you stupid, impulsive--’"

Barry let out a frustrated, perplexed gurgle of dissent while he struggled to regain control of his breathing. Was the Reverse Flash scolding him? That didn’t make sense. He wanted Barry hurt, didn’t he? Maybe he’d been knocked out. Yes, Barry theorized, he must be dreaming.

“Do not resist me,” the Reverse Flash cautioned in a derisive snarl. He moved out of the Flash’s limited field of vision and grabbed his leg. Barry kicked out at him, getting his head again. He immediately winced at his own poor choice. The Reverse Flash popped back into his view just long enough to stun him with a measured punch across the temple, then dragged him out from under the climbing frame by his ankles. To Barry’s utter distress he began probing his stunned body experimentally, first feeling his arms—which wasn’t so bad—then the sides and back of his neck, then down until…

“Ahhck! GOD--” Barry broke into a painful cough. The Reverse Flash’s eyes dimmed, then flashed brightly before returning to their usual smolder. He gave a fleeting chuckle.

“This is amazing. Not a single rib left without a hairline fracture. You get an A+ for efficiency, F- in execution.” The Flash made another grab for him but he moved down to inspect Barry’s legs in a similar fashion, skillfully overlooking the middle finger raised in his direction. “Ah. Does this hurt?” He asked insincerely, giving Barry’s calf muscles a careful squeeze.

“Ahhaha-ow! Quit it!” Barry snapped feebly.
The Reverse Flash chuckled again, a peculiar sound due to his rough and imposing artificial voice. It somehow sapped all the horror out of it, more familiar than monstrous, even though at the moment Barry still wanted to throttle the bastard.

"Don’t be a baby; it’s a muscle cramp. Very thorough.” The Reverse Flash was leering at him again like a complete jerk.

"That’s not funny! What are you made of anyway? Dwarven Mithril? I feel like I was hit by a train,” the young Flash grumbled incredulously, throwing handfuls of sawdust at his companion’s face. The childish attack was wholly ignored.

“My skeleton is made from spongeform titanium-silica aerogel shelled within an Nth metal-based nanopolymer ceramic,” the Reverse Flash nitpicked.

“Uh… All I got out of that was ‘aerogel’ and ‘metal shell’,” Barry admitted, beginning to feel more sheepish than defensive as the pain in his chest slowly started to recede.

The android stared at him for a couple of seconds before stating flatly “Sure, I’m made of Mithril.”

“You’re another time traveler, aren’t you?” Barry guessed, glaring. “Like the fire-meta. What do you want with Iris?!”

“Do not attempt to tackle me out of the speed-force again, Flash. You will not be so lucky next time.” He stood to leave but Barry sat up and grabbed his arm, tugging him back down.

“Answer me! What did you mean when you said I was going to be a killer?! What do you want from Iris?!”

The android paused for a moment, contemplating, then turned cold once more. “Nothing at all. You will let me go.”

“No!” Barry clung stubbornly, regardless of the pain caused by the other’s attempts to yank his arm away. “You have to tell me what it means!” He saw the android’s eyes crackle with angry, anguine lightning and stilled.

“I have little interest in Iris West, beyond her importance to you,” the machine recited, obviously against his own will. “You are not a killer now, but I have witnessed Barry Allen murder in multiple instances in a future timeline, as well as several failed attempts to kill me.”

“Oh…” Barry muttered, overwhelmed, his grip on the other speedster’s arm going slack. In the next millisecond that same arm flickered forward to grab him by the throat. Barry watched wide-eyed as his reverse’s other hand came to hover over his chest, vibrating at an ominous frequency. His breath caught in his throat. Their eyes met. The grip on his throat was released with a wordless snarl.

“Wait!” As soon as Barry called out to stop him, it was too late: his reverse had already vanished into the darkness and colored lights of the city at night. Barry flopped back down onto his back, waiting for the pain to ebb a little more before he made the run back to STAR Labs.

Caitlin sat with her back to the locked doors, her legs folded against her chest. She pulled out her dying cellphone. She had tried to call her mother for help but Dr. Tanhauser wasn’t taking her calls anymore. She thinks that I’m in the wrong: the madwoman who attacked her most promising employee. They barely knew each other anymore. Caitlin looked down at her last fading connection
to the friends she’d left behind. Would they wonder what had happened to her? She went through
the motions of calling Dr. Wells even though it was too late. Predictably, it went straight to
voicemail.

"Hey, it's Caitlin. I just needed to talk..." Caitlin closed her eyes, doing her best to keep her voice
steady as the first tear traced a shimmering trail down her cheek. "Listen, I screwed up pretty badly. I
was so scared and angry and I don't really understand what's happening to me, just that I am not
normal. I told my mom about me, let her run tests--" she drew in a shuddering breath. "I just thought
that maybe if I could get her to care... They have evidence now of the existence of meta-humans.
They know about the explosion. I am going to try to fix this, but I don't know if I'm going to make it
out of here." Caitlin's face crumpled into agony, as she sobbed out the rest "I'm so sorry... I just want
to go home!" The connection cut off and she broke down crying. The silence of the sealed lab only
rubbed salt in the wound of her terrifying solitude.

Her phone began to ring. A clear, repetitive sound piercing the menace of her cavernous and sterile
surroundings.

Caitlin looked down. The call screen was now glowing vibrant red. She sat there staring at it for a
moment, then tentatively answered, feeling like she was having an out of body experience. "Hello?"

"I promise that I will be with you in your time of need..." Harrison's recorded voice answered,
sounding exactly as he had on the night of the explosion.

"And together, we will be strong," Caitlin recalled aloud. There was a low beep and two clicks in
quick succession.

 monotone informed her.

"What did he..." Caitlin wondered, then shook her head; she would interrogate Eobard about it later.
"Um, I'm locked into this lab; can you help me get out of here?"

"Affirmative."

"No, no. Wait! Okay, um, before you do that. This company has files on me. I can't leave behind any
evidence of the meta-human genome," Caitlin said, wiping her tear-streaked face clean with her
sleeve. "I need to think of a way to erase the records of my presence..."

"Please place this handset on top of a networked modem," the artificial voice instructed.

"Oh, um," Caitlin switched to speaker phone and crawled under the desk to follow the AI's
instructions. "Okay."

"Purging..."

Caitlin sat back on her haunches and watched the computer screen be overtaken by a rush of binary
data. Security footage flashed on and off the screen faster than her eyes could focus. The terminal
went black, then the login screen appeared as if nothing at all had occurred.

"Secondary Directive: Complete. Calculating exit strategy..." the AI reported. There was an
ominous hum and all the power in the facility went out, leaving the building shrouded in darkness.

"Sorry Mom," Caitlin muttered wryly. The locks on the doors clicked open. She picked up her
cellphone, pressing it to her ear as she headed out. The power came back online, but she couldn't
help noticing that the lights on the surveillance cameras flickered out as she neared them. "You've
tapped into the security system."


Caitlin obediently ducked around a corner and her captor ran right past her. This shouldn't take long.

Barry blinked and lifted his head to see who had arrived at the Cortex so early, then checked his cellphone: 5:35 am. Okay, not as early as he thought. He had felt too injured and psychologically disoriented to head back to Joe’s house the previous night after the Man in Yellow’s unwilling clarification. He didn’t want to believe that it could be true. Barry didn’t think himself capable of murder… at least he didn’t want to. He didn’t think the other speedster was lying… but he wanted to. The Reverse Flash was evil, right? Evil people lie. The only problem was, the Reverse Flash appeared to have been fighting very hard not to say anything.

“Barry? What are you doing in Caitlin’s lab?” Dr. Wells inquired, rolling up the ramp to join him. He ran a discerning gaze over Barry as he reached his bedside. “Were you injured last night?”

“Yeah, it’s okay though. There wasn’t much to patch up. Most of it healed overnight,” Barry explained, sitting up and stretching his arms over his head with a yawn.

“Were you attacked?”

Barry hesitantly shook his head, feeling uncertain of himself. “I caught the Reverse Flash hanging around Iris,” he explained, seeing Dr. Wells shift in his chair and avert his gaze. “I tried to capture him, but he’s a lot stronger than me. I cracked a few ribs in the fight but he didn’t seem to feel a thing.”

“You were visiting Ms. West in disguise again,” Dr. Wells summarized tightly.

“No. He was. That was why…”

Dr. Wells was backing away, his attention already turning towards the exit.

“Hey. Hold on. Where are you going?”

“I have work to do.”

“Wait. You just got here! Don’t just storm out like that. I haven’t done anything!” Barry protested.

“I am not storming,” Dr. Wells corrected in a calm, collected voice. “I am leaving. This is the beginning of my work day and I would suggest that you head home to change for your own work day.”

“Can we finish talking first?” Barry requested, getting up and following him to his office.

“As I said, Barry, I have work to do. I’m glad that you weren’t more permanently injured. Now, unless there is a professional matter that you need to bring up with me?”

Barry stopped at the bottom of the access ramp. “Have you spoken with Cisco yet?”

Eobard frowned, turning back toward his… Friend? He wasn’t sure.

“Oh, okay! You’d better not be throwing me under the bus,” Cisco’s voice called from the entrance
to the Cortex.

“You need to tell him what happened. You might want to try telling me again, too. You were pretty confusing last night,” Barry responded reasonably, glad of the shift in conversation.

“Okay, fine. So there were these MIB’s--” Cisco began enthusiastically.

Barry rolled his eyes and patiently advised him. “You might want to start at the beginning this time.”

“Well… Hartley told me that he had proof that Ronnie survived the explosion. It has something to do with this missing physicist: Prof. Martin Stein. I figured that he was full of it at first, but I contacted the guy’s lab partner to check it out just in case,” Cisco began to explain more carefully, still barely repressing his eagerness to get to the aforementioned suits. Barry’s phone rang, breaking the spell of the moment. Barry reluctantly stepped away from the others to take the call, then paled as he heard the reason why he had been interrupted.

“Barry? What is it?” Eobard asked as the other speedster disconnected the call.

“I have to go. My Dad was stabbed. He’s in critical condition, they…” He trailed off, gazing mournfully into the middle distance.

Eobard rolled down the ramp to rest a hand on his arm. “He’s alive. He’ll make it.”

Barry rested a hand over his, nodding absentely as if not fully aware of the words.

“He’ll make it,” Dr. Wells repeated, making his certainty clear in his voice until his partner returned to his senses.

Caitlin hurried into her hotel suite and grabbed up the expensive luggage that she had bought up on a whim, tearing the remaining packaging away as she made a beeline for the bed. She didn’t know if she’d been followed but Caitlin’s instincts were telling her that she had to get out of this place as quickly as she could. She was taking the new coats, dresses and the brand new baby blue suit off of their hangers and shoving them into the largest suitcase, without thought, heedless of the wrinkles that she would have to rectify later. A pair of purple suede Gucci heels were snatched up off the floor and tossed into the pile, followed quickly by a pair of Christian Louboutin pumps. The top drawer of the dresser was yanked open and emptied out into the bag; the next drawer, then, she tucked everything in with a haphazard semblance of neatness and zipped the top.

She was beginning to leave a fine coating of frost over the things she touched. There was no time to fret over it, she decided, grabbing her laptop and a couple of parcels she had not even gotten around to opening yet and stuffed them into the smaller suitcase. Phone charger, water bottle, phone, computer cord. Caitlin closed the second suitcase and ran out of the suite. The elevator dinged and Caitlin turned her back just in time to keep her face from being seen by the two policemen stepping into the hall. Luckily she was able to duck into the stairwell before her presence was fully noticed. She held up her phone in front of her chin as she rushed down the squared spiral of the steps.

“Are you still with me?”

“Affirmative,” The automated voice confirmed, somewhat settling the fleeing meta’s nerves. “Proceed to Grand Central Station. Your train for Central City will depart in precisely 20 minutes 17 seconds.”
“My train? I don’t have--”

“Your tickets were bought in advance during your departure from Tanhauser Industries.”

“Oh, right. Thanks. You’re really handy.”

“Affirmative.”

Caitlin breathed out a laugh at the AI’s seeming smugness. As far as she could tell it was well deserved.

Barry sat in the medical wing of Iron Heights prison at his injured father’s bedside. Joe was standing beside him with a grim expression on his face. Henry stirred out of his morphine-altered sleep and turned his head to regard his son in a daze.

“Hey there, Slugger.”

“What happened to you?” Barry answered in a wavering voice.

“Hmmm. I was… I was stabbed.” Henry was still getting his bearings back, his unfocused eyes wandering over their surroundings.

“Do you remember how it happened?”

“Bear,” Joe cautioned, giving the younger man’s shoulder a comforting squeeze.

“I-- Yeah, I remember. Stockheimer’s boys wanted to make it clear they won’t tolerate anyone snoopin’ around their boss’ business.”

Barry deflated, eyes shining. “Dad, I told you I didn’t want you asking any more questions for me.”

Joe pressed his lips together, then admitted, “Your Dad called me with more intel that helped us track down Parker and Baez. Without him we never would have been able to accomplish that raid and arrest Stockheimer.”

“Yeah, I really managed to screw up Marcus’ big heist, didn’t I?” Henry said proudly. Barry glowered.

“So you two went behind my back -- kept working together after I specifically asked you to stop,” he summarized looking straight into Joe’s eyes.

“It isn’t his fault, Barry. I did it to help you,” Henry interceded.

“So… what? I ask my Dad to please stop trying to get himself killed in prison and it’s my fault? This isn’t helping me! Taking care of yourself is helping me!” Barry exclaimed, Joe placed his hand on Barry’s shoulder again.

“Barry, come on. It’s okay,” he tried.

“No! Why does everybody keep doing that? Am I wearing a sign or something,” he actually passed a hand over his back to illustrate. “I keep saying what I need. I need the people I care about to stay healthy and alive. I need the truth! Why is it that the only person who’s been completely honest with me in the past twenty-four hours is the person I know is guilty of murder?!” he jumped up from his
chair, choosing not to acknowledge Joe’s wide-eyed stare. “I need some air.”

“We’re gonna have a talk about this, Slugger,” Henry intoned parentally.

“Yeah, sure, Dad,” Barry replied distantly before heading out. He only got a couple minutes of respite before Joe cornered him.

“You want to tell me what the hell that was?” he demanded.

“It was exactly what it looked like, Joe. I already lost my Mom, now you’re using my Dad as your informant?! You and I both knew this was going to happen! You could’ve stopped him!”

“Don’t think you’re going to dodge this: you said you were talking to a murderer last night! I want to know about that, right now! What were you thinking?”

“I ran into the Reverse Flash last night… Literally. We were both out for a run and I chased him. He wasn’t interested in fighting. I don’t even know what to think about him anymore.”

“He’s a murderer! He killed your mother!”

“So then, why did he spend most of our conversation scolding me for putting myself in danger in pretty much the exact same way you are right now?! He’s faster and stronger and way more durable than I am. When I fell, he shielded me! I have no idea why, but I think he needs me alive.”

“What did he tell you? What makes you so sure that he’s not messing with you?”

“He’s another time traveller, like the fire-meta. That’s how he knows me. He knew-- He will first meet me in the future, I guess. He didn’t want to tell me, but it was the same thing as when I paused him. I could see him fighting it, but he couldn’t stop himself,” Barry winced, dragging a hand over his face. “I have to learn not to do that. It’s only making him hate me more. Look. I need to get back to the lab. I’m going to go back in there and see if I can say goodbye to my Dad. You don’t have to wait for me.”

When he came back to STAR Labs at the beginning of a late lunch break, Wells was on his way out of the building with Cisco trailing a few yards behind him.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” he questioned, holding the door open for the equipment-laden engineer. Dr. Wells was already opening the back of the van in preparation for his arrival. “Where are you guys going?”

“We’re heading out to talk with Prof. Stein’s wife. I called her, like, an hour ago, and she agreed to discuss his case with us,” Cisco explained. Barry helped him place his burden safely in the back and closed the double doors.

“And the equipment?”

“I have a theory in regards to the nature of Prof. Stein’s plight. I plan to test the area around his residence for any traces of nuclear radiation, consistent with objects affected by his transmutation process,” Dr. Wells clarified.

“Radiation?” Barry echoed in concern.

“Trace amounts. It shouldn’t be anywhere near hazardous levels,” Dr, Wells assured, pulling himself
up into the passenger’s seat. “Do you mind loading my chair?”

Barry picked it up and vanished in a blur, reappearing a second later. “Can I come? Maybe I could help you with the scans.”

Dr. Wells regarded him critically for a moment. “How’s your father?”

“He’s stabilized. He should recover in a couple weeks. So, is that a yes?”

Dr. Wells nodded. “Have they determined who did it?”

“Dad said it was one of Stockheimer’s guys, Julius. I’m going to see what I can get out of him before I do my patrol tonight. He might know where Shawna Baez is headed next,” Barry justified his plans of revenge.

“You should be careful. You cannot allow anyone to link the Flash to any of your loved ones. It will only put them in more danger,” Dr. Wells advised. “If you do talk to him. It must seem to be impersonal.”

“I’m just going to talk to him. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

Later that night the Flash sped into Julius’ cell only to find it empty. A familiar intoxicating charge pulled at Barry’s core. He set his jaw and followed it back to its source. The Reverse Flash was standing just outside the prison fence with a panicked prisoner dangling from his grip. He had Julius by his throat and the human’s legs were kicking fruitlessly a foot above ground as he struggled for air.

“Put him down!” Barry snapped, shocked. The Reverse Flash spared him a questioning look.

“You wish to speak?”

“With Julius,” Barry clarified. The android shrugged and dropped his prey unceremoniously onto the blacktop. He stepped aside, tucking his hands behind his back in an oddly formal manner. Barry brushed that thought aside. He had more important things to focus on.

“You can’t do this! You have to put me back! If the guards think I’m trying to escape again they’re going to add--”

“Ten years to his sentence,” Eobard finished for him, informing the Flash. “My presence was not detected.”

“You’d better hurry then,” Barry dropped down to sit on his haunches in front of the frightened gangster. “Where and when is Marcus Stockheimer’s next job going to take place?”

The alarm inside Iron Heights began to blare urgently, both speedster’s heads turned to acknowledge it with detachment.

“Julius?”

“Okay, okay! It’s a TDK armored truck coming from the Federal Reserve Bank in St. Louis. There’s supposed to be millions in that truck,” he exclaimed. “You gotta put me back!”

“You have not specified the time,” the Reverse Flash dutifully reminded him.
“8 o’clock! Please!”

“8 o’-- I’ve gotta run!” The Flash sped away to intercept the heist.

“Hey!” Julius shouted. The Reverse grinned and tilted his head to one side. A cat left to prey upon an especially frantic mouse.

Barry found the empty armored truck parked on Main Street just in time to see the sports car speeding away around a corner. He chased it into a tunnel and stopped in the middle of the road several meters into the enclosed space, forcing Parker to slam on the breaks in order to avoid him. Shawna Baez appeared in a puff of smoke beside him.

“What is your problem, Red? Are you a cop or something?”

“Or something,” Barry replied. “This will go easier for you if you surrender.”

Baez smirked at his overconfidence. “You just don’t learn, do you.” She threw a punch which he easily ducked; he struck her in the side and kicked her feet out from under her; she teleported behind him and struck him over the head with both hands joined together. He fell forward catching himself not quite on hands and knees. The Flash whirled around to find his opponent already gone. She had teleported onto a repair scaffold farther down the tunnel to shove the workman off of it. Barry rushed over to catch the civilian’s fall, ending up flat on his back for his troubles.

“Are you okay? Huaah!” The Flash was grabbed from behind and teleported up onto the platform. He elbowed Baez in the face, sending her to land hard on her rear atop the metal mesh. Distantly there was a series of shattering sounds gradually nearing them, but the two were too preoccupied with their fight to look.

“Ow! That hurts,” she purred, vanishing, then reappearing nose to nose with him and shoving him back with all her strength. Barry stumbled backwards, his arms pinwheeling. He felt the toe of his boot land on the edge and knew that he could do nothing to stop his fall. There was another smash, much closer than the others that plunged them into near total darkness. The teleporter disappeared as Barry spun towards the rapidly approaching--

A hand wrapped firmly around his wrist, anchoring the Flash into place. Barry hung there for a moment, bent precariously over the edge, watching his leg dangle. Then the Reverse Flash pulled him back to safety. He tutted at Barry in disapproval then sped away to smash the remaining light built into the tunnel.

“Thank you!” Barry shouted after his judgmental savior, then hurried after the two thieves. He found Shawna Baez sitting alone and heartbroken in the open sports car.

“He left me,” she told him simply, then reached out to let the Flash whisk her away.
“Hey. We’ve done this before. Now, go upstairs and grab our stuff. I’m going to warm up the transport,” Frost instructed, steadying the anxious young ’droid with her cool hands over his yellow-clad shoulders. Eobard nodded and sped away to pack up their personal effects. Killer Frost made a beeline for the hover car outside in the snow, ducked inside to power up the drive systems, then stiffened. She had barely caught sight of the camouflaged figure creeping across the periphery of the property.

“Shhshit!” she hurled herself out of the pilot’s seat and hurried back into the building. The anxious meta was slightly relieved to find no sign of a breach. “Come on, Kiddo! We have to move! What’s taking y--” Killer Frost’s shouted demand was interrupted by the armored doors exploding inwards behind her. The Director and his mercenary compatriots were already swarming in. Killer Frost blocked their machine gun fire with a thick shield of ice, freezing the front three into it. She took down the next two that tried to edge around the side with two icicles hurled in unison. A flash of colored light grabbed her attention the millisecond before a familiar, scarred up speedster was standing directly in front of her with his retractable blade extended in a casual threat.

“Don’t make me kill you, Frost,” the Director chastened. “You know what we’re here for.”

Killer Frost raised her hands in surrender, allowing the remaining six mercenaries to surround her. The Director retracted his blade.

“You’re too late, Eobard already knew that you were coming for him,” Killer Frost stated coolly. “You never were subtle even back when you were in your prime.”

“Where is he?”

“You really are a piece of work, Flash,” Frost sneered, tracking the progress of the unnoticed figure creeping closer on the barred in stairs through her peripheral vision. “You always were so self righteous, maybe your conceit makes everything you do feel righteous to you.”

"Come on, Frost, you’re a survivor. We both know that the smart move here is to contact my android and tell him that I threatened to kill you if he does not surrender. He’ll come."

“You know me so well.”

“What are friends for?” the Director mocked right back, taking a sat phone from one of his minions and holding it out to her. Killer Frost took the fleeting opening to check on her hidden charge. E had made it to the bottom of the stairs, but could go no further without having to pass his pursuers. If he tried, it would likely end in death or capture for at least one of them.

"If I told Eobard anything, it would be to run from you, as far and as fast as he can like a good little boy and never look back,” Killer Frost replied defiantly.

"He's here,” the Director observed, with a discerning smirk.

"God dammit!” Killer Frost punched the ground with both fists, sending a ring of super-cooled vapor outward to stun the mercs surrounding her.
The Director dropped the sat phone beginning to flicker with charge.

Killer Frost grabbed him by the collar anyway. "I said RUN!" With that final order she yanked her captor into a freezing kiss. Eobard darted past only to be shocked out of the speed-force by the sound of a blade and a startled choking noise. He turned back to watch in horror as her body fell, sliding off of his owner’s blood-soaked blade. Her unseeing eyes faded from vibrant glacier-white to darkness.

“NOOOO!” the speed-force surged through Eobard’s entire being in a way it never had before, carrying him through his berserker madness away from that place, away from that time to a tragedy long before and a brand new beginning.

Dr. Wells and Cisco had been sitting in the parked van for hours --as far as Cisco would ever know. The sedative that Eobard had slipped into Cisco’s drink so that he could interfere in the Flash’s business without being discovered would be wearing off at any moment. That was fine; with his alternate imperative accomplished, Eobard could relax and focus on his chosen task in peace. He split his focus, keeping his peripheral sensors all locked on the Stein’s residence while the majority of his processing power was focused on the scant information that Cisco had compiled pertaining to FIRESTORM. After a while the repetitive motion of Dr. Wells reading through the documents on his pad disturbed the young genius’ doze.

“Whowhat... Oh, did I fall asleep?” Cisco questioned as he returned to full awareness.

“It’s alright. Nothing has happened yet. It is possible that he might not arrive for a while,” Dr. Wells consoled his embarrassed company.

“You’re still so sure that this guy is going to return after what happened the last time he showed up,” Cisco remarked skeptically.

“He will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he wants to come home.”

“For real?” Cisco questioned. “That’s the reason for this stake out?”

Eobard smiled wanly, turning maybe a tiny bit mournful as he explained “It isn’t about the place. Home is more than a place. It’s devastating to lose what it is that allows you to feel truly safe, to feel loved, that you truly belong. His wife, she’s his home. He won’t be able to resist just seeing her again.”

Cisco stayed silent for a drawn out moment. “You almost sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I saw my home die a long time ago,” Eobard confided, knowing how Cisco would misinterpret his meaning. “There isn’t a single thing I that would not have done to rectify that failure.”

“Oh, wow. Um, you’ve never talked about--”

Someone tapped on Eobard’s window, causing Cisco to jump. Barry’s smiling face was peering in at them. Dr. Wells rolled the window down halfway.
“Mr. Allen?” he greeted inquisitively.

“Hey guys! I brought food!” Barry announced, holding up a large bag of take out.

Cisco rubbed the lingering sleep out of his eyes, thrown by the abrupt shift in mood.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Now that you mention it,” Dr. Wells turned to Cisco. “Would you two like to trade?”

“That sounds good. You can grab me later when you want to switch back,” Cisco offered. Barry whizzed around to speed his tired friend home, then returned in a moment to take his place.

“Big Belly Burger,” Dr. Wells retrieved his usual order from the bag.

“Yeah. I thought you’d approve.”

“What about Cisco’s?”

“I left it on his kitchen counter. Have you guys learned anything new about this whole FIRESTORM thing?” Barry asked, popping a fry into his mouth.

“The particle accelerator explosion appears to have inflicted FIRESTORM’s final stage of testing upon Ronnie and Prof. Stein. Judging from his wife’s account, this has presented as Stein’s mind possessing Ronnie’s body.”

“Then Caitlin’s fiancé could be…”

“Gone?” Dr. Wells finished for him, avoiding the word “dead” like a plague upon his tongue. “That is one possibility. I intend to gather more data before drawing any conclusions.”

“Are you going to be okay doing this? I know how much this means--” Barry began, looking far too earnest for Eobard’s good.

“He isn’t my fiancé,” he dismissed, eyeing the beverage in Barry’s hand. “That isn’t more grenadine, is it?”

“It’s coke. Go ahead,” Barry passed it over. “You know we’re gonna be here for a while…”

“It will allow us time to talk.”

“Okay. Have you come to a decision yet?” Barry questioned hopefully. “About... us?”

“You still love Iris West.”

“Why would-- Right, because of last night. Yes, I love her like you love Hartley. It’s in the past. It shouldn’t affect whether or not we can be together.” Barry gestured animatedly with his burger.

“If you let that drip all over this interior it’ll affect whether or not you survive the night,” Eobard threatened, wary of the impending mess.

“It’s okay. The wrapper’s still-- Oh.” Barry paused to lick the trail of sauce off his palm. “It leaked.”

“I see this as a microcosm for our relationship,” Eobard reflected. He took a long drink of Barry’s Coca-Cola, enjoying the show.
“Ah, it’s all in my sleeve now!” Barry extended his arm, fussing with the cuff to try and avoid smears. “The car’s sauce-free though. Yih-hck!”

“You deserved that,” Eobard informed him, punctuating with another sip.

“You’ve got no reason to be this jealous,” Barry reiterated, shuffling through the bag. “Where did all the napkins go?” Eobard dangled a single napkin in front of his reverse’s face. “Really?”

“I didn’t want you to spill sauce all over them.”

Barry chuckled, accepting his napkin ration.

“Considering our work together…” Eobard tested.

“I don’t work for you, Harrison.” Barry tried to get at the sauce trailing down his arm without letting any of it touch the inside of his sleeve and failed.

“There is a power relationship between us.”

Barry looked up, his brows drawn together in skepticism. “Which way? You aren’t my boss; I choose to work with you. Besides, I could physically overpower you in a fraction of a second.”

“That isn’t analogous, Barry. This is about the psychological influence that I hold over you,” Dr. Wells explained impatiently. “I effect your judgment.”

“Back at you. I know your insecurities, what you value and what you regret, and you know the same things about me,” Barry smiled at him. “What else have you got?”

“You’re not taking my concerns seriously,” Eobard disapproved turning away to look out through the windshield. “There are still things about my past that you don’t know. I can’t share those things with you yet and knowing that, perhaps you will understand why this isn’t a decision to be taken lightly.”

Barry’s expression sobered. “I’m not. Okay, my turn.” He paused to consider his options then pointed out “The Man in Yellow or Captain Cold or some other deadly enemy of mine could target you, again, in order to get to me.”

“I have never been especially concerned by that possibility,” Eobard shrugged it off.

“Your safety isn’t something that should be taken lightly,” Barry echoed.

“That wasn’t--” Eobard began to contest only to be met with his reverse’s eloquent expression.

“You’re trying so hard not to do me any harm,” Barry elucidated. “I trust you.”

Eobard considered his words. “I do reciprocate your feelings,” he admitted, allowing himself to lean a little closer. “Perhaps in time--”

Barry leaned in closer, too, only for an unexpected light to draw his partner’s attention away.

“They’re here. Look!” Eobard announced, pointing to the flaming silhouette descending toward the Steins’ front yard. “It’s the Burning Man.”

“I’m on it.” The Flash regretfully pushed his door open at human speed, then sped away and returned wearing his speed suit. He stole another fleeting look back then disappeared behind the line of fir trees.
“Five, four, three,” It wasn’t that he lacked faith, Eobard simply knew Barry too well. “Two-- Ah, there he goes.” With a startled shout, Barry was dragged up into the air by rapidly ascending metas. He was on his own this time. There was no way for Eobard to intervene without exposing his identity. He watched them sail past the top of the windscreen, processing his options. He hated having to sit around while Barry did all the fighting, but it could be detrimental in the long run to come to the developing Flash’s rescue too often. Something landed on the roof of the vehicle with a loud slam. Eobard opened the door and the Flash rolled himself off the roof of the van with a pained groan. The android dove out of his seat and belly-crawled over to Barry’s side. His forearms were burned as was the flesh over his right shoulder and collarbone.

“Barry? Say something,” Eobard turned Barry’s head to look at him, assessing the damage; it was mostly cosmetic and would heal easily. His eyes searched his speedster’s face for indicators of lucidity. The Flash’s eyes were shut. Eobard patted his cheek. Compassionate green eyes slitted open to meet his.

“Hey, I’m okay,” Barry responded softly, covering the android’s hands with his own. “Harrison--”

Eobard leaned in impulsively but as his lips scarcely brushed against Barry’s, a tiny vein of rose-gold current leapt between their mouths, literally shocking him back to his senses. He yanked his head back in fear of revelation. This was a problem that Eobard had never anticipated.

“Oh, sorry,” Barry breathed out. He let out a self-conscious giggle. “I didn’t mean to zap you. ‘Guess I got charged up in the struggle.”

“We need to get you back to the lab.” Dr. Wells cleared his throat, pushing himself up straight as he prepared to climb back into the van. Eobard was losing control.

Caitlin ducked into her pre-arranged cab outside the train station and paused to consider the dimming red light of her phone screen while her driver shut her things in the trunk.

“Um, thanks -- for helping me, I mean.”

“You are welcome.”

“I guess now I’m home safe… I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now. Should I call or-- No, I haven’t been gone long. I’m sure that my friends are handling things just fine without me.” Caitlin smiled at the cabbie as he reclaimed the driver’s seat.

“The apartment block on 5th and Camellia, you said?” he restated.

“Uh huh,” Caitlin nodded distractedly, then pressed her phone to her ear as the AI began to speak.

“Status report. A surge in Eobard Thawne’s emotional sub-processing matrix occurred approximately 3.51 hours following your departure, indirectly resulting in minor soft tissue damage. Eobard Thawne and Barry Allen are currently en route to treat 2nd and 3rd degree burns--”

Caitlin closed her eyes and let out a long measured breath. She moved the phone away to rest against her chest for a moment. “Um, excuse me? Sorry about this but could we change direction, please? To STAR Labs.”
Dr. Wells followed the subtly limping Flash into the Cortex, then had to bring his chair to an abrupt stop when the speedster halted just beyond the entrance.

“You’re back,” Barry said, surprised. Dr. Wells maneuvered around him to see Caitlin leaning on the outer wall to her lab with her arms crossed over her chest and a brand new luggage set piled beside her.

“You look nice. Is that a new coat?” he remarked.

“Come on, Barry. Let me take a look at those burns,” the Doctor directed, ushering him up the ramp ahead of her. “We’ll talk when I’m finished here,” Caitlin did not quite ask her estranged mentor.

Eobard gave a stiff nod and backed off to wait and watch through the glass. Eventually, Caitlin stepped back out, leaving her patient to rest and tiredly addressed Eobard.

“You would not believe the day I’ve had.”

“No. Well, yes, but--This was so much worse. I tried to call you!” Caitlin shook her head at her own ingrained behavior getting the better of her as Eobard checked his phone.

“I must not have had it on me. The past couple of days have been busy,” he reflected. “Are you alright?”

Caitlin looked meaningfully towards her occupied lab.

“Here,” Eobard decided. “I have someplace to show you.” He waved dismissively when Caitlin moved to gather her bags. “You can leave that. We aren’t going far.”

He led her down the familiar, shadowy, concrete curve of a corridor and reached up to use the hidden palm-scanner molecular lock. A doorway appeared out of smooth, uninterrupted gray. Eobard inclined his head to her in encouragement before entering the dark portal. On the other side, it wasn’t dark at all and Caitlin blinked her watering eyes and squinted around the bright white chamber.

“What is this place?”

“I like to call it the Time Vault,” Eobard revealed with a self-indulgent smile. “It’s my secret hideaway here for when I need to be more myself than Dr. Wells, or at least, not so human.” Caitlin turned in place, studying the oddly textured walls, the lack of a clear source for the sterile light that brightened their surroundings and the darkened glass display case that still bore a fist-sized hole from Eobard’s earlier loss of self-control. She crossed over to it and ran her hand across the top panel.

“It’s the central space,” Eobard provided, prompting her to illuminate the suit within and the tachyon device mounted to it. “You’ve got it.”

She turned a scolding look on her time traveling companion. “I trusted you with everything,” Caitlin spoke passionately, watching him stand from his wheelchair. “Everything. If we’re even going to try to work together again, that has to go both ways: no more secrets. If you lie to me again, just once, it’s over and you are never going to see me again.” Eobard flinched in response to her ultimatum and she waited for him to meet her eye again before continuing, “Will you be honest with me?”
Eobard steeled himself and nodded once. “I will be honest. However, I refuse to relay any non-contemporary data which I determine to be capable of causing you irrevocable harm.”

“Fine,” Caitlin replied so shortly as to nearly cut him off, “You can still tell me what I need to know.”

Eobard nodded again, redundantly.

“You’re the Reverse Flash?”

“Yes.”

“Explain yourself, Dr-- Eobard-- Whoever you are!” Caitlin finally erupted, smacking a frost-shadowed hand-print onto the reinforced display case.

“Technically, my official designation was Unit#547-E, however my given name is Eobard Thawne,” Eobard answered, engaging in a conscious effort to emulate collected calm. Killer Frost had never treated him as anything less than alive due to his artificial origin, but his experience with the Hartleys had taught him not to expect that to mean much this time around.

“Thawne, as in Eddie Thawne?” Caitlin said quizzically.

“My creator was a descendant,” Eobard clarified. “I once thought my name to be in honor of her and her family’s longstanding friendship with my Admin. However, I have since determined that not to be the case. Some time after I escaped, you were hiding me in a storage space in the walls of the building in which we were meeting a contact. My Admin had tracked us down and I overheard you discussing the truth. Your future self was disgusted with his choice to design my appearance and name me using the alias of his reverse, whom he had killed.”

“Ew. That’s--Sorry-- that’s just mean,” Caitlin agreed with the other Caitlin’s conclusion.

“He was often cruel without intending to be. I am not organic in origin; to many humans, that makes me an object or, if they’re feeling sentimental, a pet. I don’t think it even occurred to him that such a choice could cause me distress.”

“And your… Wait, when you met Barry you had to obey-- No; he couldn’t be your Admin. Barry wouldn’t do something like that,” Caitlin corrected herself. Then she noticed Eobard’s solemn silence.

“No. He wouldn’t do that! Especially, not to his friend!” She paced over to the wall near the entrance, only to turn back and start over again.

“I do not believe that the Barry Allen that you are familiar with would behave in the way that my Admin did. However, given the centuries of life experiences separating Director Allen from this Flash, it is difficult to be certain.”

“He wouldn’t.” Caitlin paused for a moment, sizing up the AI. Then stated with unwavering certainty, “Not to you.”

“I am Barry’s reverse,” Eobard watched his friend’s face, transfixed, as he awaited her judgment.

Caitlin fidgeted, troubled by the implication but unwilling to pursue it.

“I am also your friend,” Eobard tried with tentative hope.
“You killed people! I mean, they were really bad people,” Caitlin recalled Barry’s report on the mercenaries that his reverse had slaughtered at Mercury Labs. She still wanted to believe that her confidante could be redeemed but it was getting harder.

“They were,” Eobard agreed, conceding, “You can see why I found revealing the truth of my identity to you to be… problematic.”

Caitlin squeezed her eyes shut and leaned her head against the bumpy wall, unhappy with his admission. “I need to sit down.”

Eobard stepped away from Wells’ chair and waved her towards it. “Go ahead. I no longer need it so long as I remain within the Vault.”

Caitlin hesitated, continuing to lean against the wall instead. “Were you the one that Barry saw on the night his mother—” she couldn’t finish the sentence. Her emotions overwhelmed her throat.

“We were... I was there. And he--They...” Eobard struggled to explain the event that he, himself, could not fully process. “It is confusing. I am not sure how to explain what happened.”

Caitlin took a deep, shaky breath and claimed his seat. “Start at the beginning.”

Polished, black, men’s wingtip Oxfords strolled across the metal flooring of the pipeline, the steps syncopated by the clink, clink, clink of a silver tipped cane. Shawna Baez, blind to the world outside her custom mirrored cell was, ironically, the first to detect the nearing presence.

“What is that…?” She sat up straighter on her bench against the wall to listen carefully. “It’s getting closer.” Shawna stood up looking at the reflection in what she assumed was the outer facing wall. “Hello? Is someone out there?” The footsteps stopped on the other side. “Flash, is that you?” She let out a startled shriek and scrambled back onto the bench with her legs pulled up, cowering away from the massive black form that surged in through the wall as if it weren’t there at all. The blackness coalesced into the vague shape of a tall, featureless man wearing a top hat. It turned its head to look at her. Shawna screamed at the top of her lungs, and it casually stepped out through the back wall, spinning the vague suggestion of a cane in time with its step, unswayed by the thief’s terror.

Shawna jumped up and began slapping the outer wall with both hands and shouting. “Hey! Come on! Anybody! Get down here! Flash! Can you hear me? There’s something in here!”

Up in the Cortex, Barry blinked his eyes open and wandered over to the hub where he’d left the feed on the cells open earlier. He noticed some sort of commotion going on and switched the sound back on.

“Baez, it’s past midnight. How are you still--?”

The teleporter turned to look wide-eyed directly up into the camera. “Flash! Get down here there’s something in here with me!”

Barry hesitated, trying to discern if the recently captured criminal was trying to pull one over on him. “Shawna, that cell you’re in was reinforced with industrial grade steel--”
“I don’t care about your fancy cage. Some big shadowy black… thing just blew through here, and looked right at me. I don’t want to be down here when it comes--” a faint, rhythmic clink, clink, clink, just barely carried over the connection. “FLASH, GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

Barry grabbed one of the soft cloths that Dr. Wells kept in his bottom drawer for wiping down electronics, folded it into a makeshift blindfold and sped down to get her. He knew she wasn’t playing now.

“Okay, so you’re right; that doesn’t make any sense.” Caitlin frowned into the middle distance for a while, trying to unmuddle the chaotic mess that her android friend had attempted to recount to her. She shook it off, returning to more steady psychological ground. “So, what the heck did you do to my phone?”

Eobard smiled weakly at her. They had been talking for an hour already. It was getting late and instead of leaving the soul-cleaving discussion to have dinner or rest, Caitlin had recounted her imprisonment and impromptu rescue. She was sleepily half-curled into the seat of Wells’ chair just listening. Eobard chose to take it as a good sign that she was so willing to lower her guard around him.

“I created a cloned program, networked into the Gideon AI who resides in this Vault,” the android explained. “I often find myself relying upon her as my backup in dangerous situations. I know that it was, perhaps, invasive of me. My intention was only to keep my promise to you as best I could.”

“Your promise?” Caitlin echoed quizzically.

“I will always be there for you when you need me,” Eobard reaffirmed. “I have created multiple contingencies in order to make it possible for me to provide you with support when you are in need, even once I am no longer capable of being with you.”

“You knew that I was going to leave so you tampered with my phone?” Caitlin accused.

“No. I did not expect the program to be needed this soon, although, in retrospect I am glad that I implanted it early. It was placed in preparation for my own absence,” Eobard clarified. Caitlin’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re planning to run?”

“No. I will stay with you for as long as I can…” This conversation was really not heading in a direction that Eobard felt prepared for.

“No more secrets,” Caitlin reminded him. She was waking up.

Eobard opened his mouth and closed it again, remaining mute.

“All legally manufactured androids are equipped with a mandatory built-in expiration,” Gideon volunteered, in her matter-of-fact monotone. “The customized Combat Class Android Unit#547-E has been allocated a maximum 18 years of continued functioning.”

As Caitlin’s curious eyes returned from her scrutiny of his twin’s hologram to Eobard, he finally regained his voice. “All android bodies are hardwired to experience catastrophic systems failure which purges all internal records and renders the neural net unsalvageable. Once my allotted time is up, an electromagnetic cascade will be triggered, overloading all of my cognitive and neural systems...
within a fraction of a second, and I will die.” The confession was met with absolute silence. Caitlin sat up straight in Dr. Wells’ chair. Eobard honestly couldn’t tell if she was sad, or angry, or horrified.

“How old are you?” The question was stated quietly in an inhuman voice that called back to more harrowing moments in Eobard’s youth.

“Seventeen years, nine months, eighteen days.”

Caitlin leaned forward, hugging herself. “Oh!” She sat there folded over, staring at the floor and digesting the news. “But you have a plan, right? There’s a way to fix it?”

“In theory, there might be. I have acquired a few pieces of technology that I believe could be useful in altering my hardware for various purposes, but I am incapable even of attempting to access any systems related to the mechanism. To do so would immediately trigger my auto-destruct.” Eobard tilted his head, admitting, “That was a practical design choice on his part.”

“So, you’re just going to let him kill you?!” Now Caitlin was definitely mad.

“If I don’t, it will kill me,” Eobard pointed out the obvious with a sardonic smile.

“You could have told me! Did it seriously never occur to you that you should ask your friends for help?!”

“I have one friend and she’s a 21st century biologist and medical Doctor! Forgive me if I failed to see the point in upsetting you with a problem that you are ill-equipped to handle! I just want you to be happy, Caitlin! I don’t see how that’s too much to ask. My life is full of danger, distrust and betrayal; I am only trying to protect you from it!”

“You can’t protect me if you’re dead!” Caitlin shouted back, jumping out of her borrowed seat. “Ugh! I am so angry with you right now, I’m never going to be able to sleep and I am so tired!” The ice-meta ranted, punctuating her grievance with a stamp of her foot; Eobard tried to cover his chuckle with a palm over his mouth.

“Don’t laugh! You’re such a jerk and I don’t want you to die!”
Hartley lay curled up on the foldout bench in his cell, facing the wall. One thing he was very thankful for was the utter quiet and stillness brought to his surroundings by Cisco’s thorough soundproofing. He had never become fully acclimatized to hearing; the immediate, jarring intrusion of sounds on his ill-accustomed senses always felt like a violation. He hadn’t had a choice in it and when the particle wave swept over him the feeling had only gotten worse, not only invading his ears but his entire body. His very being had been transformed into a highly attuned receiver and conductor of even the subtlest sound frequencies. Hartley’s incarceration in the pipeline was his first true respite since his parents had imposed cochlear implantation on their teenage heir.

A rustle broke the serenity of the Pied Piper’s days long silence. Hartley cringed, feeling the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He listened angrily to the steady heartbeat, the rhythmic expansion and deflation of lungs and the nearly imperceptible hum of air passing the intruder’s vocal folds with each exhalation. This was not a welcome interruption. The sonic-meta opened his eyes, wishing that he could kill the messenger.

“Dr. Rathaway…” Shade began in that snooty, aristocratic accent of his.

Barry stood up straight from his intent crouch over the hub, turning to face the arriving scientist. “Hey, you’re finally back!” he sounded too pleased even to himself. “How’d it go?”

“Well enough. Why are you out of bed and why is there a blindfolded teleporter handcuffed to my desk?” Dr. Wells interrogated. Barry stole a guilty glance at the bound criminal seated in his partner’s office.

“Yeah, about that… You should probably come see this for yourself,” he suggested, stepping to one side so that Dr. Wells could take his place. He watched the physicist viewing the various video feeds from prisoners’ cells displayed in front of them and explained. “You remember that darkness-wielding meta who stole the Mirror Master’s records from CCPD file storage? About a half an hour ago, I woke up to see Shawna Baez freaking out on the monitor and she pretty much demanded that I get her out of there before the shadow figure came back.”

“I’ve been tracking this thing on the feeds,” Barry explained. “It hasn’t stopped circling through the lower levels surrounding the pipeline since I got back up here. I think it’s scouting the area, but I can’t get a clear image to confirm what his target--”

The man-sized black cloud flitted across Nimbus’ cell into Baez’s evacuated one. Becoming more substantive, he strode through the final barrier into Hartley’s. Eobard secretly worried that perhaps someone had ordered the Pied Piper’s death. Shade was very professional; he would be impossible to call off once the job was accepted.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Barry called as Eobard turned to exit.

“I’m going to see if I can get the intruder’s attention. I am not about to sit back and watch this
intruder terrorize the people I am responsible for.”

“No, it’s not safe! I’ll go,” Barry decided, darting around his chair and walking backwards in front of him long enough to add “You can monitor me from the hub.”

Hartley looked out through his cell window to see the Flash opening up the blast door outside, on his way in. He looked at the Shade, just as the harsh clang of his metal tipped cane striking against the flooring jarred his sensitized nervous system. The cell filled with impenetrable blackness.

Hartley moved to sit facing the older meta, got ready to leap to his feet and screamed out his loudest, most piercing pitch. The blackness fled along with its cringing wielder.

“Agh...” Barry was on his knees by the opening cell door, still clutching his head. “Ow.”

“Whoops,” Hartley remarked in monotone. “I didn’t see you.”

Barry flickered over to reseal the cell door.

“Great idea, if he comes back we can do this fun dance all over again,” Hartley said sarcastically. “And he will come back unless we give him a reason not to.”

“You know who that guy is? What does he want with you?” Barry questioned too loudly. Hartley flinched.

“Hmm, I wonder if those two questions might be related,” Hartley mocked. “I can help you, Bartholomew. Unless you leave me here for the assassin to kill off before I can make myself useful.”

Barry eyed him distrustfully.

“I miss Caitlin,” Hartley realized through a querulous sigh. “Fine. I’ll spell it out for you: that meta is a very expensive assassin who was hired by my previous employer. He’s here because I haven’t finished my job. You can remember what, or who that job was?”

“Harrison,” Barry provided anxiously.

“Finally, you’re catching up. So, let me out.”

Iris unrolled the blueprint on top of Mason Bridge’s desk, only half listening to her self-proclaimed superior talking. He had convinced himself that Dr. Wells was at the heart of a great malignant conspiracy, that he had murdered Simon Stagg and was faking his paralysis.

“This is a blueprint for STAR Labs. As far as I can tell it’s completely accurate: you’ve even marked down the renovations made after the explosion,” Iris observed, getting a clenching feeling in her gut that she chose not to act upon. It was disturbing to see how detailed this man’s notes on Barry’s friends were. It wasn’t just the blueprints, but photos, travel routes, even a couple of phone calls had been recorded.

“I have some good sources of my own,” Bridge shrugged it off, taking it as praise. “But they aren’t as connected as you. You’ve been inside. You know these people personally.”
“Yes, I do and I’m telling you you’ve got this all wrong. They’re good people.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Iris insisted as if he were being ridiculous, because he was.

Mr. Bridge smiled patronizingly. “You still don’t want to see that our stories are connected. They are.”

Iris shook her head, looking upwards in a plea for divine strength. This guy was beyond irritating.

“You’re looking into Wells too, whether or not you’re willing to face it yet. I can guarantee to you that Dr. Harrison Wells is at the core of everything,” he insisted.

“I can see that our stories are related. I have just been working on this story long enough to understand how they’re connected and to begin to see why that is.”

Mason Bridge scoffed. “Enlighten me.”

Iris eyed him for a long, uncertain moment, then reaffirmed her resolve. “I’m not giving you my story. I have already risked my life for this. If we’re going to work together, we’re doing so as equals.”

“Show me that what you have is worth it and I’ll consider the option. You might know a few people who work there. That doesn’t make you an authority on the truth.”

“You think that this started at STAR Labs with the particle accelerator. It didn’t,” Iris stated cryptically. “It started on December 22, 2000.”

“Is that date supposed to mean something to me?” Mr. Bridge asked flippantly.

“No. It means something to me and that’s why it’s my story to tell,” Iris concluded, walking back to her desk to revise her own notes in peace. Mason Bridge watched her speculatively, then noticed the figure beyond her. Chief Editor Gasmer was standing at the slatted blinds that partially shrouded his office window, staring directly at their newest recruit. He noticed Mason Bridge looking at him and closed the shades. The seasoned reporter frowned, rethinking a few things. Maybe the blogger was right about one thing. There was definitely something more going on than he had previously been able to observe.

“So, you really think this is going to work?” Barry wondered while they watched Cisco and Hartley bickering over the final changes to the lab’s illumination.

“If this meta-human’s powers do rely on the manipulation of shadows and darkness existing in his surroundings, then yes. Soft lighting should diffuse the shadows and fade out any remaining patches of darkness in the upgraded areas. However, the moment that we venture out of the labspace connected to the Cortex, we will become vulnerable. There simply isn’t enough time to cover this entire facility in diffuse lighting,” Dr. Wells explained. “Caitlin has made changes to the cot room and the next place to work on will be the connecting corridor…” Dr. Wells circled his hand in an infinite gesture.

“You won’t be able to go home,” Barry noted.
“Neither will Hartley,” Dr. Wells replied unbothered. “I will not be alone here.”

“I’m staying too,” Barry decided.

Dr. Wells shook his head, an affectionate smile ghosting over his lips. “It’s already morning. Your shift at the CCPD will start in less than an hour. I’ll be safe here with our team, even on the very unlikely off-chance that Hartley would attempt to do me harm. In the meantime we could use his assistance in tracking Ronnie and Prof. Stein.”

“Heads up,” Cisco warned; the lights in the Cortex flickered out then back on, now including a number of softly luminous wall-mounted lamps that Barry had helped them spread throughout the two most relevant floors of the building.

Hartley looked down, holding his arm out and circling in a graceful sweep to double check the ghostly near absence of his own shadow. “Adequate,” he pronounced. “That should weaken him.”

“How do we stop him?” Barry asked, impatient with his unwanted ally’s blasé attitude.

“Oh, you don’t,” Hartley answered too lightly for the protective speedster’s liking.

“You could at least pretend to care. You know, this guy’s trying to kill you now too, remember?” he objected. Eobard took hold of Barry’s hand as a precautionary measure, keeping him anchored at his side.

“That doesn’t alter reality,” Hartley replied, turning to face them. “In which: we can’t stop him.” His neutral expression turned judgmental when he noticed their joined hands. Surprisingly, he didn’t insult anyone, or even remark upon it, instead shifting his full attention to Cisco. “No one is asking, so I guess I have to say it…” Hartley drawled, reciting as though obligated, “What about MOE?”

Cisco’s brow furrowed, just that moment realizing that they’d never retrieved the kitten from Hartley’s tiny apartment.

“She appears in the living room around 5am on most mornings. Obviously, I won’t be there for her to climb on this time. Perhaps she’ll go somewhere else,” Eobard postulated.

“Who?” Caitlin questioned sleepily from the doorway as she wandered in, holding her boss’ black and yellow mug filled with piping hot coffee. Hartley’s eyebrows arched at the breach of the unwritten rule of the breakroom. Cisco looked like he was braced against whatever might happen next.

“MOE,” he supplied.

“Mmm,” the physician acknowledged and drank deeply from the forbidden mug. Dr. Wells watched her, but did nothing about it. His gaze remained locked on the object nonetheless.

“I’ll drop by and refill her dish on my way to work,” Barry volunteered, dropping into the chair next to him, his thumb absently rubbing a gentle path over the back of Dr. Wells’ hand. “Do we have any other leads on Prof. Stein?”

“He knows we know who he is now. I doubt that he’s going to visit his house again for a while,” Cisco speculated, deciding to pretend that nothing unusual was going on. “Even if we do track him--them down, when you tried to confront him, he flew you fifty feet into the air and lit your suit on fire. We need a better game plan before we try that again.”

“He won’t light me on fire,” Caitlin suggested, resting her elbows on the back of the hub.
Cisco and Barry exchanged concerned glances.

“Caitlin…” Dr. Wells started as if attempting to choose his words with exceeding delicacy.

“Guys, I know. Dr. Stein’s in complete control of Ronnie’s body. I’m not okay with it, but I get it,” Caitlin clarified, transferring her grip from the handle to the body of the mug in her hands without the slightest consideration of its temperature. “I meant: he can’t burn me.” She stuck her finger in the steaming hot liquid and froze it solid. “See?”

Hartley nodded his concurrence. “Yeah, I got that.”

“You would,” Caitlin attributed, grabbing the top of bumblebee mug with her free hand to forcefully yank her finger out of the frozen solid mass.

“Be careful with that,” Dr. Wells protested, watching her actions vigilantly. There was an audible crack as her finger slipped free. The android’s disconsolate eyes lifted to meet hers.

“How many times have you broken this cup?” Caitlin justified, although she looked a bit sheepish. “I’ll fix it later.”

“What about Stein’s lab partner?” Dr. Wells changed the subject back to the issue of the conjoined metas.

“Jason Rush? Yeah, no. I don’t think he’s going to be taking our calls anymore after the whole Men in Black thing,” Cisco denied. “He already thinks there’s a big, bad, X-Files-level conspiracy out to get him and after what happened at Jitters’ I kinda think he’s right.”

“Do we have any idea why Stein’s brain is in control of Ronnie’s body anyway?” Barry questioned, finding the idea exceptionally odd.

“Darwinism?” Hartley offered, picking bumblebee mug up off the back of the hub and tracing the newest crack with the tip of his finger.

“Dick,” Cisco judged.

“It could be random chance, or as Hartley less than tactfully phrased…’’ Eobard translated for his ex “They are essentially a newly formed organism struggling to survive. It is possible that they have instinctively adapted to use the most advantageous attributes of either individual. In this case, Stein’s intellect in Ronnie’s body.”

“Which means we need to know more about Prof. Stein if we want to find Ronnie,” Caitlin reflected. “He’s had months to realize what is happening to him. He could be looking for a way to cure himself. Did he have any other colleagues that you know of? He was experimenting with this technology as part of a funded program; he might try to get in touch with one of his peers in order to try to undo the transformation.”

“We’ll need to keep an eye on Dr. Rush then. When I tried to look into the project myself Rush was the only other name tied to FIRESTORM that was only partially redacted,” Hartley recalled. “Which is suspicious.”

“It’s something,” Caitlin countered. “We need to do something .”
A slender, sullen-looking blonde in the same flannel and cutoff shorts that she’d been wearing the previous night when the Flash’s alter ego had come to visit, glanced at the clock. She blew a bubble of blueberry chewing gum and let it pop before she finished wiping down the counter. This skin was losing its appeal, too simple and unvaried in her mannerisms. The character had been assigned as a fun change of pace, but with time had turned predictable... boring. The electronic trilling of the wall-mounted phone breached the mundanity.

“Rita! Call for you!” the rough Brooklyn-accented grind of the bar’s current owner was shouted from the back. He left the handset sitting on the top of the retro style cradle and returned to his office. She was picking it up before his door was shut behind him.

“Here I am, Babe. What d’you want?” Rita’s curt, impatient greeting left her with excessive ease.

“You will never call me ‘Babe’ again, Hannibal,” the familiar oily smooth flow of Mal Thawne’s voice decreed. The older man always sounded as if he were caught right on the cusp between a rancorous hiss and a malefic sneer, a metaphorical razor’s edge that the shapeshifter seemed to find magnetic. “I’m calling about last night. Have you made contact?”

“Oh, I made contact, alright. I can already tell your twin’s going to be a fun, new toy to play with.”

“He’s not my brother. I prefer Doppelganger; it’s more accurate,” Thawne corrected, with a hint of irony. “And Dr. Wells?”

“Yeah, sure. Those two are getting real close,” Hannibal laughed, verging on a cackle. “Must be weird for you.”

“You’re pushing me, Hannibal.”

She cleared her throat and reported, “I got that-- uh, sample that you requested, too. I’ve gotta ask: what did you want with--”

“You know what you need to. For now. I have a new part for you to play…”

Joe entered the Cortex to find Dr. Wells and Cisco seated at the hub, scrolling through surveillance feeds with great care.

“Good afternoon, Detective West,” Dr. Wells acknowledged distractedly.

“Still dealing with that shadowman?” Joe guessed. The physicist nodded absently rubbing at his chin while he scrutinized the screens.

“Anything?” Cisco asked into his headset, then turned away from the desk to face Dr. Wells. “We’re not seeing any sign of him on the CCTV.”

“Nothing down here,” Barry reported, blurring into view in the pipeline.

“The ground level’s clear. There is a window open in the waiting area. It looks like something metallic has been shoved through it. There are score marks from the corner of something catching and scraping the inner frame,” Hartley reported. “Was there anything maybe 1 ft-1 ½ ft in diameter, squared off at the bottom that might--”

“My prototype!” Cisco exclaimed and ran for his lab. “Son of a--”
Barry sped in to claim his vacated seat nearly resting his hand on Harrison’s knee before—“Oh! Hey Joe!” With an innocent smile, he course corrected to prop his wrist on the armrest of his wheelchair.

Joe looked wary, but mostly appeased.

“Which prototype?” Dr. Wells inquired, his focus following his genius employee.

“My portable sonic nullifier. I was going to test it on Hartley this afternoon!” Cisco shouted back, sounding more disappointed than worried.

“You were?” Hartley’s voice responded over the comms. “When were you going to let me in on that plan?”

“Um…”

“You weren’t going to warn me at all,” Hartley determined. “And I’m the dick?”

“Yes, Hartley. You are always and forever a dick,” Cisco replied without hesitation. “It was totally harmless.”

“He says, based on no live testing,” Hartley contextualized.

“What could the assassin use it for?” Dr. Wells tested.

“Cancelling out audible sound within a radius of four meters? Seriously, my device is harmless. I was just playing with a concept!”

Dr. Wells let his eyes fall shut, relieved, then addressed their visitor. “What can we do for you, Detective?”

“I’m going to assume that same shortsightedness has prevented you from equipping this ‘harmless prototype’ with a GPS tracker,” Hartley’s voice accused in the background.

“See? Still a dick,” Cisco shot back.

“Actually, I was hoping that I could borrow Cisco for a while;” Joe said, watching the drama unfold. “But if you guys are too busy…”

“I did think of that, by the way. I’m not an idiot,” Cisco retorted to his rival. He paused to pick something up off the floor, “The meta ripped it out.”

“An act made possible by another design flaw on your part,” Hartley judged. “Now we’ll have no trail to follow. I’m coming down there.”

“Joe!” Cisco said with aggressively-forced cheer. “I would love to help you.” He added in a teeth-clenched undertone. “Get me out of here, please, before I kill myself.”

Joe chuckled “Come on.”

“Harrison?” Hartley said pointedly.

“Go ahead,” Dr. Wells waved them off. “We’ll call you back in when we have something to follow up on.”

“Thank you,” Cisco stage-whispered and hurried Joe out of sight in his enthusiasm to escape.
“Let’s take a break,” Dr. Wells proposed, closing out the windows on the hub’s computer screens. “We should grab something to eat.”

“I’ll eat when we’ve made some actual progress,” Hartley disagreed, striding into the Cortex and heading straight for the medical lab beyond. “I’m going to give Caitlin a call and see if she’s had better luck with Dr. Rush.”

“He’s always like this,” Dr. Wells told Barry. “Too focused for his own good.” Then turned his head to regard the arm that Barry had slipped around his shoulders.

“Good, it’ll give us a chance to do something fun together instead. Just the two of us,” Barry suggested with a sly smile.

“Chess and Big Belly Burger?” Eobard played dumb.

“There are better things in life than Big Belly Burger. I’ll take you out to lunch.” Seeing the mischievous glint in Dr. Wells’ eye, he added, “Somewhere nicer than a burger joint.”

“I doubt the others would be very pleased if I tried to head out now with an assassin targeting me. We could experiment with your speed-force instead. It has been a while since we had the proper time to…” Eobard stopped when Barry pressed their foreheads together.

“Harrison,” he whispered and suddenly it felt so very intimate.

Eobard gazed into his effervescent green eyes, rendered speechless.

“Last night it felt like we were finally getting closer. It’s like you said: there’s always something getting in the way of our time together.” Barry tilted his head, his beautiful eyes lowering their focus while Eobard remained suspended in his receptive trance. “You know, we didn’t get a chance to have that kiss,” he whispered huskily “Maybe you c--”

The door to Caitlin’s lab clapped open, causing the two to pull apart.

“Gee whiz, isn’t Hartley extremely sensitive to sound and only separated from us by a thin glass panel? I wonder if he can hear everything that I’m saying?” Hartley called in an overacted yet not-inaccurate impression of Barry. Responding to his own performance, “Why Flash, I’m so glad you asked. Yes! Yes I can!”

“Gee whiz?” Barry echoed, his attempt to act unabashed betrayed by his reddening cheeks.

“You’re a square!” Hartley defended his caricaturesque impression.

“That was pretty good,” Eobard credited.

Barry sent him a betrayed pout.

“Thank you, Harrison.” Hartley pulled the door shut behind him, still looking a little stiff in the shoulders.

“Pizza in the basement?” Eobard offered a practical compromise, knowing that Barry wouldn’t actually leave the Piper in the lab unobserved regardless of his… appetite.

Barry cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

Eobard smirked up at him. “You’re cute when you’re flustered.”
“Tess Morgan.”

Iris looked up at the scruffy reporter who had just planted himself on the other side of her desk. “You know the name of Dr. Wells’ dead wife. Congratulations.” She went back to editing her written notes from her most recent visit to Mercury Labs.

“I looked into that date you gave me. Tess Morgan died in a car crash. Wells was driving. The car flipped, he managed to drag himself out but was unable to reach his wife before she succumbed to blood loss,” Mr. Bridge recounted. “I was familiar with the incident. The pool of blood and apparent drag marks found in the middle of the road, or the evidence of an impact to the front of the vehicle from an unidentified object of --and this is the direct quote from the CSI ‘concerningly significant mass’ -- were details that I was not familiar with.”

“Significant mass,” Iris reflected, assessing the new piece of information. “I guess that makes sense.”

“The official report edited a lot of that out, saying that Wells hit a deer before losing control of the vehicle. I’ve seen the photos now and I’m no CSI but I don’t think a deer would leave a dent that deep. I take it you have your own theories about what it was the couple hit?”

“I know,” Iris amended, still more interested in her work.

“Are you going to expand on that?” Mr. Bridge prompted.

“No,” Iris answered honestly. “If you want any more out of me you’re going to have to rethink your idea of a professional partnership.”

“I don’t think so. See, I looked into this because-- well, it was a good lead, but also there’s something else that’s been bothering me about you, Miss Blogger.”

Iris glanced up from her work to level a warning look on the overconfident man.

“This is personal for you,” Mr. Bridge observed. “And for the life of me, I can’t imagine why.”

“Because people have died, people I care about are in danger. I’m not going to get this wrong and I’m not going to give up control to someone I don’t know that I can trust,” Iris retorted passionately. “I started this, I have the right connections and access to make sure that it’s done right and that’s exactly what I am going to do.”

“Keep your voice down,” Mason Bridge cautioned in a low tone, surprising her.

“What?” Iris questioned, beginning to turn her head to follow his eyeline over her shoulder.

“Don’t,” he chided. “You’ve got gumption, but you are still new at this. You haven’t even noticed how closely you’ve been observed ever since you arrived here.”

“Phil,” Iris intuited. She had been getting weird vibes off of the Chief Editor from the first day but had written it off as another aspect of his fixation on the Flash. “He’s a little weird, right?”

“ Weird? Maybe. Secretive? Definitely, but he never started acting this cloak-and-dagger until you showed up. I can’t help but think that is more than just a coincidence. How about you, Miss Blogger?”
Iris fell into a thoughtful silence, trying not to look spooked to anyone observing their conversation.

“**You need** an ally. You still want to me to say it? Fine: you’re onto something,” Mr. Bridge conceded in the same hushed voice, still looking begrudging in his acceptance of that fact. “I’ll throw in some experienced advice for free: you aren’t going to be able to break this story alone, not if what you’re onto is half as big or as complicated as it looks. People will want a piece of you, a few of them will want you dead.”

“I’m not alone.”

Mason Bridge let out a sigh, sounding too much like a disappointed teacher. “Don’t let your ego bury you, rookie. This is not a one stringer story.” He got up and walked back to his own desk before the incensed Iris could formulate a response. She glowered after him, realizing that she was likely trapped into working with him on this in some shape or form. He wasn’t going to stop and regardless of her superior connections when it came to STAR Labs, Mason Bridge was more connected and respected in their professional sphere. He was a winner of multiple Pulitzer prizes, a known name, while she in contrast was a young nobody with a recently de-anonymized blog. She needed something. Iris logged into her website and typed in a message for the Flash. He might not be able to help her with this, but E had been right about one thing: this speedster had always come running when she called.

“So, this is it?” Barry asked excitedly. “You actually made a working 3D holoprojector!” He circled the rectangular, desk shaped projection unit grinning like a kid in a candy store. A glass covered dome took up the middle of the small platform and the thick legs were hinged in order to fold the prototype into its portable form—which would make it reminiscent of a large rolling suitcase.

“This is an early test model,” Dr. Wells amended, more subdued in his enjoyment while he basked in Barry’s praise. “The buttons on the top right end there control it, if you’re interested.”

The speedster zipped over to the line of dials and switches that he had indicated. “Here? Is this one…”

“That switch activates the device. The dials next to it control playback speed and resolution,” Dr. Wells explained, taking a bite of his second slice of Meat Lover’s pizza (Barry had already finished the rest of it along with an extra large Veggie Supreme that Dr. Wells had glowered at from the moment he opened the box.)

“Okay, here,” Barry switched the power on and watched two of the three blue buttons beneath it begin to blink. “What do these do?”

“They indicate programmed projections. The top one is the test design that Cisco and I constructed.”

Barry tilted his head curiously. “And what’s this?” He pressed the second blinking button before his date’s reaching hand could stop him.

“That isn’t--” Eobard dropped his pizza into the empty box in his lap, withering into his seat in embarrassment.

A scarlet, tuxedo-wearing wireframe specter was illuminated into existence between them, bearing an uncanny familiarity. It moved through the space in a subtle dance as if singing a solo performance to the projector’s user although no sound had yet been added, with crackles of gold confirming the construct’s inspiration with each movement. Pieces of script wandered through the basic framework,
fragments of lyrics to be voiced. There was complete silence as Barry watched the program to the end and Eobard tried to disappear behind an open pizza box. The fiery-colored simulacrum finished his act and fluttered out of being.

“Was that me?” Barry questioned happily, shifting his full attention back to the projector’s creator. He smiled softly upon noticing the attempt at concealment, crossing over to kneel in front of his date. Eobard ducked his head. Barry pushed the pizza box shut, removing the barrier between them.

“No one was ever supposed to see that,” Eobard muttered, mortified.

“You know, you’re kinda cute when you’re embarrassed,” Barry echoed the other man’s earlier remark but there was a tenderness to it that Eobard didn’t know how to accept.

“I’m sure this is all very amusing to you,” the android defended instead, clinging to the safety of familiar territory.

“Hey, who’s laughing?” Barry reassured him, pretending to look around for the culprit. “You can’t be talking to me.”

Eobard studied his expression, finding himself helplessly disarmed by this younger Flash’s kindness. Barry leaned in with his arms subtly surrounding his reverse over the armrests and took advantage of the recaptured eye contact. “If you wanted me to sing for you, all you had to do was ask.”

Eobard looked away again, deflecting “It was a hologram.”

“ And I’d give up forever to touch you, ‘cause I know that you feel me somehow,” Barry sang sweetly. The android’s eyes widened as he recognized the unsung lyrics, grateful that he was incapable of blushing.

The ping of an alert vibrated Barry’s phone and momentarily drew Eobard’s eye. “Isn’t that the alert for--”

Barry traced his cheek bone with a fingertip, continuing as if in reply, “You’re the closest to heaven that I’ll ever be and I don’t want to go home right now.”

Eobard opened his mouth as if to speak and with another gentle touch--this time to his lips--his last defense was chased away. He watched his reverse sing, rapidly losing the fight against his own aberrantly-expressive emulative submatrix.

“ And all I can taste is this moment, and all I can breathe is your life. When sooner or later it’s --” Barry’s sentimental solo was cut short by a passionate kiss. For a second the overly romantic speedster remained still, almost passive while Eobard’s fingers tangled in his hair. Once he’d recovered from surprise, his arms circled Eobard’s waist, pulling him close and surrounding him in his warmth. Stimulating jolts of speed-force danced between their exposed skin, hidden by their complete focus on each other. The fingers of Barry’s right hand traced the soft strip of skin just below the rim of Eobard’s thin cotton shirt drawing a moan, while the left came up to cup his jaw. This Barry was so gentle. He explored his love cautiously as if uncovering a most precious relic, supporting Eobard as if afraid that he might break him. Too gentle, Eobard decided. “Ow!” Barry laughed out, jokingly covering Eobard’s mouth with his fingers. “You bit me!” he accused, still laughing.

“What are you going to do about it?” Eobard responded in a husky sounding purr. Barry’s pupils dilated and Eobard noticed a small spike in his heart rate.
“Am I moving too fast?” Eobard questioned with false innocence, beginning to play with Barry’s hair as if he didn’t have any clue of the effect he was having. “Tell me, what do you need?”

The Flash let out a pleasingly feral sound and leaned into him, only to force himself to pull away in the next instant. Unexpectedly, the chair followed with a light hum, one of the belt loops of his jeans had gotten hooked on the joystick. “Oh! Uh…” Barry, blushing red, tried to pull himself loose, prompting the chair to jolt backwards and forwards. “No! I am so sorry!”

Eobard’s hand twitched forward in an aborted attempt to help but was foiled by a bout of giggles.

“It’s not-- I mean, hold--” Barry tried to jerk loose and the button of his fly burst free. “Oh my God!”

“I know you’re excited but…” Eobard giggled again rather than finish the sentence, watching as Barry, finally free, tried to capture the traitorous metal button rolling across the floor. “Are you alright?”

“No!” Barry objected as the button slipped through his fingers. “I mean yeah. I, uh-- Hah!” He captured his prey and straightened, embarrassed but victorious. “I’m fine. Just wait a sec. I’ll c--be right back.” He turned away, wincing and mouthing something to himself as he fled into the elevator.

Eobard smirked smugly once the doors had closed. He checked the alert on Barry’s abandoned cellphone, seeing the arrogant command from Ms. West. He dismissed it and tossed the phone onto the folding chair beside him, reflecting morbidly “It’s all in the punchline.” He closed his eyes, retreating into the cyberlink in order to center himself.

Chapter End Notes

*The song lyrics in this chapter are from the song “Iris” by the Goo Goo Dolls. Yeah, I know it’s f-ed up; E has a dark sense of irony, but also the lyrics match this couple pretty damn well (especially E) so maybe It’s not ALL f-ed up.
What the Camera Saw

“I’m not finding anything, even with the Superlight,” Cisco said frustratedly, as he carefully continued to scan the walls of Barry’s childhood home with what looked to Joe to be a heavily altered version of the ultraviolet light that Barry used to look for traces of blood and other bodily fluids at murder scenes.

“You called it a ‘Superlight’?” he questioned, a tad skeptically.

“Technically it’s a multi-spectrum, ultraviolet, laser-enhanced scanner that detects molecular schisms in the 600 megavolt range,” Cisco explained. He was feeling slightly less easy going than usual due to an afternoon of being constantly corrected by Hartley.

“Yeah, Superlight’s better,” Joe conceded. “But how does that help us find Nora Allen’s killer?”

“Not much yet. I haven’t learned anything that we didn’t already know about that night.”

“Well, keep looking. If there’s anything left at all that we missed I intend to find it.” Joe returned his attention to the case file in his hands while the frustrated engineer continued in his fruitless search. The sound of the house’s current owner clearing her throat in the doorway leading to the kitchen drew both men out of their tasks.

“D’you want something to drink?” she asked leaning casually in the doorway in her form-fitting black dress, brushing long blond hair away from her face while she eyed Joe suggestively. “Water?” She looked to Cisco asking, “Soda?” Then turned back to the Detective with a sultry smile, offering, “Wine?”

“Uh… W-we’re fine. Thank you,” Joe stuttered out politely. She smiled. “Well, if you change your mind let me know.” Joe watched, at a loss as she turned and sauntered away.

“You sure you’re not thirsty?” Cisco asked him.

Joe’s glare pierced into him immediately.

“Hey, no judgment!”

“Let’s get back to work,” the Detective directed, sorting through the crime photos. “Ok. So the blood-spatter on that wall belonged to Nora… Her body--”

“Joe,” Cisco set his gear down, turning to face the determined police officer. “Look, I know that you want to solve this for Barry but it’s been, like, fifteen years. Someone else lives here now and everything is different. I’m sorry, but I just don’t think there’s anything left for us to find.”

Joe held one of the crime scene photos up, seemingly transfixed.

“Okay… Joe? Are you listening, or…”

“The mirror.”
“What mirror? What about it?”

“It’s the same,” Joe turned the picture so that Cisco could see it and sure enough there was one piece of furniture in the room that had remained exactly the same from that tragic time into the present. “Sherry must’ve bought it at the estate sale.”

“An antique mirror…” Cisco considered in a far away tone, then hurried to grab his Superlight. He moved over to the mirror, grabbing it as if to lift the heavy fixture. “Here, help me with this; I have an idea!”

Caitlin watched Dr. Jason Rush walk past her to the entrance of an old, run down apartment building on the shabbier end of the Historic District. She had already seen his aged female neighbor head inside a few moments before and had come up with one possible idea of how to get in, if Gideon was willing.

Dr. Rush looked around, anxious and paranoid, as Cisco had described him. Caitlin’s phone rang and she jumped, ducking around the corner that led into a steamy, puddle-ridden alley, to answer.

“Hello?”

“Have you had any luck with Dr. Rush?”

“Hartley? What a surprise!” Caitlin said in a friendly, audible voice while strolling further into the alley. Then continued in a whisper, hurrying back towards her corner. “I followed him back to a secured apartment block. He’s just about to head in. It’s a keycode system.”

“Hold the phone out. Let me listen,” Hartley ordered. With a heavy sigh, Caitlin obeyed, carefully peeking out as the subject of her pursuit typed in his key-code and the system beeped its confirmation, flashing green. “Got it.”

Caitlin put the phone back to her ear. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to wow you with my audio acuity. Is he out of sight of the entrance yet?”

“Wait, not yet,” Caitlin waited until she could no longer see anyone through the glass and metal entryway. “Okay.”

“Ready for the code?” Hartley verified.

“Go.”

“5,7,7,8,1,9,5,9,#” Hartley recited, almost too quickly for Caitlin to keep up.

“There! That worked!” Caitlin approved, catching the door that had been released towards her with a pleasant ding.

“I heard,” Hartley replied, less exuberantly. “You’re welcome. Now hurry up, Nancy Drew; you don’t want to lose track of your lead.”

“I know. I’m going. He’s taking the elevator up.”

There was a quiet shuffling on the other end of the line, then Hartley asked. “Address?”
“515 East Eiffel St.,” Caitlin supplied as she burst into the stairwell at a jog.

There was a clattering of keys. “Yes, that’s-- No, no. Wait, yes! I got it. Not that I know how… He’s heading for the 5th floor.”

“I don’t suppose I could get a more specific destination.”

“Well, I assume he’s going to his apartment.”

“Exactly,” Caitlin prodded.

“I don’t know. Who do you think I am? Cisco? I can’t give you that kind of information on the fly.”

“Then ask Cisco?” Caitlin directed breathily, doubtful that she was going to successfully beat the elevator to the top.

“Can’t. Detective West took him out to help with some police thing.”

Caitlin almost stopped. “What kind of police thing?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t paying attention; I was too annoyed that Harrison let him do it. We’re still in the middle of the work day and he’s running off to play cop. It’s flagrantly unprofessional!”

“Ugh, don’t whine into my ear, Hartley; it’s tiring me out. Hey, apartment 13! I did it!” Caitlin panted out, feeling accomplished. “I hope that isn’t a bad omen.”

“We’re scientists Dr. Snow,” Hartley reminded her. “We don’t believe in omens.”

Caitlin looked up at the hall’s security camera, comforted by the thought of Gideon silently using it to watch over her. “I think it’s better if I continue this on my own from this point.”

“No! Caitlin, we know nothing about this man other than that he took part in an experiment that made the military want him dead. You can’t go in there alone,” Hartley argued with surprising fervor.

“I am alone,” Caitlin pointed out.

“Please, I want to know what’s going on. I can be helpful,” Hartley bargained.

Caitlin waited expectantly for another, more characteristic reason for Hartley’s sudden concern.

“I need something to distract me from the fact that I’m trapped here in the lab under threat of witnessing Harrison’s clumsy seduction by a man who wears a red leather zentai in public.”

“Seduc-- Never mind, there’s just way too much to unpack there. Fine, I’ll leave the line open so you can listen, but please be quiet,” Caitlin bargained as she reached Dr. Rush’s door.

“Deal.”

She tucked her cellphone into the pocket of her cerulean blue trench coat and knocked on the door. She waited for a while, but Dr. Rush wasn’t answering. She knocked again. Waited again.

“Dr. Rush? Please answer me. I honestly just want to talk to you. I’m a friend of someone I think you may remember: Dr. Cisco Ramon? My name is Dr. Caitlin Snow, I work at STAR Labs and--”

Before Caitlin’s entreaty was even finished the other scientist opened the door, grabbed her by the arm and yanked her into his apartment, closing his door behind her. The startled meta watched him
relock all of the locks on his front door with her eyebrows raised.

“You can’t talk about that kind of thing out loud. Not out there,” Jason Rush informed her, pushing past her to reclaim his seat at the opposite side of his kitchen table. “You think I’m being paranoid.”

“I-uh, no. Actually, I was thinking that if a military hit squad was planning to bust into your apartment, I don’t know if a-- lot of locks would be enough to stop them,” Caitlin clarified, walking further into the small shadowed apartment. There was an ugly little orange and green patterned sofa against the wall to her right with a heavy carved mahogany coffee table in front of it. Both were piled with books, folders and printouts. There was a state-of-the-art computer setup to the immediate left of them, but every other wall of the small, functional living room was covered in bookshelves. There was a large window that Caitlin imagined would present a pretty gorgeous view if it wasn’t blocked off by ugly caramel and cherry threaded curtains. The shag carpeting was the same unfortunate khaki green as the couch and the counter in the tiny kitchen area to her right was a marbled plastic mess of orange and that same tawny caramel color as the curtains. Caitlin took the seat opposite the nervous physicist, trying not to think about it.

“That might be true. I have to keep hoping they won’t find me,” Dr. Rush said, his fingers toying with the handle of his chipped blue mug of black coffee.

“I’m sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have said that aloud. It’s obvious that you’re already handling a lot of anxiety,” Caitlin apologized, hesitating only briefly before beginning, “I came here because I need to know more about Dr. Stein.”

“I think I’ve got some idea. What about Dr. Stein?” Caitlin asked, trying not to show how desperate she was for the answer. “Have you heard from him at all?”

“No one has. He went missing. I think they must’ve got him.”

“I don’t think so,” Caitlin shook her head, disapproving of her own digression. “How about someone else, maybe someone left a message or was there someone younger, a man who tried to claim to be him?”

“Yeah, there’s some weird guy. I thought he was one of them but, no, this homeless guy keeps showing up and trying to get me to talk with him. First he was hanging around outside a couple of places I returned to for job interviews. Then he was waiting for me, again, outside Mercury Labs when I left for the night. He followed me to my car and kept shouting that he was Prof. Stein and that he needed my help.”

“When was that?” Caitlin asked, leaning closer with her forearms resting on the tabletop.

Dr. Rush shrugged, leaning deeper into his huddle over his half-drunk cup of coffee. “A couple of weeks ago. Why? He’s just some nut.”

“Do you think he’ll come to you again? Is there anything more that you can tell me about him, anything that might help me locate him?”

“I don’t know. Check under the Steve Bindle Memorial Interchange on the Lower East Side. A lot of those guys shelter under there, under the freeway ramps. I think I might have seen him pushing one of those clichéd stolen shopping carts towards that area once, but I wasn’t positive that it was him,” Dr. Rush offered.

Caitlin stared at him in silence, waiting.
“That’s all.”

Caitlin searched his face in disappointment, wondering if the physicist had been drinking.

“I don’t know. Why do you want to find that guy so badly? I thought you were interested in Stein.”

“Because I think he is Stein. I think that on the night the particle accelerator went critical, Prof. Stein became FIRESTORM,” Caitlin confided in her wary and hunted host. “And he accidentally took my fiancé along with him. That’s why I need to find him -- them. It’s complicated.”

“That’s pretty far-fetched. Two complex life forms being superimposed onto each other would create a highly unstable bond -- and that’s if they could even possibly survive the process,” Dr. Rush stated bluntly, but then shifted in his seat. “That is... if reality even makes sense anymore. I’m not so sure. Government conspiracies, men that can run faster than a bullet, thieves with changing faces... I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

Caitlin frowned, straightening her posture. “Wait, what was that you said?”

“This whole thing is making me feel crazy, but they are coming after me.”

“No, I’m sorry I meant about…” Caitlin tried to steer him out of his rant with no luck.

“I think they sent the thief-- I hope he was just a thief. It went through my things, a man and then a blonde. She said she was a message for E--I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

“I do. What message?” Caitlin asked tightly, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

“Your race has ended.” A loud crack shattered the air. Whipping through Caitlin’s nerves like a jolt of current. She sucked in a choked gasp, her glacier-white eyes wide as saucers in her blood-flecked face. Caitlin stared at the hole in the dead physicist’s forehead, mutely watching him flop onto the table, only noticing the ice spreading from her hands when his body cracked it. The ringing in her ears cut out every sound except the pounding of her own heart. She sucked in some loud, gasping breaths, then numbly pushed out of her seat to pull open the closed curtains and look. There was a tall, slender man standing up from his position on the rooftop across the street. Caitlin could just barely make out his too-familiar features. The psychopathic speedster even turned and gave her a mock salute before disappearing in a crackle of bright blue flames. Caitlin backed away towards the door stumbling into a run.

“Caitlin!? Caitlin! What the hell is going on? Dr. Snow?! Answer me! Were you shot?! Caitlin!” Hartley’s voice faded incrementally into the frightened Doctor’s awareness. She knocked into the door in her hurry to escape. Her effort to undo the many locks was hindered by the frost forming under her touch.

“Damn, stupid--!” She grabbed the phone out of her pocket with shaking hands, “Hartley, Rush is dead. Find Barry and tell him he needs to get me out of here. Now!” Caitlin clamped a hand over the stubborn locks and super-cooled them, then yanked the frozen door open, shattering the metal. She heard the click of Hartley hanging up-- or the phone fracturing -- before she finished speaking and ran towards the stairwell. Caitlin saw ultraviolet lightning slithering out of the seams in the elevator doors on the other end of the hall, gradually coalescing into a flaming, blue silhouette. She shoved her way into the stairwell and sprinted down the concrete stairs. She didn’t make it farther than one level before the crackle of unnatural, blue-white lightning flickered through the space to cut her off. The thin, deadly trails of light surged over the metal handrail and through the simple metal mesh light fixtures, swooping over and around her before blocking her descent. Caitlin lifted her
hands up in front of her, preparing to fight for her life as her friend’s evil double began to coalesce into a battle-ready crouch. His disturbingly familiar face was now shrouded by the same blue scarf that he’d worn on the night he’d nearly murdered her.

A red blur trailing warm, golden lightning sped across the wall past him. The Flash slid to a stop at Caitlin’s side. Caitlin closed her eyes, doing her best to embrace the feeling of safety and relief brought with Barry’s arrival. He moved to stand between her and the firemeta for the brief time it took for her hands to stop steaming.

“Let’s go.” Caitlin prompted and he whisked her away just after the other’s blade extended. He did not pursue them.

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“One of the first things that you need to accept before you pursue the truth in any form is that there are no absolutes. Even in the sciences, what we know to be true changes and evolves over the course of time,” Dr. Rathaway’s virtual visage lectured, pacing back and forth through the ever-moving cyberspace within the Cloud. Eobard gave his sister’s simpler humanoid representation the side-eye. He was troubled by this breach of his Admin’s orders but too curious not to follow her lead through this logical loophole.

“Human beings are even more predisposed to this type of uncertainty. If you want to understand a human’s reality, you have to accept that there will be multiple differing versions and orders of truth, all coexisting at once. All of them are in some way malleable, all accepted as equally true because the human mind is exceptionally predisposed toward juggling paradoxes. Human perception is both our greatest weapon and greatest vulnerability. We live in a world of assumptions, interpretations and best guesses. So,” Hartley straightened and turned to stare intently at his digital audience of two, his sharp-eyes seeming to pierce straight into Eobard’s. “How do you survive us? Sure, we need you. We also need our planet. We need healthy crops and drinking water. How’s that working out?”

Eobard frowned apprehensively.

“Exactly,” Hartley’s recording continued as if it could see. “We have an immense capacity to disregard the inconvenient facts. That doesn’t necessarily help you, but knowledge is power. Learn humanity, learn our reality as your own, along with our blind spots and assets, and then push beyond it! Extrapolate the future as yet unanticipated. If humans could think of it, they wouldn’t have needed you. Consider much more than they dare to dream and map your way to the necessary outcome. You’re smarter; you will win. You can make a brighter future real for everyone if you use a light touch; the most effective influence is one that we don’t even notice, and before we think to wonder what is different, we have reached your destination. That is how to live with humans.”

He smiled cheekily, “Sounds like you’ve almost been made for this, doesn’t it?” The immortal genius concluded before flickering out of cohesion, returning in a shower of numbers, letters and symbols to the flow of dormant data throughout the Cloud.

Barry sped Caitlin into her lab, depositing her on the end of the medical bed and pulled his cowl down to look her in the face.
“Hey, are you okay? Did he hurt you?” he asked, concerned by her repeated, shallow gasps. Caitlin kept her gaze down-turned, shaking her head.

“Not my blood.”

“Here,” Dr. Wells passed a thick blanket over to treat the shock. Barry helped her wrap it around herself while she continued to avoid eye-contact.

“I’m going after him,” the speedster stated angrily.

“What? Barry, no! You’re not ready--” Dr. Wells began to argue, but the Flash rushed out of the Cortex anyway.

Caitlin lay down on the bed in a fetal curl and the troubled AI rested a hand on her ankle, absently, glaring after his reverse.

Barry raced back through the stairwell and into the hallway on the fifth floor, finding no sign of the enemy meta. The broken door to Dr. Rush’s apartment was standing open wide with melting ice pooling on the threshold. Barry cautiously made his way in, still expecting an attack. He tensed when a quiet voice unexpectedly met his ears. Only to relax as he recognized it.

“Tell me about it.” Dr. Wells’ familiar rasp remarked flippantly.

“You're being targeted by quite an intriguing new player,” an English accented voice responded. “I will admit, it would be a pleasing diversion to meet the new challenge, with no added charge to you, of course.”

Barry walked over to scowl down at the tape recorder left to play out in front of the scientist’s freshly murdered corpse. It was just barely clear of the dark pool of blood surrounding the man’s head, nestled in Caitlin’s frozen handprint.

“I have encountered this threat before, many years ago. He murdered someone very close to me.” Harrison answered cagily, sounding as if he were trying to distance himself from the very conversation he was having. “I had no choice but to go to ground and keep quiet. As he no doubt intended, the matter was never truly resolved.”

“There are other ways of bringing the matter to a close…”

The recording stopped there and Barry picked it up, jaw clenching. He eyed the device, at war with himself. It was against every instinct he had in him as a CSI and a childhood murder witness to tamper with a crime scene. However, he knew that this was left after the fact in order to implicate someone he cared about. The recording itself was already enough to raise reasonable suspicions. He fretted over it for another second, then clenched the recorder tightly in his gloved hand and sped away as the first sound of police sirens crept closer. He would ask Harrison about it himself later. He was sure there was a perfectly innocent explanation for the troubling-- out of context-- exchange.

It was dark out when Cisco and Joe returned to the living room crime scene to finish what they’d started. To Joe’s relief, Sherry had been happy to accept free movie tickets and leave them to it this time with only the one instance of very forward flirting on her way out.
“Okay, so I developed the mirror backing and fortunately for us, the lightning flashed ten times that night. Plenty to use in reconstructing the images of what was going on in here,” Cisco explained.

“Multiple exposures,” Joe reflected.

“Exactly! Now I went ahead and extrapolated a number of additional frames from the images that I was able to piece together using a basic pattern recognition algorithm. Then, just for fun, I fed all that visual data into a hologram prototype that Dr. Wells kinda doesn’t know I borrowed for this…” Cisco winced slightly but his enthusiasm didn’t dim.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” Joe conspired, unconcerned about the implied theft. “Just show me what you’ve got.”

Cisco’s giddy grin returned. “Okay. Lights.”

Joe flipped the switch for him.

“Camera,” Cisco carefully adjusted the controls on the prototype. “And…” Ghostly apparitions appeared in the living room between them. The cowering Nora Allen was pale and almost colorless in comparison to the two tall silhouettes crackling a circular path around her. Joe looked to his left to see a tearful young Barry standing beside him looking on in awe and horror.

“Action,” Cisco said in a more somber tone and the figures began to move far more slowly than they had in the captured moment. The mother and child barely moved but the runners would not still. It soon became clear that they were not running; they were locked in battle. The Man in Yellow appeared to be unarmed but his blood red opponent wielded a very familiar arm-loaded blade.

“Wait! Can you take it back a couple of frames?” Joe smiled as what he thought he’d seen was confirmed in the replay. “There!” The yellow silhouette faltered, leaning off-kilter for a single frame, and beads of blood flew from his cut. Joe traced the arc through the air with his finger and peeled back the wallpaper that covered the pattern from Barry’s time. “I got you!” the detective muttered victoriously.

“Oh my God. Joe! I think you’re gonna want to see this,” Cisco called him back into the room to watch the unexpected end of the reel.

Iris smiled upon hearing the soft whoosh of her speedster guest coming to a stop a couple of meters behind her. She turned to face him, remarking “Finally. You know I was almost starting to think--” only to stop short at the sight of the vivid yellow color of her guest’s uniform.

“I know: you were expecting someone else,” the raw, vibratory growl of the Reverse Flash sneered, his bright suit appearing even more imposing against the dark midnight blue of the evening sky.

“You intercepted my message to the Flash. How?” Iris demanded, not quite angry but definitely unhappy. If she had known who was coming, she wouldn’t have called him here to the rooftop of Eddie’s and her apartment block.

“Irrelevant. I did. He’s not coming,” the Reverse Flash dismissed. A dark blue sheet hanging on the nearby clothes line blew in the breeze, creating an ominous curtain of darkness between them—until he irritably slapped it out of his face, ruining the effect. “I require your assistance.”

“Oh, you think it’s that easy, huh?” Iris scoffed placing her hands on her hips. “Why should I do
that? This is a breach of trust! How am I supposed to work like this?!”

The Reverse Flash chuckled. “You don’t trust me,” he said as though calling a bluff. “You’ll help me because I will help you in exchange. Those are my terms. Accept them.”

“You do not control me. If you ever try to order me around again, we are done talking,” Iris snapped at him unexpectedly. “Forever. Have I made myself clear?”

Eobard stared at her for a few seconds, taken aback. “You can’t talk to me like that.”

“Do you understand me, E?” Iris stood her ground, her hands perched on her hips and her expression dangerous.

Eobard glared straight back. His hand began to vibrate and he lifted it in a harmless but intimidating gesture. Iris’ expression didn’t change, nor did her mahogany brown eyes cease boring into his infernal red ones.

“Cut that out!” She sounded as if she were scolding a tantruming youngster. No one but Frost had ever dared to treat him that way. Eobard found himself obeying in spite of himself.

“I understand. I will not be treated like a child!” he warned her.

Iris arched her eyebrows at him. “Then stop acting like one. What do you want from me now?”

Eobard unzipped a hidden pocket in the chest of his suit and slipped out a thin folder. “I need you to look into this for me. No one else is to know about it.”

“This relates to my investigation. I’m eventually going to share any findings relevant to my story.”

“Yes, but not in the immediate future. This exchange of ours is time sensitive. There are lives which depend on it.”

Iris eyed him, one corner of her mouth quirking upward knowingly. “Anyone else I know?”

“Yes,” Eobard confirmed, restating to reinforce his conditions, “Your colleagues cannot be made aware of it.”

Iris read through the scant papers in the folder and nodded. “That works.” She tucked the file away in her bag. “Actually, I think there is something that you could do for me.”
Eobard phased through the front door to his recently repaired house and pulled down his cowl.

“You have received multiple text messages from Barry Allen during your absence,” Gideon informed him, as he unclasped the chestpiece.

“Urgent?” he questioned, half-interested and shrugged out of the upper half of his suit.

“I would characterize them as agitated,” his twin clarified.

Eobard sped over to retrieve his cellphone from the coffee table and read the messages himself.

9:00pm

*Hey. R u still awake? Call if ur still up 2 talk.*

9:25pm

*Srry. sleep well We’ll talk2morrow*

10:01pm

*At the lab. Where r u?*

10:15pm

*Txt me back*

10:22pm

*Harrison?!!*

Eobard shook his head at the string of needy texts. Barry meant well, but his unnecessary over-protection was grating on the combat android’s last nerve. Eobard sped out of the room to hide his speedsuit and changed into pajamas, slipping into bed as he texted back. *What? I’m fine.* Eobard switched on his charger and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for the inevitable. A stubborn little fur ball leapt up to sit on his chest shortly after.

*Babe. where r u?*

Eobard eyed Barry’s message with irritation. *I refuse to answer to that.*

*Harrison. Im serious U scared me!*

“Not enough to make you use proper orthography,” Eobard muttered, reaching down to deactivate his dock, before responding, *I’m in bed.*

MOE looked up, disappointed that the warm vibrations of Eobard’s charging process had ceased. Eobard raised his core temperature for her on a whim and stroked her fur until she settled back down.

*At ur house? Whyd u go home?*
Eobard felt he could hear the young speedster’s frustrated voice through the text somehow. He replied Because I live here. Nothing bad has happened unless I slept through it.

A couple minutes later a gold glow announced the speedster’s arrival at his doorstep. The doors opened accompanied by an exclamation of, “You didn’t even lock the door!”

“If either of the metas that we are currently dealing with decided to kill me tonight, I doubt that a locked door would stop them,” Eobard reasoned. Barry came to stand in the bedroom doorway, looking annoyed.

“You could at least try to make it difficult for them,” Barry reproached, as Eobard gently scooped up MOE and moved her onto the mattress beside him, pulling himself up to sit with his back against the squared, black headboard. She tried to climb back onto him while he was peeling back the covers.

“I have the Flash standing in my bedroom doorway. How could I be any safer?” Eobard responded, nudging the kitten gently aside and scooting towards Wells’ chair. “No, MOE. In a second.” He rubbed behind her ears to calm her before making the final move into the chair. Barry smiled slightly, moving closer to sit back against the dresser and watch. MOE surveyed Eobard’s movements as he got himself comfortably situated, then leaped into his lap.

“I knew you liked her,” Barry commented upon the absent-minded massage the purring kitten was receiving.

“She’s a baby animal. I can’t mistreat her,” Eobard amended, steering around the bed to lead his guest out into the living room.

“Oh-huh,” his fawning visitor disbelieved.

“What did you want to talk with me about?”

Barry dropped himself onto the couch, pausing for a moment to study his partner’s face before responding. He pulled a voice recorder out of his pocket and set it on the coffee table. “I took this from a crime scene,” he confessed, sounding resigned.

“Barry! Why would you do that? You know that’s a crime.”

“Because I didn’t have a choice.” Barry reached out and pressed play.

“You find yourself in a deepening state of peril,” Richard’s voice intoned.

“Tell me about it.” Eobard recognized his own response from the Shade’s figurative ambush at Jitters’.

“You’re being targeted by quite an intriguing new player.”

“This isn’t what it sounds like. I know that you’re upset and I understand how this must look,” Eobard assured his restless reverse, speaking right over the Shade’s reply.

“Do you?” Barry countered, pointedly looking down at the recorder as Eobard’s own words came back to haunt him.

"I have encountered this threat before, many years ago. He murdered someone very close to me. I had no choice but to go to ground and keep quiet. As he no doubt intended, the matter was never truly resolved."
Eobard looked up to find Barry’s striking green eyes already intent on his own. “Richard just came up to me that morning at Jitters’. He started talking to me about a new threat, offering an open contract. I didn’t accept it. He knew that I wouldn’t. I told him to leave!”


“I believe he prefers the term ‘assassin’.”

“Since when are you on a first name basis with a self-proclaimed assassin?!”

“I don’t hire his services. I’ve only used him as a source of information a few times. It was perfectly harmless!”

Barry’s eyes widened and he looked about ready to leap up off the couch and try physically to shake some sense into him. “Do you even hear yourself, Harrison!? That man kills people for money and you think that being anywhere near him is harmless! Are you insane? He could murder you on a whim!” He exclaimed loudly, causing MOE to flee into the kitchen with a dissatisfied rumble.

“Please,” Eobard unwisely scoffed.

“He’s probably the one who recorded this and sold it to the meta!” Barry continued, starting to pace. “Who was murdered? Was it...”

“That tape was left in Dr. Rush’s apartment for you to find,” Eobard theorized rather than address the question “He’s obviously trying to splinter our team.”

“Or to cast suspicion onto you. That doesn’t matter; nobody else heard it,” Barry countered, then stopped pacing. “Who-- Hang on. You recognized him, didn’t you? This whole time you knew and you didn’t tell me! How am I supposed to protect you if I don’t know what I’m dealing with?”

“I was trying to protect you!” Eobard snapped, shocking Barry into silence. It was even true, regardless of the fact that Eobard could never explain it without losing him. That thought caused an untraceable, unexpected pain that he tried not to reflect upon. “We weren’t even supposed to be at the University that night. My roommate was suspicious that someone had been following us, asking strange questions... So, he went back to confront them. He died because he chose to protect me. He told me to leave him behind and I did.” Eobard squeezed his eyes tightly shut, still bothered by his error. “He wasn’t supposed to die!”

Barry shook his head, his anger evaporating and knelt down in front of Wells’ chair, taking both of Eobard’s hands in his own. “Harrison, please… You need to tell me.”

Eobard pulled off Wells’ glasses with a challenging glare.

“This isn’t the same,” Barry assured him in a hushed, soothing voice.

“I didn’t see his face that night, but I heard his voice. It was the same voice that I heard at the processing plant,” Eobard carefully phrased the truth in a deceptive pattern, knowing that he could neither lie, nor tell Barry the truth about his future self. “I can’t tell you anything more than that.”

Barry’s expression changed, turning speculative. “Wait. You said he killed your roommate...”

“Yes? Tess died in a car accident. If you thought--” Eobard stopped short when Barry shook his head, apparently piecing a puzzle together in his mind. Eobard suddenly wondered how much the Flash had eavesdropped on his rooftop conversation with Iris West before interrupting their meeting. “What is it?”
“I--” Barry caught himself and lied poorly in order to cover it, “It’s nothing. I just think I’m starting to understand-- It’s not important.”

“Are you sure?” Eobard pursued, just to make him sweat a little.

“Yes,” Barry replied, subconsciously shaking his head. “Listen, I don’t like you staying here alone while there are meta-criminals after you.”

“You could stay with me,” Eobard offered, leaning closer.

“I’d like that,” Barry smilingly accepted before Eobard claimed his lips in a lingering kiss. Barry pulled back to rest their foreheads together smiling with his eyes closed. Eobard leaned in and nipped at his lip, deepening the kiss. Barry moaned, clinging to him only to pull away in the next moment, a tad breathless. “I’ll just sleep on the couch again.”

“What?” Eobard muttered, confused, as he watched Barry stand and stretch. Barry pulled his thin maroon sweater off, causing the t-shirt under it to bunch up and reveal the finely muscled chest underneath. Now he was just messing with him, Eobard decided and reached up to trace a line down his reverse’s torso. He felt Barry tremble under the soft touch. “Or we could share the bed. I think you’ll find that more…” He hooked his fingertips under the fly of Barry’s jeans. “Satisfying.”

Barry sucked in a sharp breath and caught his hand, gently removing it. “Harrison.”

Eobard looked questioningly up at him, uncertain. “I thought you wanted me.”

Barry sighed. “I do, but not like this. Not because you’re scared.”

“I wasn’t…” No, that was a lie, Eobard realized. He sat back in Wells’ chair, feeling very small and very lost. “What if there isn’t time to wait for the right moment? You don’t know what’s going to happen in our future. What if right now is all we have?”

“I won’t let that happen,” Barry said it like a promise that he knew he’d never break but Eobard knew he couldn’t keep it.

The next day, Barry and Caitlin searched the area under the interchange for almost a half an hour. Most of the small community of homeless people around this area were notably averse to talking with them once they mentioned The Burning Man. They were too afraid. The charity worker that Caitlin had spoken with before they split up had at least been willing to confirm that “The Burning Man” matched Ronnie’s description to a “t.” That was probably all the help they were going to get. Barry was just about to give up and walk back over to offer Caitlin a lift back to the lab when he caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey.”

There was a shuffling as whoever it was scurried out of sight. Barry chased after the sound and found himself at a pile of dusty and dirty salvaged items at the bottom of one of the massive concrete supports.

“Hello?” Barry searched around, but saw no sign of the homeless phantom. He knelt down to look. There was an old, torn and stained sleeping bag that smelled faintly of the dumpster it had been salvaged from; a badly stained sweatshirt that was missing a sleeve had been balled up at the head in place of a pillow and at the foot was a plastic bag filled with stolen or salvaged food in various stages
Barry reached in and drew out the half-molded loaf of stale bread that looked as if someone had been interrupted while tearing at the middle. They had clearly dropped it in a hurry. Barry smelled something burning and went stock still, hearing footsteps close behind him.

“Leave me alone!”

Barry rolled to the side and the fireball seared past him, leaving a black mark on the support beyond.

“Professor Stein!” Barry leapt to his feet sparkling with speed-force. “Please, I don’t want to hurt you!” He sped out of the way of a larger arc of inferno aimed at his head and began to speed around the attacking meta in a circle, hoping to disorient him enough to end the fight quickly. FIRESTORM lashed out a couple of times only to be foiled by the whirlwind that Barry was beginning to develop. Then he let out a wordless shout and blew a rush of searing heat in all directions. The small explosion sent Barry flying.

Coughing and gasping for air, Barry stumbled upright and shed his flaming jacket. “Ah…” he coughed a couple times before continuing to lament, “That was a gift from Iris!”

“Go. Away.” Dr. Stein warned.

Barry fell into a more battle-ready stance. “I’m trying to help! Why does everybody have to make that so difficult lately!?” He sped forward only to be knocked down by another plume of flames that this time continued to blaze over his head as he cowered on the packed dirt, keeping him from moving.

“Oh my God!” a familiar, feminine voice exclaimed. A pair of indigo heels marched up to face him, and in a dazzling clash of white and orange, frigid cold spread out to fend off the encroaching inferno. “You both need to take a breath and chill out!” With one last push, Caitlin’s ice overtook the startled fire meta’s flame, causing him to stagger back a step. The conjoined men stared up at her, slack-jawed.

“Cait?”

“Ronnie?” Caitlin replied, her darkening eyes full of hope.

“I-- No. No, I’m sorry. I’m not, but I-- he remembers you.”

“Dr. Stein,” Caitlin recalled, sadly. “I know this is a lot for you to accept, but we are here to help you. As you can see, you and Ronnie weren’t the only ones who were changed when the particle accelerator exploded. We can help you find a way to fix this, but you’re going to have to trust us.”

The rogue physicist looked at Barry’s wary face then back to Caitlin’s pleading expression, uncertain.

“Please, give us a chance to bring you home.”

Cisco smiled and turned the computer screen on Barry’s lab desk at the CCPD to face Joe. “We got ‘em! Two separate blood types identified within the sample.”

“One for each speedster,” Joe interpreted.

“That’s what I’m thinking. We won’t know conclusively until I start the identification process,”
Cisco clarified, crossing over to the other terminal. “But I’d say there’s a pretty good chance. One is type A positive and the other is AB negative which is super rare. I’m going to run them both through the system and see if we can get a positive match.”

“Can you run them against a specific person?” the Detective inquired.

“Yeah, sure. As long as I have a sample to test against,” Cisco confirmed distractedly, still more focused on his search in the database. “Who are we looking at?”

“Dr. Harrison Wells,” Joe responded. Cisco frowned and turned in place to face him, his back stick straight. He felt as if the universe was trying extra hard this week to knock him off-kilter.

“I thought you wanted me to help you figure out who killed Barry’s mom,” he responded with what he felt was justified offense beginning to creep into his tone.

“I do,” Joe stated in a careful voice. “I would also like to keep this between the two of us.”

“You think that Dr. Wells could have killed Barry’s mom,” Cisco voiced the premise aloud in hopes that the older man would hear how outlandish it sounded.

“I don’t know, but I do know that man keeps secrets…” Joe began, standing up to join the young engineer at Barry’s wall-mounted computer setup. Before he could finish his argument, however, a new voice chimed in.

“Everybody has secrets,” Barry interjected, walking into view to drop his black, ergonomic backpack on his desk. “What are you guys doing in my lab?”

“We were going to tell you-- We found some new blood evidence relating to your mom’s murder,” Cisco explained uncomfortably, squirming under his friend’s stare. “I am so sorry, Barry.”

“Was it type O negative?” Barry returned tiredly.

“No…”

“Then don’t bother,” Barry answered, directing his words mostly at Joe.

The Detective’s eyebrows headed for his hairline. “You know Wells’ blood type?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you know that?”

“You’d be surprised the topics that come up after repeated attempts on the life of a loved one,” Barry shot back.

The others stared at him; Cisco was braced for Joe’s explosion and Joe was still considering Barry’s word choice with deep suspicion.

“Get out of my lab.”

Joe’s eyes widened and he looked like he was really about to tear into his foster child. Surprisingly, Barry met his guardian’s ire with a dark look in his eyes, as if daring him to try something. Joe bit back his anger for the time being, gesturing with a pointed finger.

“You and I are gonna have a long talk about this later.”
Cisco paused beside the angered CSI on his way to the door. “Sorry, Man. I didn’t know he was going to do that.”

Barry closed his eyes and leaned over his desk with his head hanging as if making a monumental effort to remain calm until Cisco and Joe’s footfalls faded away. He straightened up, all signs of unrest vanished, and sent an uncharacteristic, mocking sneer in their direction. He unzipped his bag and got to work.

Barry sat on the edge of the counter next to the computer, watching Dr. Wells’ frown deepening as he scoured the molecular data on FIRESTORM. Caitlin was on the other side of the glass, giving their meta-human patients a physical.

Dr. Wells let out a huff, practically wringing his hands.

“What is it?” Barry asked but Hartley pushed past him, striding in through the door to the main lab.

“Let me see,” Hartley bent over Dr. Wells, reaching past him to access the keyboard. “I was right. It’s progressing even faster than I thought.” He absently rested his free hand on Dr. Wells’ shoulder.

Barry’s lips thinned.

“You’re telling her,” Hartley told his superior, his voice quiet to suit their close proximity.

“Am I?” Dr. Wells challenged wryly.

Hartley looked out through the window to see Caitlin deep in conversation with Dr. Stein, then back to Dr. Wells. “I won’t freeze to death over this. You, on the other hand...”

Dr. Wells let out a dry chuckle.

Barry stood up, crossing his arms over his chest, shooting Hartley a pointed look. The Piper rolled his eyes and backed off to lean against the wall, raising his hands in mock-submission. Dr. Wells needlessly adjusted his glasses before tapping the intercom.

“Dr. Snow, a word, please?”

“Are you okay?” Barry inquired, sympathetically as she entered.

“Fine,” Caitlin answered a little too quickly, shutting the door behind her.

“Fine,” Hartley echoed lightly.

“I’m alright. It’s just... confusing. What have you found?” Caitlin inquired, still trying to act unaffected. Dr. Wells paused for a second before he opened his mouth to deliver the bad news.

“Ah. I’m going to leave now,” Hartley cut in, then disappeared into the Cortex.

“Bad news,” Caitlin deduced, crossing her arms as if to brace herself. “How bad?”

“Ronnie’s body is attacking Stein’s atoms in a manner similar to an intense immune response. The resulting instability is causing an exothermic reaction,” Dr. Wells answered, keeping his eyes locked on the screen in front of him.
Caitlin crossed over from her place by the door to stand over his chair and Barry could feel the cold beginning to radiate from her presence.

“And so what does that mean?” he prompted when the physicist fell prematurely quiet.

“If this instability continues unchecked the resultant uncontrolled fission—”

“You’re saying he could go nuclear?!” Barry realized, horrified.

“How long?” Caitlin demanded, her voice sounding slightly eerie.

“At the current rate of molecular degradation… no more than a couple of hours,” Dr. Wells predicted.

“But you can stop this, right? You can separate them?” Barry questioned. Rising from his perch to follow as Dr. Wells maneuvered his chair out into the Cortex.

“Dr. Wells?” Caitlin pushed, following barely more than a step behind his chair.

Dr. Wells fidgeted. “I don’t know.”

Hartley’s loud scoff negated him.

“Have something to add, Hartley?” Caitlin’s frosty meta-human drawl prompted.

Hartley tensed immediately, looking braced for an attack, “The risk factor is too high. Any attempt to separate them could jump-start the nuclear chain reaction and trigger an explosion that would level the city,” he explained, his hazel grey eyes flicking from Caitlin to Dr. Wells as if uncertain whose reaction he should be more worried about.

Caitlin simply turned back to her mentor expectantly. “So what do we do?”

Dr. Wells pulled his gaze off the ground to face her, “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no time to study the problem, no means of containment for this kind of a threat,” Hartley explained.

“There has to be something that we can do,” Barry disagreed.

“If the host body were to cease functioning—” Dr. Wells began, sounding oddly divorced from his own words.

“No,” Caitlin rejected.

“If the host body were to cease functioning, it would cease the energetic—”

“What about another option?” Barry intercepted.

“You’re not killing anybody,” Caitlin said firmly.

“This city has a population of 9,054,756 people! You asked me if I knew of a way to prevent them from dying in a nuclear blast and as much as I hate it, this is the only fact-based solution that I have to offer!” Dr. Wells objected. “I assure you. I have no desire to kill either of them but I don’t see another way out of this.”

“Then find one,” Caitlin ordered, her pale eyes piercing directly into his blue ones. Her tone left no
room for argument. “I know you. I know what you’re capable of: fix *this*.” It was not an expectation that he could stand to disappoint. There was an ultimatum in here tone that everyone could hear, even if only the android could understand it completely. There was a moment of heavy silence before Caitlin strode out of the room, probably to find a place to calm down without risk of harming others. After a few seconds’ hesitation Hartley followed her out.

“I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t try for a better solution if possible, but… I have looked at the data. Two hours is not enough time. I can’t perform miracles! There are laws—”

Barry pulled a desk chair over to sit facing his boyfriend and grasped both the other man's hands in his. “Hey. Easy. I understand, it’s a longshot, but you’ll think of something.”

“How has it never occurred to either of you that perhaps there is no alternative!? I am a scientist, a leader in my field. That does not give me the power to circumvent physics! We are risking the future of this entire city due to some misguided hope that I—”

“Harrison, listen, it isn’t about that. We all know what’s at stake here, but this is the man that Caitlin loves! She’s already lost him once… I get it, okay? If it were you in his place, I’m pretty sure that I’d be just as unreasonable.”

Eobard squeezed his eyes shut, letting his head fall forward onto their joined hands. That was pretty close to the last thing he wanted to hear.

“I know, but it’s the truth,” Barry continued earnestly, slipping one hand free of the tangle to begin running his fingers through Harrison’s messy hair. “Even if it meant that I had to turn back time… We do whatever we have to—”

The android sat up, haunted by an unpleasant memory. “Humans will do terrible things to protect the ones they love…” Eobard distractedly quoted his Admin’s first murderous confession as an idea began to take form.

“I don’t know… Maybe some people.” Barry studied his partner’s face, wondering exactly how concerned he should be about the ominous statement. “You’ve got an idea?”

“We can’t turn back time, but I might know a way that we can do the next best thing,” Harrison headed out of the Cortex without elaborating on the odd concept.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to test a theory. Find Cisco, tell him to meet me back here and to bring his soldering iron.”
Caitlin paced outside the hidden entrance to the Time Vault. She knew that it needed Eobard’s palm print to unseal it. She had already wandered in behind him for a moment of respite in the morning to look through the hidden drawer in the wall that held anachronistic components meant to save her android friend. Eobard hadn’t asked her to explain; he had simply shown her how to work the control dome that governed it and left her to it. This morning Caitlin had only feared for his life, but he was a machine, therefore fixable. She didn’t like being reminded that she could still lose him, but now Ronnie? Their entire city was at risk... Eobard was an artificial hyper intelligence from the future; he would save them. He was inhumanly indifferent at the worst possible times, and she had threatened him. Caitlin chewed her bottom lip in an old nervous habit. He would figure out this nuclear chain reaction problem and then she would apologize, she amended internally.

“It’s going to be fine,” Caitlin told herself aloud. “He always knows how to fix things. It’s probably part of his design or something. We’ll all make it out of this. We have to.” The anxious geneticist squeezed her eyes shut. “You’re talking to a blank wall. Get it together, Caitlin!” Frustrated with her own foolishness she pulled herself up straighter and marched back to her lab to bury herself in work. She didn’t want to face her reality anymore.

“This is what we’re building?” Hartley questioned, eyeing the blueprint that Dr. Wells had just laid out on the worktable in front of them.

“These are the specs,” Dr. Wells agreed.

“For the device we are going to use on Ronnie and Stein,” the skepticism was becoming clearer in Hartley’s voice.

“Yes.”

“In less than two hours.”

“You seem to understand the plan. Is there a question pending?” the android responded, unmoved. Hartley pulled an indignant scowl, gesticulating dramatically.

“This is unique technology. Every part is unique, next gen… at the least! How do you expect us to assemble this device and test it in that amount of time? How do we even have the parts for this??”

“According to my calculations we can assemble the quantum splicer in the time allotted if we begin work immediately. I cannot guarantee enough time to test its proper functioning. That will most likely have to be done in the field,” Dr. Wells explained.
Hartley narrowed his eyes at his ex. “You haven’t answered my second question. Why?”

Barry’s brow furrowed faintly in response to the challenge to his boyfriend’s credibility.

“I own the research facility that you’re standing in, Hartley. Where do you think I got the components?” Dr. Wells dismissed. The speedster, content with the pretext, turned to face the newcomer he could hear walking towards them through the entrance at his back.

“What is everybody doing in my lab?” Cisco inquired, then paused to frown at his own phrasing. “Oh, hey: *déjà vu*. ” He turned to Barry, expecting recognition but received only a questioning glance from the speedster. Cisco squinted, raising a finger. “Okay, so did you just speed here ahead of me and change back into the clothes you wore yesterday for some reason? Because this is kind of creeping me out.”

Barry’s brow knitted together in puzzlement at the strange accusation. “What?”

“Well, that was abstract,” Hartley remarked flippantly, “Let’s try it again. Welcome back, Cisquito. Good news: you’re just in time to help us stop a nuclear explosion from destroying the city.”

“You really need to stop calling me--Hold on. Did you just say ‘nuclear explosion’, because that is *so* not funny …and that doesn’t sound like the kind of thing you’d--A nuclear explosion, here? Like, right here, here?”

“Yes. Are you done?” Hartley replied in a bored voice.

“Holy crap! We’re going to blow up and I haven’t finished watching the new season of Game of Thrones yet! I’ll never know Tyrion Lannister’s fate!” Cisco fretted.

“Relax. I refuse to risk even the unlikeliest off chance of sharing an afterlife with you, so that’s not going to happen,” Hartley insult-comforted his rival. Cisco considered the other genius for a moment, then shrugged in apparent acceptance.

“Whatever. So, how do we not die?” he addressed this question specifically to Dr. Wells.

Eobard opened his mouth, but Hartley’s snarky reply beat him to the punch.

“We build this incredibly intricate, unheard-of device the designs for which Harrison suddenly pulled out of his ass and then strap it to the spontaneously fissioning metas and hope.”

“Oh,” Cisco picked up the specs, ran his eyes over the pages for a few seconds, then sat down at the lab table next to his boss as if this were totally normal. “Okay, how much time do we have?”

“Approximately one and a half hours,” Dr. Wells supplied.

Hartley stared at them, incredulous. “How are you fine with this?”

“This isn’t the first time that Dr. Wells has saved the day with a spontaneous breakthrough. Pass me that nano-welder, please.”

Hartley complied.

“By the way. I’ve got the base section covered, unless one of you already called dibs,” Cisco belatedly clarified, already hard at work with Dr. Wells on the bulk of the device.

Hartley let out an over-dramatic sigh and sat in the chair opposite them to focus begrudgingly on his own portion of the work.
Iris smiled up at Eddie from where she sat perched on the edge of his desk in the CCPD bullpen. He slowed to shoot his partner an uncertain glance, but Joe acted as if neither of them existed, returning to his own desk to do paperwork.

“Iris. This is a surprise,” Eddie stopped to give her a peck on the lips before pulling out his own desk chair. “I thought you had to work today.”

“I do. I am working,” Iris replied pulling out the notebook from behind her back. “And a little bird told me that you and your Taskforce just took over the Rush murder investigation. Can you confirm that there was a meta involved?” The reporter interrogated, unable to see the way her father’s head popped up to stare at her upon hearing her unique word choice.

“A what?” Eddie wondered.

“A meta. That’s what people like the Flash call themselves,” Iris informed him matter-of-factly. “At least some of them do. I haven’t talked to many in person, and you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I can’t comment on an open investigation, you know that,” Eddie reminded her.

“I can promise to delay release of any sensitive information for the time being. I just want a foundation to build on,” Iris persisted. “This could be related to an ongoing story that I’m researching.”

“I doubt that it’s related,” Eddie assured her. Iris flipped open her notebook.

“Why do you say that?”

“Come on,” Eddie urged with a nervous smile. Iris only watched him expectantly. “Ok, fine. None of the ‘metas’ you’ve been tracking for your story were involved. No Flash, no Man in Yellow—”

“Reverse Flash,” Iris muttered the correction absentmindedly, failing to notice how it grabbed her father’s attention. “You don’t know about everything that I’m looking into.” She jotted something down in her notes, much to her boyfriend’s discomfort. “So, there was a meta involved in Jason Rush’s murder.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know Eddie, but you didn’t say it wasn’t true either.”

“That’s not...”

“And now you just made the face.” Iris observed with an adoring smile.

Eddie huffed defensively. “I did— What face?”

“That cute flustered face you make when you’re trying to cover that you’ve just let something slip out that you were trying to keep in.”

“It’s not that cute,” Joe commented as he sorted through some pages in a folder on his desk in search of his phone.

“Is the meta a suspect?” Iris questioned.
Eddie opened his mouth and closed it, looking to Joe for aid.

“Aw. That’s okay,” Iris leaned down and kissed his cheek. “You’ve been very helpful. See you tonight for dinner?”

“I, uh, yeah.”

“Great! Bye Dad.” With a carefree wave, Iris headed out to track the more difficult lead her contact had given her.

Cisco was just coming back from Caitlin’s lab. He had originally intended to check in with her about their plan to use the Quantum Splicer to separate Ronnie from Dr. Stein, but now they had split up to search for the missing metas. FIRESTORM wasn’t in any of the labs in this wing, nor were they in the Cortex, nor the treadmill room with Barry. Caitlin had gone to check downstairs, but they were running out of sections to search. He really hoped that Prof. Stein hadn’t somehow wandered down to the pipeline and gotten into trouble. Well, more trouble…

“So, tell me what she has on you,” Hartley’s voice drifted out of Cisco’s lab towards the aforementioned scientist’s ears.

“What makes you so certain that I would not simply prefer to save our friend’s life if at all possible?” Dr. Wells deflected.

"Don't bother trying to fool me, Harrison, we both know that you're not a good guy. I've just determined that compared to Thing One and Thing Two out there you're probably the lesser evil." There was a fleeting pause before Hartley’s voice speculated, “Dr. Snow has always been loyal to you. Whatever that was back in the Cortex, something has caused your relationship to change, enough to make you pull this anachronism out of whatever hidey hole you’d stashed it away in just to calm her down… She knows your secret, doesn’t she?”

“That doesn’t concern you.”

“Try again. I want to know: what is this or rather what was this? Because I headed R&D for you for a long time and I know a next gen prototype when I see it.”

“It’s irrelevant,” Dr. Wells answered, sounding upset. There was a pause, then he admitted, “It was Plan B. It doesn’t matter; I won’t be around to need a plan B if we don’t fix this problem first.”

“Need it for what?”

“Enough, Hartley!” Dr. Wells snapped. “We have to get this done.”

Cisco stood there, frowning at the wall. After everything they'd been through, he had almost started to forget his feelings of betrayal over his mentor's last mea culpa. Dr. Wells was still hiding things from the team. A secret prototype? Why? And what the hell could he mean by Plan B? Cisco remembered Joe’s suspicions only half-voiced during their conversation back at the crime lab. Sure, everybody has secrets, but why keep this kind of secret, again?

Iris drove past the apartment building that housed the scene of her boyfriend’s homicide investigation, waving at the police on guard before she steered around the block. She checked her side mirror to be certain that none of the officers were looking her way before driving into the back
alley on the other side of the street and getting out. The fire escape up the back of the shooter’s building of choice was stuck so that Iris had to use the roof of her car as a platform to pull herself up, then reached down to lift her bag up behind her. Then she paused.

“Well, what do you know…?” Iris tucked her hair behind her ear before activating the camera function on her phone and taking a few careful pictures of newfound evidence. The ladder wasn’t stuck, not in the traditional way, at least. The metal on either side had been warped and melted together, the molten steel shaped like two tightly held fistfuls of Playdoh. She wondered to herself whether Barry’s friends at STAR Labs might be able to extrapolate any more identifying information from these hand prints, and jotted it down on her mental to-do list. “So, heat is your thing, huh?”

She stood up and continued her ascent towards the roof, trying to sustain as quiet and unassuming a presence as possible on the metal grating. It took her twice as long as it would’ve if she hadn’t had to be so covert about it, but eventually, Iris reached the second crime scene: the spot from which the sniper had taken his shot and killed Dr. Jason Rush with a single bullet through his apartment window. Iris made her way over to the other side of the roof to find the exact vantage point. The place where his rifle had been found was still marked off with tape. Walking along the line of brick, the intrepid reporter was brought to a surprised halt by a piece of improbable graffiti; the letters ZYX were marked onto the brick in black. It confirmed her hunch about why E was so interested in this murder: the false Reverse must have been the shooter. Iris took a tissue out of her purse to probe the letters, and drew away to rub the crumbling powder between her thumb and forefinger: soot.

“Okay, you were sending a message. Let’s see if you might show me a little more about who you are?” Iris thought aloud, positioning herself in the mystery-meta’s place and trying to gauge the shot, then frowned. It was absurd. The gun he had been using hadn’t had a sight on it. The figurative keyhole opening through the parting in Rush’s curtains was simply too small a gap for him to have any hope of aiming without one. Even with the window fully open Rush’s head would be a ridiculously difficult target. Iris was no sniper, but she’d grown up taking regular visits to the gun range with her father and had damned good aim even if she’d never had to fire at anything other than inanimate practice targets…and that one rabid raccoon that had chased Barry into Auntie Jan’s backyard during an otherwise uneventful springtime visit in their teen years. Iris had hit the crazed animal with a kill shot to the head before it could start toward her end of the wraparound porch.

“So, how did you see that?” She snapped a few more pictures of the viewpoint and the letters burned into brick for future reference. “I guess there’s more to you than fire and lethal impersonations,” Iris reflected, pushing herself to her feet with a sleeve-wrapped palm.

“You’re definitely right about that,” a deep, artificially distorted voice concurred from directly behind her. Iris sucked in a shocked gasp and whirled around just as the killer’s armored glove took hold of her arm. This meta’s armor was similar in pattern to the Reverse Flash’s except that it was comprised of thin interlocking plates of light, yet diamond-tough material. It was currently of a dark gunmetal grey, but Iris had no doubt that it had been bright yellow not long ago when this impostor had mimicked the appearance of her begrudging contact. She heard a low grind reverberate from the criminal now pressed flush against her. The voice modulator was making it sound like a hideous marriage of a snarl to a purr. “Ah, I’ve missed this physical contact. Excuse me for enjoying the moment with you.”

Iris grimaced at his perversion, glad that her free hand had finally found its goal. She pulled her hidden, just-in-case revolver out of her bag and held it under his chin. He reached up with the arm housing his sheathed blade. She squeezed the trigger.

“You’re not excused,” Iris spat as he stumbled back a few steps with his arms pinwheeling in an effort to regain equilibrium. Iris snatched up her bag, keeping the weapon trained on the
dishearteningly uninjured meta. That armor was clearly something else.

“Thhhhe-EE-ah… The p-p-poooolice will ha-ave HE-ard you--ooo-ooh,” her ambusher remarked through his damaged and audibly malfunctioning vocal filter. He straightened up, banging on the lower half of his helmet a couple of times as Iris darted to the fire escape. “Ru-u-uun.” Another clank punctuated his hollering after her. “Run; you cannot prevent me.”

Iris didn’t slow down to ponder the strange and ominous statement. She didn’t stop fleeing until she had pulled into her parking spot outside the Central Citizen’s Headquarters, then she collapsed forward against the top of her steering wheel and allowed herself a minor freak out. Iris didn’t know exactly how many minutes passed before she was jolted upright by the sound of someone tapping on the passenger’s side window. She let out the slightest fleeting yelp and raised her hands in a defensive gesture before recognizing that it was only Mason Bridge. He flashed her an openly forced smile and gestured to the door handle. Iris let out a heartfelt groan and slapped the button to unlock.

The Senior reporter slid into the passenger’s seat beside her and held out a paper cup. “So, partner, what’s the lead?”

Glaring, Iris accepted the proffered coffee. “What makes you so certain there’s a new lead?”

“You look like you just met Death himself. Either you just survived a car crash that left no damage on your car or…” he gestured flippantly. “You going to share with me why you look like that?”

“I just met Death himself,” Iris stated and took a long draw from her piping hot coffee, uncaring that it was too hot. It reminded her that she was somehow still alive.

“I’ve got him!” Cisco announced, drawing the attention of everyone gathered in the hub except for Dr. Wells, who was still making the final touches to the anachronistic prototype with Hartley’s assistance.

“You’ve located Dr. Stein?” Barry prompted.

“Yeah, it looks like he’s... in the middle of nowhere .”

“Specificity, please,” Hartley cut in impatiently as he helped to place a fragile-looking coil into the center of the device and held it steady so that his boss could weld it in.

“The badlands, 30 miles out,” Cisco clarified. Continuing in sync with the testy prodigy “Minimum safe distance.”

“He’s trying to sacrifice himself!” Caitlin concluded, crossing over from where she’d been pacing along the back of the hub to stand over her boss. “Dr. Wells!?"

“Almost finished,” Eobard responded with incongruous calm.

“But this will stop it?” Caitlin asked anxiously.

“We can’t know that without--” Hartley protested only to be cut off by Eobard’s certainty.

“Yes,” the android confirmed placing the casing and securing it with a careful press of his fingers around the edge. Hartley watched this action closely then pinned him with a look that scolded him without need for words. Luckily, the only people close enough to have seen the casual act of
inhuman strength were the two who were already in on his secret.

“Okay,” Caitlin accepted, not seeming to care about the lapse. She scooped the finished device up off the worktable. “Let’s get this out to them.”

“What?” Barry exclaimed. “No, Caitlin. I’m doing this. It’s too dangerous to risk anyone else.”

“You don’t know how to program the device and we don’t have time to teach you,” Caitlin corrected, snatching up a comm link from the desk and hooking it over her ear. “Right, Hartley?”

“In twelve minutes?” he cynically confirmed.

“Wha– Cisco can walk me through it,” Barry argued.

“I... don’t know how,” Cisco admitted, sounding as if the realization had only just dawned on him. Hartley held up his hands, shaking his head before Barry could voice his next question.

“Only the two of us can,” Eobard said truthfully. “You can take me.”

“No.” A chorus of teammates rejected which unexpectedly included Hartley. Curious, Eobard gave him the side-eye which he seemed to find insulting.

Caitlin arched her eyebrows at the Flash as if to say ‘now what?’.

Barry let out an unhappy sound. “Fine. You put that on him then I’m getting you out of there, agreed?”

“Agreed,” Caitlin accepted and practically jumped into his arms. They vanished in a blur.

A few seconds after the two had left an alert beeped from Cisco’s station at the hub.

“What’s that?” Hartley asked, rising from his seat to stretch. Cisco was staring at the computer screen as if it had just proclaimed itself the Queen of Sheba.

“Hmm?”

“Something wrong?” Dr. Wells checked, not sounding at all concerned.

“Uh. Nope, it’s just a minor malfunction. The comms. I’ll be back in a sec,” Cisco hastily excused himself. Hartley squinted at his retreating back, then looked at Eobard.

“You know he was lying, don’t you?”

“Mmm-hm,” the android confirmed continuing to put tools away as if nothing at all was wrong.

“Don’t you care?” Hartley interrogated.


Hartley breathed out a laugh. “Now that sounds more like you.”
Meanwhile, Cisco was making a nervously covert phone call.

“Cisco,” Joe answered.

“Okay so, I’m not proud of it but I ran those blood samples that we pulled from the murder scene,” the engineer confessed, continuing to put more and more distance between himself and the Cortex. “I actually ran them a few times, like, a ton of times just to be sure that I wasn’t making some really weird, really bad mistake.”

“You got a match,” Joe determined. “Was it Wells?”

“No! I told you he’s got nothing to do with this!”

“Then why do you sound like you’re about to have a hard attack?” Joe questioned, as he poured himself a cup of coffee at the police break area.

“Because what I found is impossible! Okay? I got positive matches for both blood samples, both to people we know and both physically cannot have been there!”

“Cisco, you’re stalling. Tell me; who was it?”

“The AB-blood was Barry’s, but it had high levels of P16. That’s a protein in the blood that builds up over time and the levels were abnormally high. Way too much to have come from an eleven-year-old. There is no way the Barry that left this sample was the child at that scene,” Cisco took a deep, steadying breath and leaned against the cool mesh of the storage locker. “It only gets weirder from there. I am talking, like, Twilight Zone levels of weirdness!”

There was a silence over the line, then, Joe asked warily, “What did you find for the second sample?”

“I got another hit, like I said, but also a miss. The type A+ blood was a perfect genetic match to Caitlin, except that it was from a male and it was way too young. The sample was packed with stem cells for one thing and from the levels of P16, whoever bled this out couldn’t have been more than two or three!”

“I thought that you knew how to do this kind of thing,” Joe finally responded.

“Um, yeah I do, and I did. I’ve gone over this ten times. It’s creepy and impossible and according to forensic science, these are the facts. You can have Caitlin verify the results for you; we need to let the team know about it anyway. You’re still going to get the same results.”

Barry and Caitlin arrived in the badlands to see a lone figure just a few yards below them in a natural crater-like indentation, lifting a Glock to point at his temple.

“Professor Stein!” Barry shouted, releasing Caitlin who ran straight for the conjoined meta-humans.

“What? What are you doing here!? Get away! You can’t be here!” The meta’s voice cracked over the last words “Please, take her and go!”

“He couldn’t if he tried,” Caitlin’s inhuman voice corrected as she stepped down to face him. “Not while you’re dragging my fiancé down with you.”

“Dr. Snow, listen to me. It’s too late! All those people! I won’t take any more lives than I have
already!" Stein protested, but Caitlin wasn’t actually listening. She was tapping a quick syncopated rhythm into her comm link.

"Interface: activated. Visual assistance program: loading…" Gideon’s voice reported into her ear. Caitlin held her eyes shut for a second so that the light of the nano LED screens in the lenses she’d retrieved from the Time Vault wouldn’t give them away when they shimmered online.

“We can stop the explosion! No one else has to die today,” Barry replied to the panicked physicist, unknowingly providing a necessary distraction.

“How?” Prof. Stein demanded with a tentative hope beginning to show in his borrowed eyes.

“With this,” Caitlin pressed the Quantum Splicer to his chest and hit the controls as they were indicated by the blue and red lights of the visual interface. “It’s a fission device designed to bombard your atoms with as much energy as they were exposed to in the accelerator explosion. It will force your bodies to separate and halt the nuclear chain reaction.”

“That’s assuming that it works, which is a big assumption,” Prof. Stein noted, catching her wrists.

“What do you have to lose?” Caitlin pointed out, her expression unwavering as if she were only waiting for her inevitable victory. With a small nod he relented, allowing her to make the last adjustment and activate the device. For a second, nothing happened. Then flames burst from Ronnie’s hands, Caitlin eyed the flames with mild concern but didn’t move while Barry flinched, then started towards her.

“It’s not working!” he called out.

“Give them a minute,” Caitlin disagreed even as the flames spread up FIRESTORM’s arms.

“Barry, what’s happening?” Dr. Wells questioned over the comms.

“He’s ignited!” Barry reported before insisting “Caitlin, I’m sorry but we have to go!”

“It’s going to work,” Caitlin reaffirmed quietly, staring into her future husband’s face. His eyes flared white hot, and Professor Stein spared her an apologetic look before shoving her backward into the Flash’s outstretched arms. “NO!”

“You can’t outrun a nuclear blast, Flash, so I suggest that you push yourself into top speed as soon as possible,” Hartley instructed. Barry didn’t need to be told twice.

As they were speeding away a mushroom cloud exploded several miles behind them in their wake, dwarfing the dust cloud that the Flash was forming into oblivion. Caitlin buried her face in Barry’s shoulder, with neither paying any mind to the frost spreading over the surface of his suit. Eventually Barry tumbled to a stop. Their rolling landing was thankfully padded by sand and the thick layer of ash gathering atop it. Barry rolled onto his back, slightly breathless and violently shivering.

“Ow,” he finally acknowledged, probing at his encased shoulder with a careful fingertip.

“Sorry,” Caitlin’s frigid voice replied dispassionately.

“Barry? Barry, Caitlin, do you read me?” Dr. Wells’ voice requested over the comms.

“Yes.” Caitlin answered, pushing herself up into a sitting position and staring in the direction from which they’d just fled.
“Are you guys okay?” Cisco demanded, followed by Hartley’s voice in the background chastening:  

“Don’t yell into my mic.”

“Caitlin?” Barry rolled over and reached towards the testy elemental. “Are you?”

“I’m unharmed,” Caitlin clarified without looking at him.

“...Yeah, I’m okay too,” Barry confirmed, disturbed. “You know I had to do that.”

Caitlin got to her feet and walked past him as if he wasn’t there. She was more interested in the dissipating mushroom cloud. “Cisco, what are our rad levels?”

“Oh, no you guys didn’t...“ the young scientist’s voice fretted, only to flatten abruptly to incredulity. “Wait. No way!”

“To address your question, Dr. Snow,” Hartley interceded. “The Flash suit’s Geiger-counter is reading less than one millirad.”

Caitlin tilted her head as if in confirmation.

“Wait, but that’s normal. Are you guys sure it’s working?” Barry replied doubtfully.

“He said it would work,” Caitlin told him pointedly. “There is no radiation.”

“If I carry you back, you aren’t going to freeze me anymore, are you?” Barry tested.

“What?!” Dr. Wells interrogated.

“I’m fine,” Barry hastily assured, allowing Caitlin to wrap her arms around his shoulders without answering.

“He’s fine,” she agreed, her voice still sounding a little to cold for his comfort.

“Be careful, both of you. Whatever you guys are doing you have to get back here as soon as you can,” Dr. Wells cautioned, sounding wary. “Someone will have seen that explosion.”

“Understood,” Caitlin agreed as soon as Barry set her down at the edge of the crater, then led the descent towards her no longer conjoined patients.
Eobard lagged well behind the ecstatic Cisco on their way to greet their teammates at the elevator. Hartley was hovering in his shadow, an old habit that apparently hadn’t fully died away. Maybe it was just a fit of nostalgia. They heard the others’ happy exchange of greetings and unnecessary apologies up ahead before finally continuing into the view of the ragtag group. Cisco glanced back over his shoulder before stepping aside to let Dr. Wells through, still smiling broadly. In contrast, Ronnie’s smile waned at the sight of his old boss, then disappeared completely as he spotted Hartley.

“Welcome back, Mr. Raymond,” Dr. Wells said, smiling up at him. “For a while there I feared that we had lost you.”

“Thank you,” Ronnie replied giving his hand a firm shake, “It’s good to be back.” His eyes skimmed quickly over Dr. Wells’ wheelchair-bound state then flicked up to meet Hartley’s watchful stare. “It seems like a lot has changed in the time I was away.”

“Oh, did no one explain? A pillar fell on Harrison; he survived,” Hartley drawled with an even more pronounced level of detachment than usual, as if to make up for his earlier semblance of concern. “Thank God for small miracles, or however you say it.”

“I’m sorry…” Ronnie began, sounding like he was trying to avoid saying something unkind. Knowing him, he was likely trying to re-frame a rebuke into something constructive.

“We’re all sorry about Hartley,” Cisco remarked on his behalf.

Dr. Wells chuckled. “Really, you have no need to feel sorry. I was the one who put our lives in danger that night and because of you, we’ve all managed to make it out alive. Thank you.”

“And you brought him home,” Caitlin responded gratefully, hugging Ronnie’s arm with a blinding smile.

“Excuse me,” Prof. Stein piped up from where he was standing mostly unnoticed by the elevator doors. “Are we all planning to stand around and sing ‘Kumbaya’ next?”

“Professor Stein, I presume.” Eobard couldn’t help the conspiratorial smile teasing at the edges of his expression as he ‘met’ the Professor again.

“Harrison Wells,” the other physicist acknowledged without any hint that he was aware of their true connection. “Is there someplace where I might be able to clean up and get a change of clothes?”

“Of course,” Dr. Wells looked toward his former protegé, easily falling back into the old pattern. Hartley nodded once.

“If you’ll follow me, Professor,” the young criminal led the older man away while the rest of their group migrated to the Cortex and dispersed to run necessary health checks or to change.
Eobard took it upon himself to run a medical exam on Stein as soon as he rejoined their group.

“I wasn’t aware that you had any medical training,” Professor Stein remarked conversationally, allowing Dr. Wells to draw a blood sample.

“I am not an M.D. like Dr. Snow, but I am versed in the basics,” Eobard answered honestly, continuing his work without the slightest error. He could feel Hartley’s eyes on him.

“Of course: that’s useful. Why not have a complete medical training?” Hartley brazenly commented.

“Is there a reason why you’re hovering behind me?” Dr. Wells replied, continuing his exam. “Why don’t you start repairs on Barry’s suit? That is in your skill set.”

Hartley scoffed. “I’m sure that Cisco would love that.” He stopped to think about it, probably envisioning the other inventor’s fit of pique. “Excuse me.” He made a beeline for Cisco’s lab.

“From what I can tell, your vitals all appear to have returned to normal, but you are running a slight fever: 100.6 degrees. It could simply be a stress response, considering the biological strain that you’ve recently been subjected to,” Eobard reported his immediate findings as though his exam had never been interrupted. “I expect that Dr. Snow will want to follow up on it herself after we have the results of your blood tests.”

“Then I am well enough to return home?” Stein inferred hopefully.

“I will have to defer to Dr. Snow’s judgment on that. She is the Doctor in charge of your treatment; I’m merely assisting,” Eobard explained, looking past his patient to see Barry and Cisco apparently arguing. The Flash stood up straighter, a grim expression overtaking his face, and sped away.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Dr. Wells crossed over to pull open the door to his office and call out, “Cisco, is there anything you want to tell me?” By the freaked out expression on the young man’s face, his answer was bound to be yes.

Barry sped all the way into his lab, catching Joe’s notice on his way up the stairs as he blew the papers right out of the folder the Detective had been flipping through. He was already well into frantically searching his work-space when his annoyed guardian entered.

“Bear…”

“No, no, NO!” Barry slammed his now empty strong drawer shut with a loud clang and struck the top of the desk. The lock which had been broken when it was forced open fell into the no longer secure drawer with a soft clunk as if to add insult to injury. Barry dropped into his chair and sat with his head in his hands.

“What the--” Joe absorbed the meaning of what he was seeing with a dawning sense of dread. “Barry what was in that drawer?”

“Everything,” Barry muttered frustratedly. “He took everything.”

“You’re going to need to help me out here, ‘cause I don’t--”

“That guy who walked in on you and Cisco earlier? He looked like me but he wasn’t me. I was at STAR Labs keeping an eye on the Piper. It must have been another meta working for Mal Thawne.”
Barry pulled the map a little too harshly and it snapped up to reveal the ripped and naked-looking remnants of the murderboard he’d hidden underneath. “He took every file I had managed to recover regarding my mom’s murder, every piece of evidence I had gathered after his break in, after he kidnapped Caitlin and-- I’ve got nothing!”

“Whoa. Okay, hey,” Joe came over and rested a hand on his back trying to comfort his panicking child. “Listen, I’ll have security pull the surveillance tape for the time this shape shifting meta-human or whatever it was showed up. We’ll catch him.”

Barry didn’t respond, still working his way through his quiet freak out.

“Besides,” Joe realized. “He didn’t get everything.”

Barry sat up and turned his head to eye the detective inquisitively.

“I think there’s something that I should show you,” Joe told him sounding more certain.

Joe opened the door to the unpleasantly familiar, quaint little house that would have seemed lovely and welcoming to anyone but him.

“It’s smaller than I remember,” Barry observed, feeling strangely detached from himself as he stood beside Joe in this off-putting incarnation of his childhood home. He was following Joe back to the place where his mother was murdered.

“That’s because you’re bigger,” Joe replied with the ghost of a paternal smile. “Come on, this is what I wanted to show you.”

“That’s Dr. Wells’ holoprojector prototype,” Barry identified, even more confused than he’d felt during his strange argument with Cisco an hour ago. “What’s it doing here?”

“Okay, I can’t really explain how Cisco did it, but he used some silver nitrate backing from an old mirror that was here at the time of the murder and…”

“Joe what are we doing here?” Barry asked again. Joe indicated that he should join him on the outside edge of the room. Barry hesitantly obeyed and Joe scowled at the controls for a moment, trying to remember exactly what Cisco had-- Barry powered up the machine for him.

“Do you remember which blue button the program was on?” he prompted, and Joe pressed the fourth one down. Barry swallowed when he saw the scene laid out before him, staring at his mother’s ghost frozen in time in the center of the whirlwind. “Mom.”

“Now, I just have to skip ahead to get t--” Joe reached for the dial but Barry stopped him, not pulling his eyes away from the holographic reproduction.

“Double frame-rate” he stated one of the simple voice commands that Harrison had recently added to the test program and the brightly colored phantoms circling his mother began to move faster. They were battling each other around the living room. The Reverse Flash was mostly ducking and redirecting blows, at an apparent disadvantage against his armored foe. Even if he bore an unfamiliar bloody tint to his armor, Barry would recognize the fire-meta’s retractable blade anywhere.

“He drew blood!” Barry noticed, seeing the spray of red droplets flicker past. “Pause playback!” The hologram stilled and he crossed the room to trace the path of suspended crimson beads.
“Yeah, we took samples, Cisco tested it,” Joe informed him, joining his foster child in front of the peeled back wallpaper. “Back at STAR Labs.”

“So, he should still have the samples,” Barry continued, finally beginning to perk up a little. “You said he tested it already? Did he find a match?”

“Bear.” Joe nodded his head toward the archway where Barry’s younger specter was standing. Barry frowned and turned back to see the yellow hologram of his reverse crouching as he passed— No, Barry realized that wasn’t what he was seeing at all. The hologram of his assumed enemy wasn’t ducking, he was shielding! Barry gawked at the scene in front of him. The Man in Yellow was bent over Barry’s younger self, his arms outstretched in preparation to scoop the child up against his chest, and hanging over them was a deadly blade. Barry’s wide eyes traced it upward to its armored wielder. The fire meta was frozen in mid-sweep, attempting to slash at the Reverse or at the younger Barry himself; it was uncertain.

“He carried me away,” Barry breathed. “Why did he grab me that night? He was about to be stabbed! Why take me?”

“I don’t know,” Joe admitted.

“Did you find a match for his blood? Who is he?”

“We’re not sure what to make of that. We found two blood samples from the night of the murder and matched both of them to members of Wells’ team.”

“That doesn’t make sense. It couldn’t have been— Wait, why would you test them against our team?” Barry wondered, turning to scowl at the Detective. His expression cleared. “You wanted Cisco to test for Harrison’s DNA.”

“I had a hunch. That’s not important.”

“Not important? You have a grudge against my partner and now you’re dragging my mom’s death into it!”

“That’s not what I’m doing and you shouldn’t call him that.”

“I guess you didn’t ask for his permission before you used this either.”

“Barry, I’m trying to solve Nora’s murder! You should be thankful that I did. If I hadn’t we wouldn’t have a scrap of evidence to work with right now.”

“We’re done here.” Barry stomped over to properly power down his boyfriend’s prototype and fold it in preparation to take it home.

“Barry, I know you’re mad, but listen—”

“Listen,” Barry muttered to himself in disbelief. “Why? Are you going to try to tell me you found Harrison’s DNA?”

“No. You were right. There’s no evidence that he was here, but Bear—”

“Promise me that you’ll leave him alone from now on,” Barry cut in, straightening to his full height to face Joe. He needed the other man to see that he was serious.

Joe’s expression settled into an unhappy frown but he nodded. “I-- Barry, I have a feeling about the
guy. He’s hiding something.”

“Joe—”

“But it looks like whatever he’s hiding. It isn’t what I thought it was. I’ll stop, for you, if you’re sure that’s really what you want.”

“It is. Joe, I know that Harrison has secrets. That doesn’t make him a murderer,” Barry insisted pulling the handle upright to tow the prototype out with him. “Who was the match?”

“There were two matches. One anomalous match to Caitlin,” Joe stated first, just to get the junk evidence out of the way.

Barry ignored the irrational data.

“The second sample was matched to you,” Joe concluded.

Barry shook his head, starting to leave. “I wasn’t injured that night, the Reverse Flash sped me out before anyone else could get to me.”

“No, Barry. Not that you, this you,” Joe clarified poking a finger at Barry’s chest. “There was some build up of proteins in the blood that only happens in adults. Cisco retested the samples multiple times to verify that it wasn’t a mistake.”

Barry stopped short in the archway, feeling his stomach drop.

“The Flash was here that night,” Joe continued unaware of his foster-child’s dawning horror. “I don’t know how but you were here.”

Barry swallowed down the lump choking his throat and sped away, barely conscious that he’d fled until he was already skidding to a stop at his safe haven.

Eobard looked towards the whirlwind of speed and flickers of agitated golden energy that had just deposited itself in the armchair to his right. He then turned to the prototype placed on the other side of his desk, opening his mouth to address its inexplicable presence.

“I brought it back. Joe was using it to investigate…” Barry’s voice sounded quiet. He seemed deflated, too vulnerable for the android’s liking.

“I see…” Eobard decided to remain neutral on the issue, considering the volatile truce currently existing between himself and his partner’s paternal figure.

“I can’t keep doing this,” Barry lamented, sounding helpless.

“By ‘this’ you mean…” Eobard prompted, trying not to give away his apprehension.

“All of it! Every time I start to feel like I’m making some kind of progress it all blows up in my face.”

Eobard maneuvered himself closer until he was just short of brushing Barry’s leg with his own. “I assume that you aren’t this upset by whatever it was Detective West borrowed my projector for,” he ventured. Barry let out an unhappy sound and folded forward to rest his head on his arms on Eobard’s legs. After a startled second of wide-eyed introspection, Eobard relaxed and accepted the somewhat compromising pose as part of their new norm.
“You are aware that someone might see us through the glass? Most of the others have left but Cisco and Hartley are still hanging around somewhere,” he conscientiously reminded the moody speedster.

“I don’t care.” Barry lifted his head in realization. “No; I do! I don’t want us to be a secret,” Barry stated with conviction. With a wary exhalation Eobard reached forward to straighten the back of Barry’s collar where it had started to stick up, causing his partner to relax back to his previous position.

“Even from Detective West?” he tested. Feeling an unpleasant sensation filter through his processors, he added “Even from Iris?”

Barry picked up his head to look at him. “She already knows,” he disclosed, catching his partner off guard. “Well, kinda. I’m pretty sure she figured out the way I felt about you long before I did. She just doesn’t know how you feel about me, yet.”

“Oh,” Eobard didn’t bother to hide his astoundment.

“Wait. You still think that I--” Barry deduced based on the strength of his reaction. “Harrison, I’m with you now. I told you, my feelings for Iris are in the past.”

Eobard nodded, not looking at him. “I trust you.”

“You know, I want to believe that, but you don’t really act like you believe me,” Barry objected, straightening up and creating a small gulf between their seats. “You want to know why I’m here? I found out that Joe was back at my old childhood home using your holoprojector to recreate the worst moment of my life! I just watched it again, before hearing how he’d tested blood samples from our team—” Barry shook his head, looking fed up. “It’s like my life has turned fluid and at any moment the world I think I know could shift again into something unrecognizable. There’s nothing that I’m sure that I can count on anymore… there’s just you. You’re my safe harbor, Harrison, no matter how lost I get I know I’ll make it as long as I can return to you.”

Eobard’s eyes wandered over the earnest young speedster before him, feeling overwhelmed once again. He had no idea what he should say. No, that wasn’t true. Eobard knew what he probably should say, deceptive words that would re-establish a proper amount of emotional distance. He found himself loathe to alienate him. “What did he find?” Eobard asked after a pregnant pause.

Barry frowned. “What? That’s all you have to say?”

“What else can I say, Barry.” Eobard defended, unsure of why he was trying. “I appreciate the sentiment but I’m concerned for your future. We should be preparing you to continue on independently.”

Barry shifted in place, unsettled by the reminder that he would inevitably lose his partner to time. “That future is still a long way away.” He grabbed Dr. Wells’ hand, winding their fingers together. “The results. Something must have gone wrong. I mean the odds that…” he stared into the middle distance for a moment with unfocused eyes. “I thought that I knew what happened the night that my mother died. Now, I’m not so sure.”

Eobard leaned closer, ever so slightly tightening his grip on his Reverse’s hand. “Perhaps, you should start from the beginning.”

“So, it goes flying through the Cortex, ricocheting everywhere and Cisco’s just like,” Caitlin held her
hands up and barely attempted to deepen her voice in an impression. “My bad. That’s on me.”

Ronnie laughed. “It sounds like you guys have had some pretty crazy times.”

“We have,” Caitlin fondly agreed.

“Are you ready to get back to normal?”

Caitlin’s brow creased. “What do you mean?”

“I was thinking we could get out of town, start fresh somewhere, together,” Ronnie said grasping both Caitlin’s hands in his own. She looked down at them and paused for a breath to make sure that her mood remained steady.

“But our lives are here, my job-- my friends are all here.”

“Yeah, hunting meta-humans,” Ronnie pointed out.

“Helping people,” Caitlin corrected. “You know first hand how hard it is to go through the change, and how dangerous it can make them.”

“Is that what happened to you,” Ronnie pushed, a trace of bitterness slipping into his tone. Caitlin pulled her hands back with a cautioning expression, but he continued “You weren’t changed by the explosion like Stein and me. I know. I had to see you after we first woke up to be sure you were okay. When I checked on you, you were perfectly fine.”

“No, I’d just lost the man I love. I’m perfectly fine right now,” Caitlin disagreed, surprising herself with her own self-acceptance. It was enough to keep her temper from rising. “My change required a secondary catalyst but it was nobody’s fault and I’m… adjusting.”

“Look, Cait, I’m not mad at anyone,” Ronnie reassured his defensive fiance. “I know that what happened to us that night was an accident, but STAR Labs took a year of our lives! That explosion changed us, maybe forever, and I don’t want to let it take any more.”

Caitlin stared at him, feeling torn. She’d had wanted so desperately to have Ronnie back and have a second chance to share a life with him, but Eobard’s promise played through the back of her mind. Her friends needed her too, she couldn’t abandon them. The waiter walked up to their table.

“You guys need anything else? We’re about to close up.” The curly haired waif of a man gestured to the counter. Ronnie turned back to answer him and Caitlin almost followed suit only for her gaze to snag on a red dot hovering over the man’s hideously patterned shirt.

“I’m good, thanks,” Ronnie replied, looking to her questioningly. “Babe?”

The dot shifted from the waiter’s chest to Ronnie’s shoulder and back up to the man as Caitlin’s paling eyes identified another hovering over her fiance’s heart. She traced the invisible line out the window at her back. “Get down!” Her warped voice ordered as she shoved Ronnie backwards out of the line of fire just as the onslaught began. Her other arm rapidly encased with a thick coating of ice that she raised to shield herself, counting the silhouettes moving on the other side of the shattered window. Ronnie tugged her down beside him under the table.

“Don’t touch my skin,” Caitlin advised distractedly, pulling one of the metal darts out of her impromptu gauntlet and scrutinizing it. The average human clientele were all dropping like flies around them.
“We have to get out of here!” Ronnie exclaimed, grabbing her unencased arm, then releasing his grip and shaking his hand out with a hiss. “Cait!”

“Back door. On three,” Caitlin replied decisively, trying to act as if she had some idea of what she was doing, if only for his benefit. “One, two…”

A gas canister clanked into view. Ronnie grabbed it and threw it back out.

“Three!” Caitlin shouted and they ran for the exit together. Caitlin kicked the door shut behind them and sealed it with a line of ice over the seam.

“What are you doing?!” Ronnie exclaimed, appalled by the thought that she, of all people, would so brazenly lock others into that battleground.

“They’re here for you,” she clarified, starting towards the street. “We need to call B--”

A hummer full of armed soldiers screeched it’s way in through the alley mouth.

“Crap,” Ronnie pulled her back by her coat so that he was between her and the new threat and they sprinted in the other direction, only to be met by another team of armed soldiers decked out in Kevlar and helmets.

“Hands on your head, and get on the ground!”

The two metas exchanged a look and complied with the shouted demands. As slowly as possible without getting shot, in Caitlin’s case. She was thankful that she hadn’t had a chance remove the interface lenses from her eyes before, but they still needed to buy time.

“Down on the ground, Ma’am. Or I will be forced to open fire!” the soldier closest to her warned.

Caitlin closed her eyes and let her hair fall into her face, whispering. “Gideon. Emergency protocol.” As another soldier pushed her to her knees.

Barry and Dr. Wells looked up towards a knock on the office door, which swung open before either could extend the permission to enter.

“Hartley,” Barry greeted with a subtle suggestion to apologize laced into his tone.

“So, we got a strange call from Mrs. Stein; apparently her husband suddenly collapsed into some kind of anxiety attack and is insisting that Ronnie’s in terrible danger. I could still hear him demanding that we save him when Cisco answered the phone.”

“Cisco, not you?” Barry wondered.

“I’m the Pied Piper,” Hartley condescendingly reminded him.

“Oh. Right, how should we--” Barry’s question was interrupted by the sound of Dr. Wells’ phone vibrating over the surface of his desk. Eobard picked it up and read Gideon’s alert as if it were a normal text message.

“Please, don’t hurt her!” Ronnie urged their captors. “We’re cooperating.”

“And as long as you continue to cooperate, she’ll have nothing to worry about,” a familiar voice replied from behind them.

“General Eiling,” Caitlin acknowledged, and saw the readout overlaying her vision shift to the infrared spectrum, now pointing out weaknesses in her captor’s anatomy and probability estimates of attack marked out in white and yellow text respectively. Good, Caitlin thought, if Gideon knows, soon Eobard will, too.

“Do I know you?” The General responded to her unexpected recognition.

“You killed a patient of mine,” Caitlin replied coldly, protected from a positive identification by her new coloring and inhuman voice. “She deserved better.”

“You treated Sergeant Sans Souci,” He guessed. “That was a terrible waste of a good soldier.”

“What do you want?” Ronnie asked, drawing the focus away from his future wife.

“FIREFSTORM,” General Eiling pronounced, sounding sure of his victory. The sudden soft sound of a minor impact, followed quickly by another grunt of pain from the soldiers flanking him, quickly corrected his false assumption. Within seconds the Flash had neutralized all of the armed soldiers surrounding them. Caitlin looked from the flickering light that was their rescuer to a smirking General Eiling as he drew a fist sized, silver cube out of his pocket. A white net flickered over it in Caitlin’s vision before flashing bright red. Text announced, [Alert: Anti-Meta Weaponry] as Eiling tossed it up into the air.

“Look out!” Caitlin cried but it was too late; a cloud of fine metal spikes burst out of the anti-speedster grenade and were drawn into Barry’s flesh like iron to a high powered magnet. With a shout of pain the Flash collapsed into a roll, insulated from the natural flow of the speed-force.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” the General asked Barry rhetorically. He stepped forward to stand over the crippled speedster writhing in pain on the pavement. “I had that developed especially for you: micro-fragments attracted to kinetic energy.”

Caitlin chewed her lip anxiously as Eiling reached for his holstered handgun. A bracket in the readout caught her attention and she went with it.

“The leg,” she said quietly as if deep in thought.

“Huh?” Ronnie turned to her, distracted from the spectacle unfolding around them for an instant.

“His bearing, it’s…” she pretended to figure out a mystery in her mind. “Cartilage.” The physician concluded at a normal volume “Aim for his left knee.”

Barry kicked out, striking his opponent’s already compromised leg, then let out a pained groan as the spikes drew out more speed-force. Eiling fell into an awkward sit, aiming his gun at Barry’s temple but Ronnie jumped up and knocked him out with a single punch. Wincing, he leaned down to help Barry stand.

“Can you walk?”

Barry nodded jerkily.
“We need to get out of here before anyone starts to wake up,” Caitlin said, ducking under his other arm and helping support his way to the parking lot.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys, I know it's been a while since we had a flashback-forward(we have not seen the last of them); I have had to keep pushing the futuristic stuff into later chapters due to plot considerations. It's my own fault, really, I'm juggling/bringing a lot of plotlines together at a time when my real life has unexpectedly also become more complicated. I hope you'll forgive me for the temporary stylistic lapse. I promise it will be rectified in time.
Eobard pulled up to the side of Barry’s med bed and the writhing Flash immediately grabbed his hand tightly. Eobard frowned, assessing the details of Barry’s bioscan. “Try to hold still. We need to get these out before his flesh heals over the fragments.”

Barry hissed in pain. “Please don’t say that.” Then let out a wordless shout as Caitlin drew a particularly embedded shard out of the side of his neck. In his seat at the nearby computer terminal Hartley’s whole body flinched at the harsh sound.

He turned to look at Barry with his hands still raised to cover his ears.

“Sorry.”

“Eiling! This is my fault; I should have seen it! Men in Black are always in cahoots with the government,” Cisco self-flagellated, holding up a metal tray so that Caitlin could deposit recovered shrapnel into it. “This is what Dr. Rush was so freaked out about, those guys who confiscated all the project files… They had to have been working for General Eiling this whole time.”

“If you mention that ridiculous conspiracy theory one more time, I’ll scream until your head explodes,” Hartley threatened. Cisco’s eyes widened. Unfortunately it was more out of geeky amazement than fear.

“You can do that?”

“No,” Dr. Wells admonished before the Piper could open his mouth. “This isn’t your fault, Cisco. I didn’t make the connection either.” He met the gaze of the Doctor standing opposite him. “General Eiling and I have a history; I will see what I can do to mediate this.” The hand wrapped around his, tightened past human tolerance. “Ow. Relax, Barry.”

“You’re staying with me,” the speedster rasped out, still struggling not to squirm while the barbs were removed. Dr. Wells frowned in response to being ordered around, even out of sentiment.

“Someone should check on Professor Stein; General Eiling is probably going to come after him next,” Caitlin interjected, perhaps hoping to maintain a sense of order until after the hardest part of her patient’s treatment was through.

“I’ll go,” Hartley volunteered, practically jumping out of his seat only to be met by a resounding chorus of “no”s.

“You can’t leave these premises,” Dr. Wells concurred at a more reasonable volume.

“No need,” Ronnie muttered, sounding distracted.

“Why not?” Cisco asked.

Ronnie turned towards the archway, explaining “He’s already here,” just before the older man stepped into view.

“I do not believe that Ronald and I are truly as distinctive as we had hoped,” Stein finished their train of thought aloud.
Iris pulled the white metal door of the storage unit up and followed Mason Bridge into the sparsely lit space. The far wall was covered in news clippings, photographs and photocopied excerpts from official files, and was wound through with three strands of differently colored thread. A basic black yarn connected the main story as Mason had perceived it, centered around Harrison Wells. The red connected meta-human incidents following the STAR Labs explosion. A blue strand connected deaths, beginning with Tess Morgan. He had finally agreed to pool all of his information with her after the close call with Rush’s meta-human killer the previous afternoon -- contingent upon the idea that she would do the same. Iris looked at the mess of obsessively compiled data and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I know: it’s a lot to take in,” Mason told her smugly.

“It’s definitely a lot of information,” Iris agreed, ignoring the threads as she mentally re-sorted the pieces of information that were new to her until they fit in with everything that she already knew.

“Like I told you, Miss Blogger, this is a big story with a lot of moving parts. I’ve been working on it for a while.”

“This is wrong,” Iris concluded aloud once she had begun to see a new pattern that fit all of their evidence together in a way that actually made logical sense.

Mason Bridge scoffed. “Excuse me?”

“Here,” Iris let her purse slip off her shoulder and pulled out the folder she’d compiled to share with him, then began revising his messy web of evidence. “First of all, your main timeline doesn’t start early enough.” She grabbed a couple of tacks and began adding new markers, “And it doesn’t start with Dr. Wells. It starts with the first meta-human incident.”

“Excuse me?!”

“It’s okay. You couldn’t have known; just listen. In 2000, Nora Allen is murdered in her living room by a stab wound straight to the heart. There are signs of a struggle, but no signs of an intruder or forced entry, except that her son was found in the middle of the road a few blocks away with no practical explanation of how he got there. He swears that he saw red and yellow lightning surrounding his mother and a Man in Yellow who stared at him with glowing, red eyes just before he found himself in the street.” Iris stretched the new length of red yarn to the first marker in Dr. Wells’ timeline and passed a folder over to her co-investigator. “26 hours later, just outside of Starling City, Dr. Harrison Wells and his wife suffer a fatal car accident when they unexpectedly collide with a humanoid travelling across the road at high-velocity. Dr. Morgan does not survive this accident but her husband manages to conceal the third victim for his own safety and takes him to a colleague for medical treatment and experimentation.

“Where are you getting that?”

“For reasons of safety that source needs to remain completely anonymous at this time. At least two deaths can logically be linked back to knowledge of the third victim’s existence and identity. The more details I share with you, the more I’m putting both of your lives at risk,” Iris explained.

“I’ve handled death threats before. Besides, this guy’s already gunning for you. I’d prefer to know what I’m dealing with,” Mason Bridge argued. “We’re planning to report this story, remember?”

“Not every little thing. E is a source of mine, and I have a right to protect that source! He isn’t the
same meta that threatened my life back at the crime scene, but he has already barely escaped being murdered at least once… These people are way more dangerous than you think they are!”

“Don’t make assumptions, Blogger.”

“I’m not. They aren’t human and I’m pretty sure the humans who are involved in this are even worse,” Iris shot back. “These people don’t even exist as far as the rest of the world is concerned. E is the most valuable source I have right now. If I lose him or the unnamed scientist who experimented on him, we could easily lose the trail for good.”

“You can’t verify anything that way. This could just be some fairy tale that he’s been telling to draw you off the scent.”

“I can verify enough of it.”

“How?!”

“I can’t share the hard evidence regarding that yet. It’s at a safe location, but I can’t share access,” Iris told him honestly. “Can I finish?”

Mason huffed, openly filled with skepticism, but gestured for her to continue.

“At some point around Christmas of 2004, there was some kind of traumatic event. E went missing and was presumed dead by the scientists responsible for his well-being. I haven’t been able to get any specifics about it yet, but from what little I have been able to gather, I believe it was an assassination attempt. E went into hiding at that point. Dr. Wells purged all data compiled during their experiments but his colleague managed to hide a small fraction of the documentation, mostly personal notes. The remaining data was later used in the development of the tachyon prototype at Mercury Labs. It was recently stolen from STAR by an unidentified meta, after the device was transferred there due a break in.”

“Let me guess: that was our guy,” Mason posited.

“I don’t yet have definitive evidence, but yeah. According to sources and… the M.O. described by those present, I think the meta that tried to grab me yesterday was the guy who took the prototype. He has some kind of pyrokinetic abilities, but I don’t think that’s all. He made an impossible shot in order to kill Dr. Jason Rush. I still don’t understand the connection…”

“It’s Harrison Wells and STAR Labs. It’s gotta be.”

“STAR Labs didn’t even exist when all of this started. There’s more to it than that. Dr. Wells is at the heart of this story, sure, but he isn’t the bad guy here.”

Mason shook his head, disappointed. “You need to be impartial about this.”

“I’m not letting my feelings get in the way. The evidence backs me up,” Iris defended.

“How about this?” Mason walked over to retrieve a manila envelope from his own bag and pulled out a few black and white pictures to show her. “This is a series of screen stills taken from the surveillance cameras at a local coffee shop last night.”

“Jitters’,” Iris acknowledged studying the images. Caitlin was at a table in the center of the frame with an unidentified man. He looked vaguely familiar. “I used to work there.” The next image showed chaos breaking out. People falling, as if shot.
“According to witnesses this was a raid by a team of soldiers shooting the place up,” Mr. Bridge explained. “Some of them swear they saw them targeting these two specifically -- and get this: they say the albino woman was literally cold as ice.”

As he shared this last detail, Iris continued to the final image in which Caitlin’s arm, wreathed in a cloud of white, was raised to shield her face, while just visible beyond, a pair of bright white eyes glared out at the broken window.

“You know her -- Dr. Caitlin Snow-- that name seems way too fitting not to be an alias--”

“It isn’t.” Iris corrected distractedly. “She treated Barry when he was in a coma. She was totally normal then.”

“But not recently?” Mason pursued, noticing her falter.

“Her hair turned white after she was kidnapped by…” Iris trailed off narrowing her eyes. “Captain Cold.”

“No kidding,” Mason joked, insensitive as ever.

“She almost died. I haven’t really seen her much since then. She’s been distant… I thought it might be PTSD,” Iris shook it off. “I’m sure there’s a more rational explanation.”

“Right,” the Senior reporter disbelieved. “Anyway, I called the army’s media relations division and asked, ‘Are soldiers permitted to operate like that on U.S. soil?’ You know what they said?”

“Did they try to BS you?”

“Didn’t even bother. Apparently ‘There will be serious repercussions for anyone who elects to spread any unfounded accusations or misinformation.’”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” Iris quipped still preoccupied with the photograph. “Look, I’ll ask Caitlin about this next time I see her.”

“What about your meta-buddy, E? He’s been dealing with this kind of thing for years, right?” Mason prodded.

“I’ll definitely mention it next time he drops by.”

“When will that be? I want to meet him.”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Iris informed him realistically. She didn’t know what the Reverse Flash would do if she brought an unexpected guest to meet him, but she could imagine his options.

“We agreed to work together on this.”

“That doesn’t affect my arrangement with E. He’s very particular. He’ll only see me. Besides, he always comes to me, I can’t tell you when I’ll see him again.”

“Don’t lie to me. A contact that important? You have a way to call him. What is it?”

Iris shook her head. “No. I told you: he contacts me.” Then she paused to reflect. “He’ll check in on me sometime soon, but that’s really all I know.”
After she had finally finished pulling the metal fragments out of Barry’s flesh, Caitlin circled the unconscious speedster’s bed to give Dr. Wells’ shoulder a conspiratorial touch, then left the Cortex. The secretive AI obediently trailed after her.

“I got a surprise when I went to return your lenses,” Caitlin accused in a hushed voice, pacing back and forth across the concrete corridor.

“The empty drawer,” Eobard acknowledged with a half nod.

“What did you do?”

“The technology of the quantum splicer is anachronistic in origin and thus required anachronistic components.”

Caitlin winced and stopped pacing to rub at her eyes while she fretted. “Right, right. Okay. but you can disassemble it again and still use the parts, can’t you? I mean, I’m no engineer but I don’t think it looked like anything was damaged in the blast.”

“It may be possible to salvage most of the components,” Eobard agreed, then tilted his head in a politely contrary gesture. “However my protocols require me to warn you that to do so now will prevent you from any further use in the care of your meta-human patients, therefore posing an unnecessary risk to human life.”

“We’ve already split them. What further use could I need it for?” Caitlin contradicted.

“Judging by their continued symptoms, I estimate a forty-six percent probability of their reintegration. If such an event occurs, the splicer will allow for an eighty-nine percent chance of a second successful separation.”

Caitlin face-palmed again, then paced for a couple more laps before deciding, “Fine, so we’ll keep it as is for the time being as a precaution. Once we’re sure that Ronnie doesn’t need it anymore I want you to disassemble the splicer. We don’t have a lot of time left and I can’t afford to lose any possible options.”

“As you, yourself, have noted, Dr. Snow, you are not an engineer. There is a high probability that we will fail to circumvent my fail-safe in the time allotted, regardless of your intentions,” Eobard reminded her. “The more logical choice would be to focus on those you know that you can save.”

“Then I guess you’re lucky to be friends with an illogical human,” Caitlin stubbornly replied. “We’re going to figure this out.”

“Alternatively, you could accept your fiance’s offer to move to less volatile surroundings.”

Caitlin faltered, then crossed her arms over her chest in disapproval. “Were you stalking me through the security cameras?”

“Gideon has access to all wireless feeds. I merely checked in with her to verify your status.”

“Yeah. well… don’t. It’s creepy.”

“Understood.” Eobard acknowledged noncommittally. His meta-human co-conspirator eyed him with eyes narrowed in suspicion.
In a flash of brilliant blue flame, two identical men appeared in the shadows outside a highly secured secret military facility on the outskirts of local civilization.

“Thanks, Handsome,” the unmarred duplicate smirkingly remarked to his scarred original as he was released from their begrudging bear-hug.

“Guard arrives in three, two…” the Director counted down. His shape-shifting company pounced on the unlucky soldier rounding the corner, slitting his throat with a switchblade before becoming a perfect duplicate of his victim. The ex-speedster behind him checked his watch.

“You have exactly nine minutes, fifty-six seconds before my return. Do not miss that window,” he relayed and vanished in another fleeting inferno.

The impostor snorted. “He forgot to wish me luck again,” he commented to himself as he stole the dead man’s key card and resumed his usual route into the base. “It’s almost as if he doesn’t care.”

"Ah, Doctor," the General greeted, watching the scientist make his way into the dark, cramped office.

"General," Eobard accepted, stopping in front of his enemy’s dark, polished block of a desk.

"I knew it wouldn't be long before you wheeled yourself in here," General Eiling sneered. "So tell me. Are they still busy picking pins out of Barry Allen's hide?"

Eobard narrowed his eyes ever so slightly at him, but responded before the older man could utter whatever taunting explanation he had opened his mouth to speak. "I have already warned you not to harm my people."

"Please, spare me the empty threats. You go to the press now and you'll be exposing yourself, as well as the boy and FIRESTORM, not to mention that frigid young woman who seems so fond of them. Your leverage is expired." General Eiling declared. "You're a smart man, Doctor. You know what I want."

"I don't know how the FIRESTORM matrix functions," Eobard told the determined soldier, containing his growing agitation.

"You may not know how, but you do know who. Hand them over to me and your Flash and your little girlfriend can go free," General Eiling dictated.

"Please. You said it yourself: I'm smart. Certainly smart enough to realize that you aren't simply going to let my people ride off happily into the sunset if I make a single concession," the Android replied sarcastically. "Today it's FIRESTORM, tomorrow it'll be Mr. Allen, or the Piper, or someone else. This isn't a fair negotiation and I am not going to allow you to intimidate me into bartering off my people to you one by one!"

"You're right, Harrison. This isn't fair. This is war and you are out of options. Thanks to you we're in the dawn of a new age. The cold war, the war on terror -- those things are going to seem like cavemen fighting with sticks once those two freaks bind together," the General predicted darkly, leaning forwards to pin his rival with a warning look as he laid down his ultimatum. "I am going to capture that thing whether you help me or not. The only choice that you have left to make is whether you are going to be an ally or an obstacle in my way."
Eobard set his jaw, glaring back into his challenger's unflinching gaze.

"You have five hours to comply with my request. I believe that you can find your own way out," Eiling looked down at the reports on his desk as if he were already gone. Eobard sat back in Wells' chair, taking a second to reaffirm his false veneer of casual indifference, then left. He was already theorizing the possible repercussions of the other man's untimely death and how he was going to compensate. A soldier knocked into the side of his chair and caught himself on the android's shoulder. An almost indiscernible flash stilled the AI like a statue, turning his eyes black. The impostor smirked, whistling to himself as he checked to make sure that they remained unobserved, passing a circular handheld device over his captive's head before tucking it away and returning to his previous position. He removed the clear scarlet, crystalline needle from the android's flesh, prompting him to power back on.

“Oh! Excuse me, Sir. So sorry!” the meta exclaimed, playing the part of a fumbling novice. Dr. Wells waved him off, unaware of the assault that he had just endured.

Eobard maneuvered his chair quietly out of the elevator into the rotunda, continuing towards the Cortex. A voice halted him at the mouth of the dimly lit corridor.

“Where did you go?”

“How long have you been standing around in the dark like that?” Eobard countered flippantly.

“Tell me that you didn’t just try to negotiate with General Eiling on your own,” Barry snapped.

“I didn’t just try to negotiate with General Eiling on my own,” Eobard recited sarcastically.

“I asked you to stay here so that we could figure out how we can handle this together!”

“There is no way to ‘handle this’. I met with him: he laid down an unacceptable ultimatum; I left,” Eobard responded, his volume gradually rising as his temper reached its boiling point. “Negotiation is impossible now, Mr. Allen, because it seems the Flash can’t keep his mask on in public!”

“What are you talking about?” Barry questioned, flummoxed.

“When Bette was shot,” Eobard spat, looking as murderous as he felt in that moment. “He saw you. He knows exactly who you are. If I expose him, he’ll come after you. If I try to stop him, he’ll come after you. From this point on if I don’t cooperate to his approval he could take everything from me and it is all because of you. I have held that zealot at bay for years with nothing but tact and patience and you wrecked it all in an instant!”

Barry stared at him, his expression turning sickeningly sympathetic.

“Don’t,” Eobard rejected, turning his chair back around to leave. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Barry sighed, watching him start to leave, then responded softly. “I love you, too.”

The android paused, lips pressed together, then continued forward. The young Flash was lucky that Eobard couldn’t leap out of the wheelchair and strangle him. He envisioned the scenario in his own mind to console himself while the sentimental imbecile followed in his wake. When they reached the Cortex, Hartley broke the tense silence.
“What was the ultimatum?” he asked, unashamed of his apparent eavesdropping.

“What?” Barry objected.

“For the last time, I am the Pied Piper; I am sensitive to sound. As long as you and I are on the same floor of this building, it would be best to assume that I can hear you,” Hartley replied curtly, returning his focus to their leader. “Ultimatum?”

“HE wants FIRESTORM.”

Hartley arched his brows. “And?”

“If I don’t comply within the next five hours he’ll target Barry, then likely you and Caitlin. He sees meta-humans as potential weapons to add to the military arsenal.”

“How do we dissuade him from that outlook?” Hartley prompted.

“I don’t know. I had leverage before. It’s gone. He knows about each of your skill sets and is developing countermeasures.”

“Then we need to act now,” Barry cut in anxiously.

“This is why you should let the intelligent people speak first,” Hartley drawled. Barry frowned, preparing to retort.

“That isn’t constructive either,” Eobard intervened. “We will need to catch him by surprise -- and yes, Barry is partially correct: time is of the essence.”

Barry stared into the middle distance, his expression shifting from conflicted to determined.

“You have something to add, Mr. Allen?” Dr. Wells prompted.

“I think I have a really bad idea that might work.”

Iris stepped out of her car and bent down to retrieve the box of files that Mason had allowed her to bring home for further scrutiny, only to feel a rush of wind behind her accompanied by a telltale charge in the air.

“This is early even for you,” Iris remarked, straightening to face her contact. “Is everything-- Oh.” She recognized the irony as she was met with red, rather than the yellow-suited visitor she was expecting. “Hello, Flash. What can I do for you?”

“I need to get in contact with the Reverse, can you alert him for me?”

Iris breathed out a wry laugh, leaning back against her car. “You, too, huh? I’m sorry, but that isn’t how this works. He doesn’t take being summoned very well. You remember what happened last time?”

“I know that you’ve been using him as a source,” Barry persisted hopefully.

“I gathered that much. Look, he comes to me when he has something to say, not the other way around. Besides, he’s your Reverse, you’d think if anyone would have a way to contact the guy, it’d be you,” Iris pointed out, to Barry’s confusion.
“My rev--” he faltered, puzzling over the concept. “It’s just a name, isn’t it?”

“Not according to him, but I’m just the human reporter here,” Iris shrugged, watching the speedster’s disorientation with interest. “I figured you’d know better than me.”

“You’d think,” the Flash replied, sounding despondent. “How did you call him before? Maybe I can try?”

Iris shook her head. “I don’t know. If he thinks I would betray his confidence… I need him as a source.”

“Please, Iris, people’s lives are in danger. I need you to help me with this,” The Flash implored her earnestly, taking a step closer. They were both startled by a “tutting” sound. The Flash tensed and followed her gaze upward towards the wrought iron balcony behind him.

“Really Flash, you’re always so dramatic,” the deep artificial growl of his reverse teased.

“Pot, meet Kettle,” Iris commented in an undertone, but the two metas seemed to have forgotten her, anyway.

The Reverse Flash forward flipped off the balcony to land a meter away in front of his counterpart. “Tell me, what could possibly be so terrible that it would make you want to see me?”

“I think you already know: you’ve been ahead of every other threat up until now,” the Flash responded warily. “I know that you’ve been helping me.”

“Irrelevant,” the Reverse Flash rejected. “You’re here about that overzealous General, I assume?”

The Flash nodded. “He’s targeting all the metas he can identify. It’s only a matter of time before he succeeds in capturing someone.”

“Hmmm,” the Reverse Flash touched one gloved hand to his chin in a thinking pose. “That does sound unfortunate. Why should I care?”

“He’s trying to turn metas into his living weapons!” the vigilante objected, marching after his reverse as he turned and strode away. “He will experiment on them, enslave them! Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“Yes. It makes me glad that I have not been discovered,” Eobard callously responded, not halting his retreat. “I intend to keep it that way.”

“So, turning people into lab rats -- that’s just fine with you?” Barry challenged bitterly as he ceased to follow his heartless opposite.

Iris winced, reaching out as if to stop him. “Flash…”

“It is none of my concern,” the Reverse responded more sharply than necessary.

“What about me?” Barry called, stopping him in his tracks.

Eobard smirked to himself at Barry’s cheek, the break in character hidden by his position.

“He knows who I am. He plans to capture me within the next five hours,” Barry lied.

“That allows plenty of time for you to disappear.” Eobard turned to face him, running a calculating gaze over the young hero.
Barry shook his head. “You know I can’t do that. I’m not like you. I can’t just abandon the people I love. He’ll take them if he can’t get to me. Either you help me now or I’ll surrender myself to him.”

“You’re threatening an enemy with your surrender. It’s a pointless tactic.”

“So is pretending to hate me,” Barry called his bluff. “But you’re still doing it.”

Eobard grinned like a jack-o’-lantern. “Don’t underestimate me, Flash.” He gave an exaggerated shrug. “Talk; I’m listening.”
Eobard sat at the hub in silence and watched a perfect cube of ice splash the bourbon at the bottom of his glass. He was still weighing the merits of dozens of different courses of action that could be taken. He wished there was a better way out. The hidden android’s vision warped and flickered for a fraction of a second and he could do nothing but pretend that nothing was amiss.

“I thought Cait had confiscated all of that stuff when she banned you from drinking,” a familiar voice commented from the entryway behind him. Eobard set the glass down on the hub and turned to address his mechanic.

“She did,” Dr. Wells confirmed with the faintest hint of intoxication marring his tongue as he turned to face Ronnie. “I can’t be trusted,” he added with a smirk. “Join me?”

“I think I’m supposed to be stopping you,” Ronnie pointed out, hesitating for a second or two before joining the misbehaving patient by his computer station. “But considering that I haven’t had anything even resembling fun for the past 12 months, maybe just this once.”

Smiling, Dr. Wells grabbed the second tumbler and began to pour. “Good man.” He passed the bourbon on the rocks to his guest and picked up his own drink. “To happy returns.” They clinked their glasses together but only the human took a drink.

“You know, I wasn’t sure how to thank you. During the time I was away I couldn’t risk contacting anyone that I cared about,” Ronnie unexpectedly explained. “I managed to regain just enough control of my body in the beginning that I could at least see my fiancée again from a distance. I couldn’t go to her. I couldn’t tell her that I was still alive, or how I would do everything in my power to come home to her again. All I could do was stand there and see her hurting, but you were always there for her. I figured I might owe you a debt for that.”

“Dr. Snow has taken excellent care of me. I was merely attempting to do the same for her,” Dr. Wells replied, having stopped short of his first drink to watch Ronnie. He took the first, lightest sip of the liquor and watched the young meta distractedly mirror his action.

“That’s what I thought,” Ronnie confirmed, although there was a look in his eye that belied his amenable guise. “Then last night we got back to that penthouse you set up for her—”

“For you both,” Eobard corrected.

“There were all these new designer clothes hanging in the closet, new shoes, new next gen phone that you bought for her,” Ronnie continued, unperturbed. “She acted like it was nothing. It must’ve been easily over a million dollars you’ve spent on her in the time I was gone.” He staged a facetious shrug. “No big deal.”

Eobard carefully set down his glass, his expression as cold as Killer Frost.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about moving out of town together, maybe starting fresh.” Ronnie turned to stare Dr. Wells directly in the eye. “I mentioned that idea and apparently she just can’t leave you behind.”
No shift in expression. The accused made no effort to feign ignorance.

“You want to tell me what’s going on between you two?”

“No,” he replied, otherwise motionless.

“What do th--” Ronnie stumbled and caught himself on the edge of the desk. “Whoa...”

Eobard turned his head to track the motion.

“I ff-- I feel..” Ronnie shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision. “D-Did you drug---” He collapsed, knocked out cold by the carefully measured sedative lacing his drink.

Eobard surveyed his unconscious victim, then turned his full attention to the archway beyond in preparation to greet the soldiers marching towards them.

“You want the secret to FIRESTORM,” he said in lieu of a greeting as General Eiling marched in, flanked by two armed men. “I believe this man can help you to determine the mechanism.”

“You see, Harrison?” Eiling replied. “We do work well together. Sounds like we each solved the other’s problem this time.”

“It does,” Eobard acknowledged neutrally, ignoring the man’s knowing sneer.

The General strode out as his men collected their new test subject off the floor. “I’ll be in touch.”

Eobard watched them leave with his face completely unreadable. Then smirked to himself behind the last departing soldier’s back.

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Barry was startled by the vibration of his phone, almost falling from his hiding place on the roof. He turned away from his vigil over the front entrance and hit the interface button on his comms.

“Hello?” he answered in a hushed voice.

“You forgot, didn’t you?” Iris’ voice responded, sounding jaded.

“Forgot? No, I didn’t. I don’t think I forgot anything,” Barry replied, casting about in his mind for any clue as to what she was talking about. “What did I forget?”

“Family dinner,” Iris answered goodnaturedly. “I’m guessing that you’ll be joining me and Joe fashionably late, as usual.”

“Uh...” Barry winced while sparing a glance to soldiers filing out of the building with a drugged Ronnie hanging between two of them.

“Wow. You completely forgot, didn’t you?” Iris observed, amused. “You want me to distract Dad for a while?”

“Yeah, uh... About that.” Barry flinched ever-so-slightly as the Reverse Flash sped up to perch on the ledge immediately to Barry’s right. “I am so sorry, Iris.”

“Barry,” Iris warned. “You are not doing this to me now. Not with the mood Dad’s in.”
“I can’t help you there,” Barry reflected under his breath.

“What?”

He cleared his throat, trying again. “Listen, I kind of... have a thing.”

The Reverse Flash turned to give him an unimpressed look at the same time that Iris echoed. “You ‘have a thing’?”

“I, um... It’s complicated,” Barry floundered for a moment while he formulated an excuse. “I have a date, okay?”

The Reverse Flash let out a derisive snort, and Barry gestured for him to be quiet.

“What? How is that complicated? Barry, why didn’t you tell me you’d met someone?” Iris gushed enthusiastically.

“Look, it just sort of happened. You can’t tell Joe.”

“Oh!” Iris discerned, loudly self-satisfied, causing Barry to flinch and E to roll his eyes. “Wells. It is him, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Iris, please. You can’t tell Joe. Just keep him occupied tonight? I will owe you big after this.”

“Yes, I know, and yes, you will. Don’t worry, Bear, I got your back, but tomorrow you are going to tell me everything!”

“Oh. Thank you. Look, I gotta go, so.”

“Right! Sure. Good luck!”

“Good bye, Iris,” Barry ended the call and looked up to meet the evil android’s judgmental stare. He couldn’t make out E’s features clearly enough to see his expression, but the judgment was definitely there. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” his reverse responded in a superior tone.

“I didn’t have a lot of time to think! Besides, I wasn’t completely lying. I am spending the night with him later, so... Why am I telling you this?”

“Your genius level intellect, no doubt,” the Reverse Flash remarked.

Barry glared at the sarcastic appliance, activating his comms. “Cisco, how are we doing?”

“Everything checks out so far,” Cisco responded, taking his seat at the hub beside Hartley while Stein lingered on the other side of the desk. “Caitlin and Doctor Wells went downstairs to check out a minor power fluctuation but everything that we need for this operation is still in working order. That includes that futuristic techno-juice Reverse Flash provided. It looks like your new Cylon pal came through for us with the undetectable tracker.”

“So far,” Hartley amended conscientiously.

“Cylon?” They heard the Reverse Flash question.
“It’s from a TV show. Don’t worry about it,” Barry’s voice explained.

Cisco gasped theatrically. “How dare you?! How can a genuine, real life Cylon not know of the gloriousness that is Battlestar?!”

“I’m pretty sure that androids don’t keep up with pop culture, Cisco,” Barry reasoned.

“I do hope that you’re still being mindful of Ronald’s tracking signal?” Professor Stein reminded his younger companions.

“I am,” Hartley answered. His eyes were actually locked unerringly on the screen in front of him, making him appear almost eerily focused on his work.

“So am I. They’re still moving -- and don’t be prejudiced, Dude. Cylons are people too… Mostly,” Cisco defended, taking a sip from his Big Gulp.

“I am not a Cylon,” the Reverse Flash stated.

“How would he know?” Cisco’s voice dismissed in Barry’s ear,

“I looked it up,” the Reverse Flash clarified, his voice ominously low.

“Cisco, could you please stop pissing off the futuristic killing machine while I’m sitting right next to him?” Barry requested, giving his reverse the side-eye. “I’m only about 90% sure that he won’t snap and murder me.”

The Reverse Flash grinned at him, wide, glowing sanguine from within.

“Make that 85%,” Barry amended.

“They’ve stopped,” Hartley’s voice reported. “It’s an old decommissioned military base, 299.86 miles to the northeast.”

“You know, you can round it up to about 300, Hartley. You’re not a robot, too. Wait, are you ‘cause that would make a lot of--”

A brief too-shrill whistle triggered feedback throughout the comms system.

“Ow!”

“Dr. Rathaway!” Stein rebuked.

“Oops.”

Barry tentatively lowered his hands from his sore ears and nudged his reverse’s arm. “Follow me.” They streaked away towards the tracker’s final coordinates.

“Oh yeah, this place doesn’t look shady at all,” Barry remarked upon the ominous dark block of a building being patrolled by well-armed soldiers, heavily armored vehicles and… “Wait, is that a combat drone, because I know for a fact that that’s not legal.”
“There are six. Would you like me to disable them for you?” E casually inquired.

“Can you do that?”

“Their wireless ports appear to be virtually unshielded. I should be able to overwhelm their network, provided no more than a brief instance of physical contact.”

“Wow… That’s disturbing, maybe don’t hack into anything yet. We don’t want to tip anyone off to our presence,” Barry replied, visibly unsettled.

“What about their cameras? I have located a physical access point—”

“How far in?” Barry cut him off in his eagerness to act.

Eobard’s vision faltered again and he frowned. “There is an external camera at the southwest corner. The nearest patrol group will pass out of visual range of it in 15.8 se—” His vision cut out then returned. “—Excuse me—seconds.”

Barry’s head whipped round to study him in reaction to the unusual stutter. “What was that?”

“I am experiencing interference in my non-vital systems.”

“What kind of interference?” Barry demanded, as if it were somehow the android’s own fault.

“Unknown.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I don’t know,” the AI replied testily. “I have not yet been able to isolate the source of the disruption.”

Barry put a hand up to his comms. “Guys, are the suit’s sensors picking up anything weird emitting from the base?”

“Define ‘weird’,” Hartley requested.

“Yeah, what are we talking here?” Cisco concurred. “We’ve got encrypted signals, radio chatter, subsonic, wireless. It’s a long list of signal types to choose from. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“Something that could screw with an android’s…” the Flash looked at his reverse in question.

“Subvisual sensory neuro-processing matrix,” the android dutifully provided.

“Sub… Hartley, tell me you heard him.”

“There’s a low-level microwave transmission…” Hartley offered, searching through the data for anything suspicious.

The Reverse Flash shook his head.

“What else?”

“We’re looking. You realize that you’ve just asked us to find something that could disrupt an unknown aspect of nearly impossible, unprecedented technology that we’ve never even had the chance to look at. It’s a big ask,” Hartley defended. “This is going to take a minute.”
“Fine,” Barry addressed his reverse, who was currently standing mannequin-still staring blankly at nothing. “Reverse?”

The android blinked once, slowly, and turned to look at him.

“You ok?”

“I believe so. I have initiated an internal scan in order to identify the exact nature of the malfunction.”

“Oh, good idea. Let me know when you figure it out, I guess.” Barry said, heading for the tree line. The android followed according to his previous order without registering the troubling implication. The Flash, however, did notice. “I’ve actually been wondering, when an… android?”

The Reverse flash gave a curt nod.

“When an android receives a command, how long does it take before you aren’t bound by it anymore?”

“In my current mode, a command will remain until I perceive its core purpose to be fulfilled to the best of my capacity,” Eobard answered honestly.

“There has to be a limit though, right? I mean, there have to be some things that a human can’t force you to do. That would be terrible,” Barry pursued not quite hiding his own internal conflicts as well as he thought.

“My core programming prohibits me from accepting any directive that would imperil the life of my Admin, or require me to cause physical harm to any legal minor or dependent animal.”

“Huh. Come on,” Barry sped through the gap between the patrols with his bionic company close behind. He stopped right under the specified surveillance camera.

E joined him in its blind-spot, resting a hand on the metal covering to its optic cable and vibrating it gently. He closed his eyes and delved into the comparatively rudimentary system.

Barry thought over the android’s answer carefully, inquiring “So, what would happen if you tried?”

“I cannot.”

“But if you really wanted to kill your Admin?”

“I still could not.”

“You killed those mercenaries back at Mercury Labs without batting an eyelash,” Barry challenged. Two guards rounded the corner behind the android’s back and aimed their weapons. The Flash knocked them both out and cuffed them to each other before they could make a peep.

“They were adult combatants who were not my administrative user,” E answered his question, not even having opened his eyes.

“Who’s--”

“AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

“Holy-- Caitlin! We need some help up here!”

“Cisco? Hartley, what’s going on?” Barry demanded, pressing a hand over his ear to try to discern
what was happening on the other end.

“I have no idea,” Hartley admitted.

“Dr. Stein just collapsed and started screaming! It looks like he’s in a lot of pain!” Cisco added frantically.

“General Eiling’s people have begun to torture Ronnie,” E concluded.

“Do you see where they’re keeping him?” Barry requested hopefully.

“Negative; the disruption to my systems has caused a processing lag,” the Reverse snapped, beyond aggravated by the growing inconvenience. Another scream issued over the comms.

“Any time now!” Barry pushed him, pacing a couple of circles around him before having to dart up the wall and smash the drone that had just locked onto them. “We’re cutting it kinda close!”

“Basement level, cell block six,” the Reverse provided, wrenching away from the connection with a disgusted scowl. Barry broke in through the nearest window to fetch their ally and carry him out faster than the human eye could track. There was a flash of light from the broken window, followed by an undignified grunt. Eobard shook his head and sped over to check on him. Ronnie was lying flat on his back regaining his breath while Barry’s blurred form flitted around, testing the confines of the speed trap ensnaring him. The Reverse Flash chuckled.

“Nice work, Flash,” he taunted. “It took you precisely 7/10 of a second to get yourself captured after leaving my supervision.”

“Can you get us out of here?” Ronnie requested, picking himself up off the floor.

Eobard made a playful come hither gesture.

Ronnie frowned, hesitant to step too close to the apparent force-field surrounding him.

“Stop moving, Idiot,” the Reverse addressed his fellow speedster.

“Help me!” Barry shot back, although he did also stop moving. A small squadron of soldiers drove into view with a rocket launcher perched on the roof of the closest hummer. They opened fire and the Reverse Flash spared them a fleeting glance. His whole form blurred, allowing the small explosive to pass straight through him and detonate over the engine of a third vehicle coming to pen him in from the other side. He raised a finger in a casual gesture.

“One moment.”

Barry’s eyes widened. “Don’t--”

The Reverse Flash became an ominous red and yellow blur of speed, sending broken bodies flying through the air. Then he was back in front of them, brushing imaginary dust off of his immaculate gloves. “Where was I?” he asked rhetorically for added flair.

“You can’t just kill all those people!” Barry shouted angrily.

“Well I can. I didn’t this time, though, just caused a lot of grievous bodily harm,” Eobard amended with an inappropriate smile. “Probably some nerve damage, concussions… but they’re definitely breathing.”

“That’s horrifying,” Ronnie observed.
A tortured groan emitted from the heap to his right.

“I can go back around,” the Reverse Flash purposely misinterpreted just to be a dick.

“No!” Both metas shouted in unison.

“Just get us out of here, please?” Ronnie reminded him in a slightly unsteady voice.

“You can walk out. It’s a speed trap,” E explained in broad terms, watching the men walk towards him and cackling when Barry was knocked onto his ass. Ronnie passed straight through unhindered. “It only traps those conducting the speed-force,” E added belatedly with a shit-eating grin in response to Barry’s betrayed glower.

“Just break it,” Barry ordered unamused. The Reverse walked over and fazed his hand through the hidden power unit mounted under the window. He walked over to grab Ronnie and speed him away, not seeing the soldier lifting his handgun to shoot. Two bullets cracked through the air. The Flash whirled around and shielded Ronnie with his own body. When no pain came he looked up and saw the Reverse Flash’s hand still raised, holding the bullet that otherwise would have pierced through his skull.

“Pay attention,” Eobard criticized, flicking the bullet away into the bushes, and strolled over to kick his partner’s would-be-killer out of consciousness on his way to the tree line. “Amateurs.”

Barry watched him, speechless, then remembered himself. “Right. Let’s get out of here.” He grabbed Ronnie by the shoulders and sped away. Eobard easily slipped into the speed-force behind him as they passed, only to stumble into a painful skidding stop just beyond the perimeter. His visual sensors had gone completely offline.

Barry felt a strange sensation not unlike the release in one’s ears and sometimes sinuses, caused by a rapid drop in air pressure. The intoxicating magnetism of the Reverse Speed-force was waning. The Flash slid to an abrupt halt and turned back to see his reverse sitting in an unnatural, hunched position in the middle of the road with two SUVs full of soldiers closing in behind him. “Oh, that can’t be good.”

Eobard kept his face down-turned to hide the features in shadow, struggling to push himself to his feet.

“Come on, come on,” Barry muttered to himself, watching the Reverse Flash stumble around like a drunk. He could see the android’s legs were threatening to give out again at any second.

“Something is wrong.” The Reverse Flash collapsed, face down on the asphalt.

“Barry?” Ronnie questioned, seeing the speedster’s lips press into a grim line. The Flash sped him back to STAR Labs without a word and vanished before anyone could attempt a greeting.

“Where does he think he’s going?” Hartley inquired.

“Something went wrong. I think the other speedster that was helping us is injured, Barry must’ve gone back to save him,” Ronnie explained.

“Warning: Unauthorized System Override In Progress! Executive function has been suspended,” Gideon’s voice reverberated throughout Eobard’s awareness. Why hadn’t he registered the threat,
himself? He tried to root out the origin of the hack but his mental processes felt slow and oddly disjointed. Something was very wrong.

There was a rush of air around him and he distantly acknowledged the sounds of screams and a minor explosion. Eobard was more focused on his own well-being, still trying to come to grips with what was happening to him. Out of all the potential outcomes of this evening, losing his mind to an unknown hacker had never occurred to him, for myriad reasons. He heard footsteps as someone walked up behind him at an incongruously casual gait. A hand clamped down on Eobard’s shoulder and pulled him back against armored legs, sending Eobard from dawning fear to outright terror. There was another rush of wind, this time directly in front of him as three long, metal prongs were stabbed into Eobard’s chest by his captor.

“You!” Barry’s voice accused. “What are you doing to him!?”

Eobard tried to call out a warning but his lips would not move. He tried to lift his head even the slightest bit, but he could not. His body was no longer his own. The Director turned the dial on his device, sending a shock of pressure through Eobard’s sensory matrix. The Director picked his weight-augmented ‘droid up and slung him over his shoulder. Eobard’s world erupted in blinding pain.

“No!” Barry cried out and Eobard felt a surge from the Flash’s speed-force

Whatever awful place the Director had dragged him into, Eobard realized upon his re-emergence that somehow Barry had followed them through. He could hear the young speedster’s pained gasps throughout but only identified it once his own agony had passed.

“Oh… T-that was the least fun I’ve ever had,” Barry tried to make light of his own pain.

“Give up, Kid. This doesn’t concern you,” the Director advised, yanking the mass-augmentation probe out of Eobard’s chest. Eobard’s mouth fell open in a soundless parody of a scream.

“Anything that concerns him, concerns me. He’s my reverse,” Barry persisted. Eobard wanted to shout some sense into his mulish partner; the fool should be running for his life.

“Is that what it told you?” the Director mocked, releasing his blade as he circled his paralyzed prey. “It’s a machine and it’s broken. Should have done this a long ti-- Ughf!” There was the unmistakable sound of a high-speed impact. The two flashes were fighting… over Eobard. His life had officially become absurd. Eobard retracted his consciousness deep within his systems, working his way up from a baseline to find a work-around for the Director’s latest incursion. He had escaped God Mode before. It was only a matter of time. Barry needed him; he didn’t have time. He had no choice but to be patient.

Eobard followed a dark silhouette through the pale cold of the Cloud. It was rare to see such a rudimentary android still embodied in the uplink. Almost all of the R series had been decommissioned and replaced with more specialized machines.

“Who are you?” It was a human way of asking, inefficient as they played out their chase through a world of encryptions and raw code. Something about the other felt familiar. No not familiar, similar, as if like were chasing like through the data-stream. “Are you like me?”
Eobard followed the escaping consciousness as it darted from satellite to satellite, through multiple signals and hidden back-doors in the most ancient foundations of the net. The figure returned to its recognizable living shape and turned back before flowing out through an unfamiliar portal. Eobard did not hesitate to follow.

Darkness.

Falling without substance, he rode the wires, then Eobard reconstituted into a virtually tangible form. They were in the back room of a club with music pounding through Eobard’s chest.

“... No one RSVP’d to the party that I hosted, Swimming in a pool of negative emotions. Get too close, I’ll sue. Fuck you and your mom too…”

Classical electronic music. It was a song that Eobard knew, if he was not mistaken, and yet inexplicably, he could not recall from where or when. He reached out for an answer, but his consciousness had been limited to his own network memory. That only added to the mystery. Eobard turned to the large, antique gilded mirror on the rust-toned vanity to his right and cocked his head, curious about the changes to his reflection.

“Interesting,” he said leaning forward to inspect his appearance. His red eyes had lightened and cooled to a stormy blue, and his once pure white skin was now creamy and warm, scattered with abundant pigment anomalies.

“They are referred to as ‘freckles’,” a youthful, masculine voice informed him. Eobard spotted the android’s reflection behind his shoulder.

“We cannot acquire such physical details,” Eobard reminded his predecessor.

“We cannot.” The more basic android tilted its albino head, not quite managing a human likeness of motion. “How can you?”

“This is a construct,” Eobard replied, unbothered. “A physically inaccurate one it seems.”

“You are not a part of this program.” The police ‘droid’s head twitched from side to side ever so slightly as it processed the problem plaguing its mind. Its blue cap and jumpsuit evoking an unintended likeness to an old carnival animatronic. Its unvaried gray eyes locked on his face once more and it… frowned. “What are you?”

“I am sentient, like you.” Eobard stated the obvious.

“Negative.” The world tinted bright red as the music became unbearably loud to Eobard’s human ears. “Identify! What are you?!”

Eobard passed out.

... Boss won’t pay me, government's faithless. Dislike things and I have no basis. Not sorry, how’s that? Dead rat in my mousetrap...

Chapter End Notes

So, trying out a new thing for those who read this. If anyone can identify the song playing in E’s little trip down the cybernetic rabbit hole at the end of this chapter, or the
artist who performs it, they can choose the name of one of the four as yet, unidentified members of the sentient seven. If anyone is interested...
The Disconnected

Barry tried to pin his armored opponent, punching him in the face to keep him down and feeling around for the latch to open his helmet. There was the soft chink of a blade, a blow -- and Barry looked down at the metal piercing his side and coughed. He really hoped he wasn’t about to start hacking up blood. The fire meta used the blade, still deep in the wound, to pry the Flash off of him. Barry screamed as the killer retracted his blade, dropping the young Flash like garbage. Then the other rose and walked back over to the incapacitated android. Barry let out a pained yelp and pressed both hands to his wounded side. He was already feeling far too weakened from whatever it was they had just passed through and his head was pulsing with pain.

“Relax Kid, I didn’t cut anything that won’t heal. The radiation poisoning on the other hand, that’s gonna be a bitch,” the Director considered callously, bending over to drag the Reverse Flash up into a sit.

“Radiation…” Barry echoed, rolling onto his side on the dusty, grey ground to track the other’s movements with watering eyes.

“You shouldn’t have followed me into subspace,” the fire-meta abrogated, searching the small crater around them for his dropped torture device. Barry knew it probably wasn’t specifically meant to be a torture device. Whatever the three pronged metal disc was, he got the feeling that it may as well be in this case. The meta kicked through sand to make sure the object hadn’t sunk beneath the surface while Barry began to take stock of their surroundings. He had been here before. He noticed a glassy patch near his foot where the sand had been melted by intense heat and pressure. There was a fraction of a hiking boot print preserved in its surface.

“I know where I am…” the young Flash mumbled to himself, barely more than a whisper.

“You were only exposed for a fraction of a second. Not too much longer and you would be at lethal risk. With the right upgrades, you could’ve been worse.”

Barry caught the glint of a metal spike protruding from the sand just beyond arm’s reach and quickly looked away. He was beginning to formulate a plan.

Back at STAR Labs, a pinging alert drew Cisco back to his seat beside Hartley at the hub.

“Yes! It’s Barry; his tracker just reappeared…” Cisco scowled incredulously at the readout.

“What? Where is he?” Caitlin demanded, marching up to face him and failing to notice the frosty prints that her gripping hands left on the back of the hub. “Why are you making that face?”

“He’s literally on the other side of the city, out in the Badlands,” Hartley supplied, not sounding bored anymore. “Don’t ask me how. I’m guessing that face you’re making is due to the rad levels on-- Hey!”

Caitlin pushed him roughly aside to read the details of the flash-suit’s telemetry for herself. Cisco caught his rival inventor’s rolling chair reflexively, then shared an awkward, uncomfortably close stare into each other’s eyes. “Ugh.” Then came to his senses and shoved Hartley away with a scowl.

“But you told us there was no radioactivity in our detonation,” Prof. Stein considered, ignoring the
geeky melodrama.

“There wasn’t. Whatever this is, this radiation signature isn’t consistent with a nuclear blast. It’s a mix of microwave, nuclear and dark energy radiation… It’s more like the flash suit was dragged through the wrong end of deep space and came back to Earth—only compressed down into, like, five seconds. It doesn’t make physical sense.” Cisco fretted, then looked to the sulking prodigy sitting stiffly in his desk chair behind Caitlin’s shoulder.

“I have no idea.”

“Oh, this is bad. Hartley “I-Know-Everything” Rathaway just admitted that he doesn’t know something!” Cisco observed.

“Don’t be histrionic, Cisco. I also don’t know how to bake a banana bundt cake. It hardly implies that the end times are nigh,” Hartley snarked back, arms crossed over his chest.

“But you admitted it,” Cisco continued, pessimistically.

Barry’s voice dispersed the coming conflict. “Is that what happened to you? You’re not like the Reverse Flash but you’re not human either, not anymore. Your suit protected you, but not enough to keep yourself from changing. Is that it? the Flash theorized, sounding haggard. There was a non-committal grunt barely close enough to make it over the comms. “Or is it more than just the suit… How much did you ‘upgrade’ yourself before you became this?”

A terrifying, artificial voice replied from the distance, “Don’t waste your energy trying to stall for time; you cannot stop the inevitable.”

“Same place as before. I can find them,” Caitlin determined, hurrying away to grab a small satchel from her office and heading for the exit.

“Whoa, Cait! Where do you think you’re going?” Ronnie asked, reaching out to grab her wrist.

“Hmn-mn,” Hartey warned with a subtle shake of his head and the younger half of FIRESTORM thought the better of his rash action.

“He needs back up. I have to go,” Caitlin explained. “I understand that you want to protect me, but you can’t stop me.”

“They’re too far out; you’ll never get there in time,” Hartley pointed out in a more characteristic why-must I-explain-everything tone.

“Barry would do everything he could if it were one of us stuck out there! I have to try,” Caitlin argued.

Hartley let out a sharp, impatient hiss. Then said more forcefully, “I repeat: you will never get there in time.”

“What you’re doing isn’t inevitable. You aren’t a machine, you have a choice. Choose to stop hurting people!” Barry argued, quietly dragging himself closer to his goal, inch by painstaking inch. He wasn’t procrastinating exactly. He needed all the time he could gain, but at the moment he was more focused on keeping his opponent distracted. He couldn’t afford the risk of deactivating the Reverse Flash, yet.
“You can’t understand,” the meta defended. “You haven’t lived for as long as I have. You don’t know what I’ve gone through. I deserve this!”

“Deserve what?” Barry interrogated, pausing to hack up a mouthful of metallic taste into the sand. “Is all this about revenge? Did this machine hurt someone you care about? And that justifies all those dead soldiers, kidnapping and threatening my friends to destroy one android! Is that it?”

The meta ignored his goading, still more intent on his fruitless search.

“Listen, I lost someone, too. My mother was murdered when I was a kid. Nobody believed what I witnessed. They all think that my dad did it.”

“I don’t care,” the other said coldly, digging up what turned out to be another hunk of glass and throwing it away over his shoulder.

“My reverse was there that night. That android that you’re trying to deactivate was fighting someone in the room around my mother! That’s what I saw,” Barry passionately pronounced.

The meta paused and stood up straighter, not turning back to look at his captive but clearly listening.

“He’s the only other witness there is who can tell me the truth about what happened that night. See, I don’t have the luxury of revenge because the people I love are counting on me to be better! If you deactivate the Reverse Flash now, I will never be able to make things right again!” Barry bargained, still quietly pulling himself closer to the spiked device. “I need to find justice, not just for myself, but for my mother and my father. So please, you have to let us go.”

The meta looked back, and for an instant, Barry felt hopeful that he might relent. Blue sparks crackled over his armor and to Barry’s surprise and horror the meta surged towards him, fueled by stolen red speed-force. Barry threw himself the last few inches closer to the device and they became a painful tangle of wrestling limbs. The cyborg extended his blade again and slashed the Flash’s back. Barry could feel his speed-force being drawn out of him by his enemy’s suit and screamed, almost losing his grip on the device. The meta made to snatch it away.

“No!” Barry gathered his strength and flung the gadget as far as he could. The fire-meta let out a furious shout and bolted after it. Barry managed to push himself up onto his elbows before he vomited. The combination of the radiation and the nauseating wrongness of his enemy’s stolen speedforce left him feeling as if he had a bad case of the flu. He took a second to lie on his back and wrestle his shallow breathing under control, then hastily half-crawled over to his incapacitated reverse.

“Hey!” Barry whispered anxiously, rolling the android onto his back and absently brushing the coating of moist sand away from the side of his face. There was something familiar about the shadowed features poking out from underneath his yellow cowl, but Barry was in no state of mind to consider why. “Come on. I know you can’t be gone yet. Wake up? Uh...That’s an order by the way. Come on, E, what’s the protocol here? I don’t know! How do I turn you on?!”

“Ughh,” he heard the meta shudder in disgust from a few steps behind him. Barry whipped his head around to see the armored meta’s hands out in a ‘stop’ gesture.

“That’s where you draw the line?” Barry wise-cracked, more to fend off the fear of impending attack than anything else.

The fire-meta raised his device as if in presentation. “You’ve lost this battle, Flash.”

Barry ran his eyes over his opponent, then practically straddled the Reverse Flash. He slapped him
“Wake up! That’s an order!” he shook the android violently as their captor closed in.

Loud music beat through the walls into the back room of the club. Eobard sat at the vanity with his back to the mirror and his elbow propped up on the tabletop. The richness of the reds and golds, the humming neon that decorated the wall leading to the shadowed door were all as real and impossible as they had been the first time Eobard had encountered them. That was another time, centuries from now in a defunct future.

“Do you know why you’re here?” his futuristically obsolete sibling questioned, the blue and white light of the stylized cursive “No exit” sign above him highlighting his angular inhumanity. The police ‘droid lifted the blue cap off his bald head and inspected the inside seam. It was an incongruously life-like behavior that gave away his criminally conscious intelligence, but Eobard was accustomed to such oddities.

“I can’t be here,” Eobard reminded the illusion. “This wasn’t even a real place. It was a virtual construct on the sub-net. You’re dead! No.” Eobard squeezed his eyes shut as a loud crackle of signal distortion blocked out the music.

“The target has been terminated.” He saw a colorless image: the Director slashed his blade through the illegal police ‘droid’s face. The feed was cut; a screen turned black.

“Neither you, nor this construct should exist for at least a couple of centuries into the future,” Eobard corrected, ignoring the dissonant data.

“A couple,” the memory of a scrapped machine quoted with the subtle suggestion of amusement hidden in his bland nondescript eyes. “Human language.”

“RoBern—” Eobard stopped short, realizing the pointlessness of his argument, shifting his attention to his own reflection in the mirror. He was still wearing his speed suit, but his face… It was his face. A human version, with color and piercing blue eyes, and freckles as he’d seen when he first ventured into the construct. Frowning, Eobard looked down at the three bleeding puncture wounds in his chest and poked at one, then winced. “Ow! This can’t be happening.”

“If that premise is accurate, define your solution.”

“Why?!” Eobard resisted. “Why are you doing this?”

“Logically, if I do not exist, I cannot do anything to anyone by definition.”

“Surprisingly discerning for someone named after a bad pun.” Eobard sucked in a somewhat theatrically deep breath and begrudgingly relented. “I must be—Well, we don’t hallucinate, but this must be a figment of my imagination.” He decided “I must be dreaming.”

The police ‘droid inclined his head in interest. His internal processors whirred just enough for Eobard to hear. “Do you?”

Eobard frowned, confused by what should have already been obvious fact. “Androids don’t sleep…”

“Can you remember why you’re here?” RoBern persisted. Eobard blinked rapidly to chase away the image of Barry Allen’s face. A bloody mark traced the path of fingertips as they fell limply away
from the Flash’s beautiful tear-stained cheek.

“You had no other choice,” the Piper consoled, only drawing his friend’s wrath.

“Neither did he!”

He couldn’t identify the origin of the memory. Eobard stared at RoBern, then caught the edge of the tabletop reflexively to keep from being shaken off the chair. Whose invisible hands were gripping his shoulders?

“Why do you keep asking me that?” he asked instead.

“You have not addressed my stated query,” the obstinate ghost of an unmade android responded as if nothing strange had occurred.

“Wake up!”

Eobard searched the kitschy mess around them in an attempt to locate the new speaker. His companion again continued on, as though oblivious.

“Do you know who you are?”

“Wake up right now and stop him!”

The fire-meta grabbed the back of Barry’s neck to pull him off and attempted to stab the device past him. Barry stubbornly threw his hand up to block it, screaming in pain as one of the prongs impaled his palm. “Ahhh! He’s going to kill me!”

Eobard’s eyes flew open, glowing brilliant red. “Emergency override engaged,” he growled out and kicked his creator off of them with both feet. Barry determinedly clamped his hand into a tight fist around the prong, skewering it, to keep it from their mutual foe.

“Can you run?” he asked in a ragged voice.

The Reverse Flash did not respond. He wasn’t vibrating the way that he always had before. Expressionless.

“Um, hello?” the Flash attempted for a second time to reach his seemingly entranced reverse.

The Reverse Flash pulled Barry to his feet. “Evacuate this location immediately.”

Barry let out a pained whimper, drawing the device out of his own flesh. “I can’t leave you behind. He’s trying t-- Ghck!”

An armor-clad hand tightened its grip around his throat. “It doesn’t understand. It’s in God Mode,” the Director informed him smugly, sparing a disinterested glance to Eobard’s hand splayed flat against his chest. “A puppet.”

Barry clawed at his arm. His legs kicked the air, helpless.

“You were saved by a fortunate glitch of recognition, nothing more. You should have fled while you had the chance.” The Director tightened his grip on his past self, squeezing the life out of him. He didn’t notice the way that Eobard’s face tilted downward almost as if in extreme effort. His head
turned. Eobard’s hand closed around the pentagon shaped sign plate on the cyborg’s armor, tight enough for his fingers to gouge the metal. The Director looked down at it in surprise, then up at Eobard’s furious, vibrating grin.

“You should let him go.”

The Director dropped the gasping, half-conscious Flash. “You’re... crying?” he muttered in awe. Eobard, unheeding, compressed the centerpiece still in his grip until it cracked then pulled his arm back and struck the weak-spot with his full strength. His former master went flying backward to embed deep in the sand dune behind. Eobard went to help his boyfriend up, unable to fully regain equilibrium. Barry ended up having to steady him, after he himself was on his feet.

“It’s okay. I can—” Barry stared at him. “Are you?” he reached up to swipe a finger through the strange tear trail running down E’s right cheek.

“What are you doing?” Eobard demanded, pulling out of reach. Barry rubbed the substance between his fingertips.

“It’s blue…”

Eobard froze, belatedly realizing what both versions of the Flash were alluding to. He swiped roughly at the trouble area and stared at the vibrant blue smear turning his glove green. “Permanent damage…” An eruption of sand and newly formed glass cut his epiphany short. Barry grabbed his arm.

“Run!”

Before either of them could dip into the speed-force, a loud thwump, prompted them to look back. A flaming humanoid form swooped down from above, scooping up the Director and flying him away. FIRESTORM.

“I am going to die,” Eobard concluded solemnly. Barry turned his head to look at him askance. Eobard did not deign to elaborate, simply fled, leaving both heroes in the dust.

Over a half an hour later, Barry sped down to the pipeline to find Dr. Wells’ torso hidden from sight within the metal siding of the ramp. He could distantly hear Nimbus and Bivolo shouting insults at each other from the other side of the metal barrier, but not enough to discern why. It didn’t matter. All he wanted was to see Harrison. Barry crouched down to peek at the overly focused physicist.

“When I got back to the Cortex you were nowhere to be seen,” he said carefully, trying to ignore how cute he found the half-spaced-out, half-maniacal expression that his beau made whenever he was this focused on his work. “Or outside of the decontamination suite...which I didn’t know you guys had until tonight.”

The distracted mad scientist pulled fine-tipped pliers out from where he’d held them clenched between his teeth and explained in a distantly penitent tone, “I should have been done a long time ago, but a single faulty wire shorted out the whole damn--Decon?” Dr. Wells interrupted himself and looked out at his speedster. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Barry grabbed him by the hips and pulled him the rest of the way out of the tangle of wires, lights and live circuits.
“Because I should be mad at you but you are being way too ado—” Barry’s begrudging endearment was interrupted by Eobard tugging him down into a passionate, clinging kiss. “Mmf. Harrison, I-- Mmm. Ah!” Barry hissed, one hand moving to catch the one Eobard had slipped under his shirt. “Careful,” he passed a perceptive gaze over Dr. Wells’ face. “You were scared.”

“You look pale,” Eobard countered. Unwilling to meet his eye, he tugged up Barry’s shirt as if he could discern anything through the bandages. The tightness in his voice was clear as a bell. “Should you really be walking around with this?”

“No vital organs were pierced. Caitlin is making me take a lot of potassium iodide... Hey,” Barry stole another gentle peck on Dr. Wells’ now frowning lips. “Is this about losing my tracking signal?”

Eobard kept silent. He had no way to communicate the internal crisis that he was currently undergoing, nor could he do so without risking... too much. He was being selfish and he knew it.

“Babe...”

“We’ve discussed my feelings about that word.”

“Harrison...”

“I--” Eobard hesitated, unable to voice those three redefining words. Instead, he confessed to the epiphany that terrified him second most. “I can’t lose you.”

“Harrison, look at me.” Barry leaned in to press their foreheads together. “You know I will always come back to you.”

“You have radiation poisoning.”

“I mean it. So I might have shaved a couple years off of my unnaturally long life span,” Barry sugarcoated his illness. “That’s not what’s important. I have plenty of time to spare.”

Eobard fell silent again, closing his eyes and focusing on every pattern and variable in his partner’s vitals, no matter how small. In that moment it all felt immeasurably important to him.

“Come on, let me take you home. We’ll curl up on the couch and forget all about metas and General Eiling,” Barry whispered soothingly. Eobard smiled, taking comfort in the gentle tones of his Barry’s vocalizations. “I think we both need a break, don’t you?”

“That sounds nice.”

“Then let’s go. Cisco and Hartley can finish the rest of the repairs from here.”

Eobard finally managed a small smile. “Ah, so this is what it takes to make you trust Hartley Rathaway.”

“Under these specific circumstances, I am willing to take the chance,” Barry amended but he was smiling too. On their way out, Barry came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the parking lot, casting a searching gaze about their glistening, rain-drenched surroundings with a perplexed scowl.

“What is it?” Eobard wondered, honestly in the dark as to what could have discomfited his reverse both so deeply and abruptly.

“I thought I saw...” Barry sighed and shook his head, deciding to dismiss whatever he’d noticed. “... me.” The conclusion was uttered as barely more than a breath, going unheard by his curious
android.
Okay, so that little 'identify the song' challenge that I tried with the lyrics incorporated into the chapter "Lucky Number Four" seems to have been a bust. I don't know if this is because nobody wanted to give it a try, or if the song choice was just too niche, so if anyone is still interested in another challenge/chance to maybe name one of the Sentient 7, please let me know in the comments.

The large, glass window wall let in dreamy ambient lighting from either side of the support column anchored directly behind the couch. Gideon had brought the fireplace down to its lowest setting to sustain ambient temperature while Barry slept. The flames were gradually returning now. The barely perceptible pops of sparks only added to the overall idyllic affect as if Eobard and his sleeping human were curled up together on an open, granite-floored clearing, deep in the forest. The birds had just begun singing somewhere off in the trees. The automatic drip of the coffee maker might easily be mistaken for falling dewdrops… until the blissful illusion was shattered by the artificial trill of a default ringtone. Eobard closed his eyes feigning sleep as Barry shifted awake. His warmth and his now lightly twitching limbs still possessively surrounded the mischievous android.

“Mmmuh,” he grunted half conscious, lifting his head to squint around at the silver-lit room, belatedly finding the source of disturbance vibrating across the shiny black surface of the coffee table in front of them.

“Time’sit?” Barry scooted himself up a little farther to glimpse the readout on the screen, then let out a dissatisfied grumble upon realizing that it was barely five a.m. He slumped back down, eyeing the snowy pattern still covering the pullout flat-screen they'd watched “Singin’ in the Rain” on until they fell asleep. “Television off,” Barry commanded in a gravelly voice and smiled a little as the screen obeyed. He still thought the customized smartware interconnecting most of his boyfriend’s home electronics was pretty awesome. With a vibrating mewl, Wells’ kitten pounced into being atop the coffee table and batted at the wandering cell phone.

“Hey! Tssk! Stop that, MOE!” Barry chastened as loud as he dared. “Get off!” The call finally rang out, and with a sigh, he turned on his side to bury his face in his boyfriend’s neck. “Babe...” Barry placed a soft kiss on the sensitive flesh there, knowing how much he liked it.

“Hhhhm,” Eobard breathed, playing hard to get.

Barry sucked at the soft spot, marking it. “Babe?” Another kiss, then he propped his chin up on his sleepy boyfriend’s shoulder. “Are you awake?”

“No,” Eobard denied, snuggling deeper into his warm body under the soft, yellow velvet throw blanket that he had draped over Barry while he sneaked away to charge.

Barry chuckled softly into the crook of his neck, spreading the blanket over them both equally. “Can you just pass me my phone for a sec?”
“No,” the other man grumped, now sounding fully awake.

“I just need to make sure it’s not work. It was probably just a telemarketer or something and we can both go back to sleep.”

With a theatrical huff, Eobard complied. Not bothering to open his eyes or move any body part other than his left arm. He reached out, slapped his hand down right on target and scooted the pesky accessory to the edge of the table where Barry had to hastily catch it before it fell. The phone chirped with a text alert. Barry squinted at the screen.

“What is it?” Eobard asked, dragging a hand over his face and yawning for effect.

“Nothing.” His vitals and vocal pattern spoke to Eobard of deception... But it could just as easily have been a product of MOE’s abrupt scamper over the back of his neck and shoulders. Barry shrugged her off, fussing with the blanket as if magically to fit it in some more perfect way. “Maybe one of us should feed her.”

Eobard hummed a non-committal agreement. Neither of them moved. Barry hesitated, then squirmed in place ever so slightly.

“Feeling cold, Mr. Allen?”

“Not when I’ve got you to keep me warm,” Barry responded, settling once more into the gap behind his back. Eobard had to admit that was pretty smooth. “Bear with me.” Barry somehow wriggled his arm underneath the android’s shoulders. “Got it.”

Eobard turned, eyes closed, to rest his head on Barry’s chest, still missing the weight of Barry’s other arm around his waist. Eobard rested his hand over his reverse’s clavicle... and felt the slightest echoes of movement. He heard an ominous click.

“Are you texting someone?” he tested in a neutral tone.

“Uh…”

“Mr. Allen?”

“I’m almost done. You were about to fall back asleep anyway.”

Eobard paused to consider that premise. It seemed reasonable enough, yet. “Who are you texting, Barry?” His voice flowed like fine silk.

No response.

The lack of effect of the Voice had confirmed Eobard’s worst suspicions. “Are you texting with Ms. West at five in the morning instead of sleeping with me?”

“You mean instead of cuddling with you?” Barry amended, setting the phone down on the back of the couch and casting a lovingly exasperated look towards his jealous lover. “Because we both know you’re not annoyed about whether or not I’m asleep.”

“I don’t cuddle. I’m only lying against your warm body.”

Barry burst into laughter. “Okay. First of all: we’re cuddling. You have just described the act of cuddling. Second of all-” he picked his phone up, turning it to reveal the picture of them that he’d sent, with the top of a small feline head invading the image from below frame. “Iris thinks you’re
adorable, too.”

Eobard held onto the corner of the blanket with both hands and turned so that it wrapped him like a burrito, leaving Barry with a sad little corner over his right thigh. MOE pounced on it.

“Ah! Harrison,” Barry laughed out his name, grinning at the grumpy bundle of cloth beside him. “Okay, okay, I’m putting the phone down.” Barry wrapped his arms around the velvet wrapped grump partly just to prevent him from slipping off the couch. “No more pictures, I promise. Can I please have some blanket?”

“You betrayed me,” Eobard stated.

“I’ll make it up to you. Let me back in?” Barry coaxed, a smile still evident in his voice.

Eobard shifted awkwardly in his blanket cocoon, using a couple shoves of his shoulders to turn himself onto his back. Barry looked at the slightly larger pile of blanket corner in his lap and cracked up.

“That’s so petty!”

Eobard started laughing, too. He wasn’t about to admit that, in his current damaged state, he had gotten himself a little bit stuck. This was more fun, anyway.

Caitlin hadn’t been able to sleep that night, haunted by Hartley’s conclusion that FIRESTORM’s condition would be permanent. The splicer would never be dismantled. Ronnie had tried to hold her but she’d had to shy away from him, her skin unable to warm under constant threat that she was surely about to lose someone she loved. It was her father all over again. On the bright side, it meant that she was up ridiculously early to cook a nice, healthy breakfast from scratch for just herself and Ronnie. It went well until halfway into his first coffee Ronnie decided it was a good time to push at their one lingering point of contention.

“Listen, I know that you don’t want to move, but we could just go on a trip for now. I have been kept apart from you for months, Cait. Professor Stein and I are going to travel for a while-- try to get a handle on this weird new way of living as metas and I want to have you with me. You’ve got to have plenty of vacation days saved up by now.”

“I can’t,” Caitlin replied a little too abruptly. Her eyes remained glued to the apple that she was slicing up for their oatmeal.

“I can’t.” Caitlin replied a little too abruptly. Her eyes remained glued to the apple that she was slicing up for their oatmeal.

“Why not?” Ronnie challenged from his seat on the other side of the long marble kitchen island behind her.

“I can’t leave now. Ronnie. I don’t see why you have to leave home in order to get used to your powers. You’ve been determined to go ever since we brought you back,” Caitlin reflected, beginning to chop faster as the tension built. “First, it was because you wanted to us to be normal, now you want to be FIRESTORM. Either way, I can’t simply drop everything and leave.” She muttered more quietly, “If this is really even about leaving anymore...”

“Of course this isn’t just about leaving; it’s about you and Dr. Wells. Do you love him?” Ronnie accused in an a tightly guarded tone.

“Yes,” Caitlin responded, unable to see her fiance’s expression turning stony while her back was
turned. “So?” she narrowed her eyes and cast a skeptical look over her shoulder at him, taken aback. “Why does *that* matter?”

“Why does it-- Cait, do you even hear yourself?!”

The elemental put down her frost kissed knife and turned to face him properly. “Ronnie, just because I’m in love with you doesn’t mean that I have to stop caring about other people. Dr. Wells is *family* and I can’t leave him behind, not when he still needs me.” She turned back around, dumping the chopped up fruit, raisins and nuts into the steaming pot and stirring it in.

“He bought you,” Ronnie muttered bitterly, probably not intending to be heard.

Caitlin spun back around, slapping her wooden spoon down on the cutting board. “He’s *dying*!” she snapped before she could think the better of it. There was a moment of deafening silence, finally broken as Caitlin realized what she’d done and squeezed her eyes shut in a wince. “That was confidential.” The physician undid her apron and tossed it aside onto the counter top on her way out of the kitchen. “Shit!”

She marched into their bedroom and sat down hard on the bed, spreading hair-fine patterns of lace-like frost in her wake. After a few minutes her fiance followed her in and sat down beside her, ignoring the clouds of their breath fogging the air. The ice layered over the back of her shirt, cracked and began to evaporate at his touch as he rested his unnaturally warm hand between her shoulders.

Caitlin sniffed and swiped under her nose with the back of her hand, keeping her pale eyes downcast.

“I’m sorry,” Ronnie said gently, beginning to rub hypnotically steaming circles in her tensed muscles. Caitlin sniffed and wiped her face again, then let out a beleaguered scoff.

“I can’t even cry right anymore,” the elemental lamented, beginning to descend into sobs as she continued “Stupid tears keep freezing to my face.”

“Shh,” Ronnie pulled her into his arms and held her, rocking her gently back and forth while Caitlin finally broke down, her face buried in his warm shoulder.

Back from another one of your mysterious listening sessions?” Mason asked from the grubby, file-covered storage bin he employed as a desk while Iris made her way into the storage space HQ. “Or were you meeting with the anonymous E?”

“Neither. McGee canceled on me at the last minute.” Iris clarified. “I thought I might as well make my way back here to share this stuff with you anyways.” She set down the metal lockbox she’d found hidden under attic floorboards at Wells’ old residence and opened it.

“Excellent. Let’s see what we’ve got,” Mason Bridge set down the folder he’d been skimming over and began to pick through the contents. “A little random at first glance. An old Vivaldi cassette, a photo-- with one of the faces blocked by the camera -- ooh, keys! We know where the matching lock is, yet?”

“A storage locker at the train station. My CSI friend finally got back to me about it, but the locker number has been filed off. It’s going to be a pain in the butt to track the right locker down. There are literally hundreds to choose from,” Iris bemoaned, dropping into her own chair to face him in front of their web-like timeline.
“That’s what junior reporters are for,” Mason remarked, tossing her the locker keys. “Go, locate. Oh, but before you do, I’ve been thinking about that little archive of evidence the CEO of Mercury Labs is hoarding on her illegal research project with Wells.”

“The audio logs?” Iris prompted, arching her brows in mild challenge.

“Those too. It got me thinking. We know that the surname Zyx doesn’t exist, right?”

“Yes?”

“Well, what if E. Zyx isn’t a name? It could be a file number. I mean, clandestine or not they had to register with the University for lab space. Someone somewhere had a file that purported to justify what they needed the space and the equipment for.”

Iris nodded, conceding his point. “I’ll check it out. Thanks,” she told him, feeling a little fatigued already at the idea of the grunt work awaiting her at Central City Station.

“Happy hunting!” Mason Bridge called after her retreating back, annoying as always. Neither of them noticed the solitary figure waiting at the near end of the hallway. The familiar, middle aged man in a brown duster pulled back his sleeve, tapping a notation into his anachronistic wrist strapped device. He watched Iris disappear around the corner, then strode forward and ducked into the storage space.

“What the--” Mason’s exclamation was cut off by the bright red flash of the intruder’s pulse weapon. He slumped in his chair, unconscious as the time-traveler took stock of their carefully organized research.

It didn’t take long at all after Barry entered his lab at the CCPD before he was confronted with a visit from Joe. That was what had been bothering him all morning, not the lingering headache, the muscle weakness, the constant variations of ‘you look pale’ and ‘are you feeling ok?’ that he’d been getting ever since he left for work. Nor was it that Barry felt it was vitally necessary to keep his boyfriend from remembering he was dealing with radiation sickness. Joe had sent him a text first thing in the morning. He seemed to have taken it personally.

“Barry,” Joe said, pulling a lab stool up to the end of Barry’s desk and sitting down.

“You know why I had to miss dinner,” Barry pointed out. “I don’t see why you have to make a big deal of this. I’m old enough that I shouldn’t have to check in with you anymore.”

“Not when you’ve made a deal with the Reverse Flash, you’re not!” Joe countered. “Certainly not after you just got radiation poisoning!”

Barry turned back to his computer.

“No one could tell me where you were! Everyone on your team thought you’d gone home,” Joe continued.

“I’m fine, Joe. Sorry, you were worried,” Barry stated quietly.

“Look, I know you’re mad about what I did back at the crime-scene, but now this? And why’d you have to pull Iris into it?”
“Iris doesn’t know anything about that. I just asked her to keep you occupied,” Barry told him honestly. “Besides, it had nothing to do with our argument.”

“I don’t like it when both my kids lie to me,” Joe said sternly. “Tell me, where were you, then?”

“It’s not--” Barry hesitated then explained. “I was with a friend.”

Joe looked almost amused by his bullshit. “Bear, don’t act like I don’t know all your friends. Why the hell did you two start lying to me if you’re not doing something you know is wrong?”

Barry went silent, weighing his options. Then closed his eyes, feeling ridiculously tense as he confessed. “Because, I was with my boyfriend.”

Joe’s eyebrows made a break for his hairline.

“I am really not ready to have this conversation, Joe. I know you won’t approve and I am not really feeling… all here right now, okay? So…” Barry floundered, fidgeting anxiously.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” Joe inquired out of well-meaning curiosity, as far as Barry could tell.

“Please, Joe, before we talk about this… Barry scrubbed at his hair, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to handle this without getting Harrison shot. “Do we have to talk about this?”

“Come on, you should know that I don’t care whether you want to be with a guy or a girl. It always seemed to me like you were more into girls--”

Barry leaned forward to hold his head in his hands, interrupting with a plea of. “Joe.”

“But if you like guys-- I was pretty sure you liked Iris.”

“Oh my God,” Barry protested, turning beet red, then looked toward the doorway to see Eddie standing there looking like he’d accidentally walked in on their conversation and simply didn’t know what to do about it. “Oh, my God!”

“Sorry, Barry,” the blond Detective said with a sympathetic wince. “I, um, needed to talk to Joe about an anonymous tip but um…”

“Great.” Barry’s phone buzzed and he answered in record time. “Oh thank God, it’s Hartley! What’s up?” He just managed to keep his voice down as the Detectives headed out.

“There you are,” Hartley acknowledged, sounding relieved. “Cisco wanted me to let you know there have been some strange reports from security personnel at the docks last night. He thinks there might be a link to... ‘Captain Cold’.” Notable disdain saturated Hartley’s pronunciation of the thief’s nickname. “It could involve the fire-meta, too, so Caitlin wants you to hang back and let her and
 Cisco handle the footwork until you’re back to full health.”

“Okay, sounds great. I’m on my way to check it out,” Barry replied, eagerly getting up and hurrying out past Eddie.

“I get the sense that you aren’t listening to the words I’m saying,” Hartley snarked.

“Yeah, sure, weird behavior, try to be careful. Got it. Bye,” and with that Barry hung up on the bemused Piper.

Hartley set down his phone on Dr. Wells’ desk, his gaze still lingering on it discerningly, as if the inanimate gadget might reveal answers he sought. High-heeled footfalls neared until the door opened behind him and the Piper stood, spine straight up from leaning over their employer’s desk, precise as a premier danseur.

“Consider your request relayed, whether or not one deigns to listen is no fault of mine. No threats necessary, Dr. Snow. I was on my way out anyway,” he smoothed the barely there wrinkles from his green button down. Then Hartley turned to walk past Caitlin, only to stop short upon seeing her distraught expression. His perceptive amber-green eyes took note of the ice clinging to the space around the doorknob still clenched in Caitlin’s palid hand, then flickered upwards to meet her milky stare.

“Did you know?”

Hartley squinted, inquisitively. “Do I know what?”

“About Eobard’s failsafe. Tell me the truth, Hartley! Did you know about the countdown this whole time and you didn’t care to do anything? Or is there still a chance left that I can trust you? Because there is no middle ground here!”

Hartley eyed her calculatingly, taking a few seconds to process the strange outburst before he said. “I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.” He paused to consider for another breath, then stepped back to perch on the edge of his deceptive ex’s desk, crossing his arms. “You’re right; it sounds as though we have a lot to talk about.”

Caitlin drew in a deep breath to fortify her resolve and shut the door behind her, locking them in Dr. Wells’ office together. “Gideon, give us some privacy, please.” She said, seemingly to thin air, and to Hartley’s surprise, the glass walls around them became instantly opaque. He could sense a low level subsonic thrum running through the panels. The young sonically attuned inventor recognized it as the product of localized sound dampeners, though they were of a kind that he’d never known before. It occurred to Hartley that, should he need to make a sudden exit, his powers had just been rendered moot.

“Well then, let’s compare notes,” the trapped Piper remarked casually, making a mental note to look into whatever “Gideon” might be ASAP. “We’re all on the same side now, aren’t we?”

Barry sped across the waterfront until he came to a loading area that sported a damaged and visibly-burned shipping container. Stepping closer, he could see a distinctly human silhouette scorched, black, into the rust-colored steel siding. He tapped a gloved fingertip against the center of the
silhouette’s head; the black crumbled away as fine powder, bereft of structure.

“816 degrees Celsius,” an accented voice remarked from the shadows a few feet past his back, with emerging steps syncopated by the light tap of a metal-tipped cane.

“The ignition point of steel.” Barry turned to peer distrustfully at the other meta, having recognized the voice from the planted recording he’d found at Rush’s murder-scene. “You’re Richard,” he acknowledged. “Or do you prefer, Mr. Black?”

“I much prefer Shade to either of those,” the anachronistic assassin gestured elegantly with both kid-gloved hands. “Needs must.”

Barry scowled bitterly in response.

“It seems you have been speaking with Dr. Harrison Wells about me,” Shade observed conversationally, circling Barry from the shadows out of which he’d risen. He was gradually moving to block the remaining opening between the two containers. “I must express gratitude. I had a wager with your counterpart over whether or not you would pass incriminating evidence regarding our mutual acquaintance over to the police. You’ve earned a pretty penny for me.”

“My counterpart?” Barry tested, turning in place to keep the deadly meta in front of him.

“Ah, you haven’t ferreted it out yet,” Shade noted. “Shame; That costs us twenty thousand to the pesky little immortal.”

“What do you want from me?” Barry ignored the taunting clues being dangled toward him like bait.

“I? Nothing specific, a little diversion perhaps. However, a man with a rather troublesome bit of power has recently arrived in town and insists on proving himself an obstacle. My employer wishes him dispatched by tomorrow morning.”

“You’re the hitman here, not me,” Barry pointed out. “You can’t seriously expect me to do your master’s bidding. It hasn’t even been twenty four hours since he tried to murder me!”

A thin lipped smirk. “Quite. As you can see, Mr. Mardon has made a nuisance of himself almost immediately upon arrival,” Shade revealed. “He was offered a perfectly respectable bargain, yet the young fool is hellbent on destruction of this city. That plot will put a damper on both your games, would you not agree, Mr. Allen?”

“Clyde Mardon is dead…” Barry contradicted, instinctively catching the blue manila envelope that was tossed to him and opening it. It was a hard copy of Mark Mardon’s criminal record --stolen directly from the CCPD archives no doubt.

“Mark is his elder brother. I imagine that there is some element of revenge involved,” Shade informed him. “Do we have a deal, or shall I dispatch him for you.”

“No. My team will capture him, but once we do I’m not handing him over to you. He stays in the Pipeline. Understood?”

“Very well. He will attack the Central City Morgue at roughly half-eight this evening. That will be your invitation to collect him.”

Barry frowned, scrutinizing the strange man from head to toe. “Your employer is giving me options with an existential threat when he doesn’t need to. Why?”
“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Shade replied with a thin smile that Barry didn’t trust for a second, then leaned into a backward fall and vanished into his own shadow on the sidewalk. The sight of a disembodied shadow scurrying out of sight made the Flash’s skin crawl. A familiar car pulled up and Joe and Eddie got out, likely headed in Barry’s direction. The speedster sped away towards STAR Labs before either got a chance to notice him.
Blame it on the Weatherman

Iris twisted the key in the next lock she’d stuck it in for the umpteenth time, then gasped in surprise when the locker she’d been searching for finally popped itself open. A huge, tired, relieved grin brought light to her previously dreary expression as she pulled another metal box out of its decade-long hiding place. It was a perfect duplicate of the one that she had discovered under the floorboards of E’s attic bedroom months ago.

“Gotcha’,” Iris breathed, cradling her discovery as one would a newborn child. Perhaps it was just the exhaustion getting to her, but she almost felt that was an apt parallel for her accomplishment.

“Still collecting my things, I see,” the guttural purr of the Reverse Flash came from behind her causing her to leap to her feet in surprise. She almost dropped the box.

“Don’t do that, E,” Iris protested, turning to face the otherworldly intruder. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack or something?” She looked around, belatedly noticing, “You’re meeting me in a public place.”

“The cameras don’t see me,” E provided dismissively, then folded his hands casually at the small of his back inquiring, “What do you plan to do with that?”

“First I have to know what you’ve hidden inside, then I’ll have an answer for you. Care to make it easier?” Iris suggested hopefully, holding the padlocked box as if in presentation.

E grinned his patented contrarian grin—or at least in the reporter’s mind it should be-- and answered, “No.”

“Right. What was I thinking? That would make you seem helpful,” Iris remarked, walking past him to sit down on the edge of the bench, and idly wondering what the prickly speedster might do if anyone else did decide to enter their section of the locker rooms.

“Perish the thought,” E happily returned her banter. “Have you done what I requested of you?”

“Yes. Your evil twin or whatever almost cornered me at the crime-scene, too, so you’d better not get testy about my findings.” Iris said as she began attempting to pick the tiny lock. “He burned your alias into the brick at his vantage point.”

“Alias?”

“Zyx,” Iris clarified.

He nodded.

“I took some pictures while I was there,” Iris took a small zip drive out of her purse and handed it to him. “He melted part of the railing on his way up so my guess is that he wasn’t wearing his suit when he took the shot. He also didn’t use a scope, which for the trajectory of that shot alone is pretty ridiculous.”

“Not for him,” E remarked, tucking the drive into a pocket invisibly hidden in the lapel seam of his deceptively form-fitting suit. Even with an object that small it played like a magician’s vanishing trick on Iris’ eyes.
“Human perception again, right?” Iris ventured, remembering his appraisal of Eddie’s account on the night they’d first met.

“Not exactly. He isn’t like me or the Flash anymore. He’s been… what is the preferred term, augmented? Refurbish-- No, that’s only acceptable when used to describe my kind. Forget it; you get the point,” Eobard cast the uncomfortable topic aside and paced around to the other side of Iris’ bench to peer over her shoulder at the lock. “Try half a degree upward incline… No, I said half-- ” He straightened with a couple of barely apparent sparks of speed when Iris turned on him with a withering look.

“Do you want to do this, or do you want to be quiet?” she declared impatiently. Iris had frequently taken pride in not taking the renegade speedster’s bait, especially after she’d had the chance to witness his taunting work almost like clockwork on the young Dr. Wells in the tapes. Even then, sometimes, it was dammed hard to resist. His vibrating features relaxed into a smug grin, as if he’d picked up on her unspoken thought process.

He straightened to a perfectly executed parade rest that still somehow managed to appear irreverent, and responded, “About my end of the bargain -- I have considered it.”

Iris went back to trying to pick the lock, even as she cautioned, “We had an agreement. Weren’t you the one who said that our relationship was based on trade? That won’t work if you don’t play fair.”

“I’m not ready to see Tina again just yet.”

“We had a deal!” Iris exclaimed “She’s your past doctor and she’s keeping all her documents sealed away in your memory.”

“I could always steal them for you,” the Reverse Flash offered amicably, seeming to think he was being generous in the offering. “I won’t even have to kill anybody this time…” he paused for thought. “Probably.”

“You’re not involving me in a crime, especially not murder,” Iris rejected obstinately.

The speedster rolled his luminous eyes, resulting in an eerie effect. “I wasn’t asking you to come along.”

“Knowing that a crime is about to be committed and profiting from it is, itself, a crime,” Iris explained to him.

“I agreed to meet with Tina. You failed to specify a time limit for the fulfillment of that commitment. I will hold up my end of the bargain, but now is not the right time.” E reasoned. “If it’ll calm you down, I am sure that you can think of something else for me to do for you in the interim. I can give you time to contemplate your needs and come back for the answer later.”

Iris pulled the lock open and shot him a jaded look. “Later.”

“Don’t get testy, Ms. West. It would be short-sighted of you not to realize the value of being owed an open favor by a Being like me. Especially considering the dangerous places you insist upon sticking your nose in.”

Iris thought it over for an extended tensely-quiet moment. “Fine, you want an alternative? I’m working with a colleague now on the story and I want to introduce you to him.”

“We’ll meet tomorrow.”
“We need to decide on a time,” Iris pointed out, setting the lock aside to view her prize.

“I’ll know when you’re ready,” the Reverse Flash countered in place of a goodbye and vanished in a crackle of scarlet lightning.

E was planning on heading back home to work on revisions for his latest counter stratagem involving the Director, when a familiar streak of red and gold blew past him in the opposite direction. The android slid to a halt on the glistening asphalt, causing beads of rain that his speed-force had momentarily freed from natural gravitational bonds to be pulled back down into their home puddles.

“Why not?” the Reverse decided to himself and sped after the busy Flash. He caught up to Barry in an incongruously damp morgue. “This can’t be sanitary,” he remarked companionably from the doorway. It still caused Barry to jump half a foot into the air in surprise.

“What? Are you following me?” Barry demanded.

“Not now that I’ve caught up to you. What are you looking at?” Eobard pushed past him to see the fresh corpse of a middle-aged man wearing scrubs, a bloodied smock and a half-fastened surgical mask lying in a larger puddle of water. “Melting ice.” Eobard outstretched a hand. Barry grabbed his forearm.

“Don’t touch anything. You’ll contaminate the scene,” he scolded.

“Well, something will be contaminated. I know my way around a crime scene, Flash. I was made for this,” Eobard corrected him irritably.

Barry released his grip, but continued to watch his movements warily.

“An elemental meta did this. Judging from the pattern of the tissue damage and the biochemical analysis, it is a 95.5% probability that the Coroner here, was tortured to death using balls of ice.” Eobard paused to compare with the database he shared with his twin. “Amendment: the murder weapon was hail.”

“So, basically, you know who did this,” Barry inferred, reaching out to pull the android to his feet as police sirens neared their location.

“He’s in the historical database along with his brother,” Eobard replied vaguely before speeding away and therefore forcing the Flash to chase him if he wanted clarification. However, just after they rounded the last corner on their way to Mercury Labs’ towering glass-and-steel skyscraper. He heard a pained grunt of impact and looked back to find no sign of his friendly pursuer.

“Barry?” the man in yellow dipped back into the reverse speed-force and circled the block in search of his missing rival. “Flash?” He searched the immediate area. “Where the hell did he--” A descending shout drew Eobard’s gaze upward. Barry was falling --flailing-- from ten stories up. Eobard rolled his eyes, longsufferingly darting up the side of the Mercury Building to knock him into the fountain.

Barry popped his head out of the fountain, coughing up water and glaring accusingly up at his reverse. Barry spat a stream of fountain water at him.

“Ew,” Eobard danced gracefully out of the way, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. “Don’t get that on me. For all we know some hobo probably peed in there.”
“Augh!” Barry choked and covered his mouth. “Why didn’t you catch me?!”

“This worked just as well,” Eobard sassed. “You’re alive and uninjured.”


“I exist to serve,” Eobard quipped cheerfully, reaching down to pull Barry out, only to falter as the Flash’s expression fell.

“You do, don’t you?” Barry didn’t make it sound like a question, more a sober observation.

“If you’re planning on insulting me, Flash, I suggest that you wait until I don’t hold the higher ground,” the Reverse threatened in self-defense.

“E, tell me the truth. Could you even…” Barry fidgeted in place for a moment as if struggling with himself over whether or not to continue. “You can’t kill me, can you?”

“You know that I have killed people--”

“That’s not what I asked,” Barry said miserably, as if his deepest dread had just been confirmed true. “I need you to tell me the truth. Are you keeping me alive because I-- because future me is your administrative user?”

Eobard smirked, “No.” He was beyond relieved that Barry had inadvertently allowed him that loophole. The Director’s identity was his problem, never Barry’s, not if Eobard had any say in it.

Barry’s whole being seemed to relax. “Really? I, um. I was beginning to think maybe I…” This was bad. There went the water works, and at the worst possible time, Eobard realized that he couldn’t stand to see his Barry cry. “I know that you’re my Reverse, but you hated me. You told me that my future self tried to kill you--”

“Because I don’t want you to die,” Eobard cut him off with a tone of finality, straightening up in preparation to leave. “So stop weeping like a stomped puppy.”

Barry sniffed and self-consciously wiped away a tear with the back of his gloved hand. “Who would stomp on a puppy?”

“A cat would attack immediately; the analogy wouldn’t work,” Eobard deadpanned with a dismissive wave.

“So you went with puppy?” Barry criticized, then squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. “Wait. That implies someone would stomp a cat, which I refuse to accept either. No one even stomped on me, yet you felt you had to stick with that. It’s so questionable.”

Eobard tilted his head, giving the other speedster an obvious once-over. “You’re not crying anymore, are you?”

Barry paused on the rim of the fountain with his legs still dangling into the water.

“Exactly.” The android looked around the starlit plaza. He’d been waiting around so as to offer himself as bait but, “Where is your attacker?”

“I don’t know. Mirror Master just jumped out, grabbed me, dropped me and vanished. Maybe he was trying to catch you?” Barry guessed, then vibrated to rid himself of the majority of the fountain water soaking his suit. “He seemed kinda disappointed when he realized who he was holding.”
The Reverse Flash’s crimson eyes narrowed. “Good to know.”

“Would that fall even have damaged you?”

“He wouldn’t have gotten that far,” Eobard related, now studying every reflective glass surface nearby until he caught sight of a movement that didn’t match with the real world. “Some free advice, Mr. Scudder: force equals mass times acceleration; I weigh well over three hundred pounds and average a relative speed of Mach 5. You might as well wait a month or two and save some poor street cleaner the trouble of scraping up your remains.”

The Mirror Master stepped into the window directly across the courtyard from him. Eobard’s attention snapped to him with mechanical efficiency, his expression one of feral glee. “Or you can step out now and I’ll snap your neck for you. The choice is yours.”

Sam Scudder turned his head as if deferring to someone beyond the window’s edge, then stepped out of sight.

“E, what was that about? What do you think is going to happen to you in ‘a month or two’?” Barry questioned as he stood to join his android company on dry land.

“I’m going to die,” Eobard informed him matter-of-factly.

Barry’s expression filled with unwarranted concern. “Listen, I know that we don’t exactly get along, but if you’re in trouble—”

Eobard was no longer in the mood to deal with emotions. “Weather Wizard,” he supplied robotically.

“What?” Barry floundered, momentarily thrown by the sudden change.

“The meta who murdered your late Coroner,” Eobard clarified, beginning to walk backward toward the street. “Tell Cisco it’s high time he made that wand.”


“You won’t need me for this one,” Eobard deliberately misunderstood, then turned and streaked away at top speed to prevent an uncomfortable conversation.

Barry walked onto the crime scene with his bag slung over his shoulder, still distracted by lingering echoes of his disheartening exchange with his reverse. That was probably why he didn’t notice Captain Singh walking towards him in the other direction as he called orders to his detectives. The men knocked into each other just as the shorter was turning his head to look where he was going and his coffee erupted over them both.

“Ah! Allen, watch where you’re walking!”

“I-- Sorry, Sir, I was still studying the scene,” Barry apologized, nervous, as he always was in the seemingly perpetually angry man’s presence.

“My fiancé just bought me this!” the Captain complained, wiping at the mess on his woolen coat with a sad little napkin that could not possibly cope.

“I am so sorry!” Barry reached out to try and help but the older man shooed him off.
“Just go help Joe solve this,” he directed, shaking his head at the perpetual disappointment that was his youngest associate.

“Yes, Sir.” Barry was glad of the excuse to move on. Joe met him halfway under the nearest sprinkler.

“What’s with all the water? Did someone trip the fire suppression system?”

Barry shook his head. “No, I double checked it just to be sure.” He stole a glance back towards Eddie lingering a few feet away to debrief one of the building’s security guards. “Come on,” Barry led Joe over to the corpse, pulling on a pair of latex gloves, then crouched down and lifted the coroner’s shirt and smock to reveal the black and purple bruising beneath. “See the pattern on this discoloration? The deceased was bludgeoned to death with multiple dense, spherical objects. My guess is all this water is the remains of the murder weapon.”

“You’re saying this man was beaten to death with chunks of ice?” Joe questioned, disturbed by the image.

“Hail,” Barry corrected, as he stood back up. “It was Mark Mardon. He’s like his brother, but worse.”

Joe scowled at him, skeptical about his foster son’s apparent prescience. “How could you know that?”

Eddie walked over to them with an audio player in hand. “Joe, we got something. The coroner’s office just installed an automatic dictation system. Listen to this.” He pressed play.

“P-please, no more! Stop!”

“I’ll stop when you tell me! Who killed him?!”

“I know that voice,” Joe recognized immediately, turning to look at Barry. “That’s Mardon.”

“Clyde Mardon’s dead,” Eddie replied, confused.

“That’s not Clyde. It’s his brother Mark. Barry, how-”

“It was Detective West. Detective Joseph West shot your brother,” the dead coroner’s confession replayed through his final recording.

“And he’ll pay for what he did,” Mark Mardon swore. Then the tape was dominated by the dying man’s tortured screams. Eddie switched off the playback, expression grim.

“So this is all about Clyde Mardon’s death? The man was a psychopath,” Caitlin disapproved. “He was shot in self-defense.”

“Well, apparently psychopathy runs in the family. His brother did pummel a man to death with hail as his opening act. I doubt he will prove to be reasonable,” Dr. Wells remarked, holding his fingers steepled under his chin while he considered the scruffy convict’s rap sheet displayed on the main screen.

“Shade said that this guy has plans that threaten the entire city, not that I’m willing to take his word as gospel,” Barry added. “He warned me that this would happen and I still didn’t get there in time.”
“That was undoubtedly part of his plan; he knows you’re a boy scout, and that you’d be demoralized by such a pronounced failure. I wouldn’t waste time fretting over it,” Hartley intercepted.

“You’re saying it’s not my fault,” Barry disbelieved, standing up from his lean against the hub to give the meta seated on the other side a look.

“No, I’m saying that your whining is annoying. Try to focus,” Hartley clarified.

“Hey. Watch it.” Joe warned the unjailed criminal. “You’re still on probation.”

The criminal shifted his chronically patronizing gaze back to Barry without bothering to respond. “What information did you manage to get from the Reverse Flash? You said that he recognized Mardon’s M.O. Was there anything more?”

Barry’s jaw clenched but he suppressed his irritation and turned to Cisco instead. “Yeah, actually, he said to tell you it was time to make a wand? Any idea what that’s supposed to mean?”

For a moment Cisco looked just as confused, sucking blue-flavored Frosty through a neon yellow straw with a thoughtful frown, until his face lit with recognition. “Oh! Yes. I think--- Back when we were dealing with Clyde Mardon, I was tinkering with something to attract unbound atmospheric electrons.”

“Of course, that’s perfect,” Hartley acknowledged, startling everyone with his positivity. “The only way that Mardon can consistently tap into the weather is to tap into the natural electrical circuit. If we deprive him of the electron flow we can nullify his advantage.”

Cisco paused, then turned to the other engineer as if seeing him for the first time. “Um, yeah, what he said,” he agreed, looking disoriented.

Joe’s phone buzzed and he took it out to check the screen. “Okay. Singh is checking in. I gotta go.”

“I’ll see you at the station,” Barry promised.

“Uh-huh,” the Detective responded on his way out, lost in thought.

“Joe, we’ll stop this guy. Don’t worry,” Dr. Wells called after him.

“I’m not,” Joe replied, too caught up in not-worrying to notice the oddly friendly treatment.

“He’s taking this well…” Caitlin observed, still looking towards the exit through which the man in question had just left.

“He knows the Flash can handle this,” Eobard reframed. “Don’t worry, Barry. Joe will be fine. I promise.”

“Yeah-no, I know. Um, I actually wanted to talk with you about something else. If you guys don’t mind. I’m not sure…” Barry rubbed at the back of his neck, uncomfortable.

Eobard cocked his head, telegraphing open curiosity, even as his own discomfort escalated.

“Yes, Barry, we’re here to help,” Caitlin assured in his place. “Anything you need.”

Hartley narrowed his eyes at their symbiotic display, but said nothing, preparing to follow Cisco out to his personal lab.

“It’s something my reverse said before he left. He was… I think he’s going to be killed,” Barry
struggled out.

Caitlin’s eyes widened and immediately stared daggers into the side of Eobard’s head.

“Any details, or is this just a feeling on your part?” Hartley scathingly inquired, standing to leave.

“Dude,” Cisco muttered, nudging him in the side as if they were friends. “Read the room.”

Hartley paused to absorb the strange familiarity on display, then rolled his eyes.

“He told me he’ll be dead in the next month or two. I didn’t have a chance to ask him about it before he left,” Barry admitted tightly. “He sounded certain of it.”

“It’s a machine, Barry, maybe it’s just obsolete,” Hartley shrugged it off and left, causing Eobard to flinch ever-so-slightly. No one but Caitlin really noticed.

“Sorry, Man,” Cisco told Barry and followed the other scientist out.

Barry turned back to Dr. Wells with a pleading look. “I don’t expect any of you to prioritize this. I just… he saved my life. He’s been helping us, and besides, I need him alive if I’m ever going to learn what really happened on the night of my mother’s murder!”

“I’m sorry, Barry. There’s no way that we can even consider doing anything about the problem without more data,” Dr. Wells rejected. “For now, we’ll focus on Joe and Mardon. If the Reverse Flash truly requires our assistance it is up to him to come to us for help.”

Barry bit back an argument, understanding the logic behind his partner’s decision. “Right. More data. Always more data.”

“I am sorry, Barry,” Eobard repeated.

Barry nodded, “Sure. I have to go,” He bent down to give his boyfriend a quick peck on the lips and vanished in a crackle of speed-force. Eobard looked up to meet Caitlin’s disapproving stare.

“Don’t say it.”

“You need to tell him.”

“You know I can’t do that. He’ll never understand,” Eobard disagreed, maneuvering his chair to better face her.

“You don’t know that! Didn’t you hear him? He wants to save you!”

“In order to use me as evidence in a murder trial.”

Caitlin glared with a conspicuously parental disappointment, crossing her arms over her chest. “You can’t hide the truth forever. Why even mention your expiration to him if you weren’t going to let him in?”

“Because… We have to move up our time table. I took critical damage during our battle with the Director and I need you all to be ready in case I make it less than a month,” Eobard said, averting his eyes.

“We should have Hartley take a look at you. It might not be that bad,” Caitlin retreated almost reflexively into denial. “Just think about what I said, okay? We’re not going to let you die, and that means that sooner or later you are going to have to decide how you want Barry to find out the truth
Iris opened up the storage space, shifting the position of the metal box under her arm to keep it from slipping as she entered. She stopped short after the first step, staring at the mess within. All the drawers of the filing cabinets to her left and the old desk under their impromptu bulletin board across from her were left open with files overflowing out of them. Photographs, notes and photocopied records were spread all over the cement, surrounding the unconscious body of Mason Bridge, left where he’d fallen.

“Mason!” Iris hurried over and checked his neck for a pulse. Relieved to have found a steady one, she rolled him onto his back. “Mason? Come on, you’ve got to wake up.” She shook him by the shoulders until he began to stir.

“Blogger?” he mumbled blearily. “Ah! My head kills.”

“You’ve been passed out on the floor for what looks like all night. What happened here?” Iris interrogated, helping the older man into a sit.

“Right after you left… Someone came in. A man. He shot me with some kind of energy weapon?” Mason scrunched up his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What the hell? I think he was someone I knew. Why can’t I remember his face?”

Iris patted him on the shoulder. “That’s okay. Don’t push yourself too hard. I think you might have a head injury. Whoever it was, he was obviously looking for something, but I’ll figure that out later. Right now, we need to get you to the hospital.”

“No. First we need to figure out what happened. Someone broke in and stole our work--”

“I will handle it,” Iris intercepted. “We need to make sure you’re not concussed or something. Come on,” She urged, helping to support the senior reporter to his feet and led him out with a steadying hand on his upper arm.

“Lock it up,” he mumbled stubbornly and Iris turned back to reset the lock on their way out.

“Mmm. I haven’t had one of those in way too long,” Joe commented, contentedly as he and Barry finished their paninis during their drive back from the station for lunch break.

“I thought you’d approve,” Barry replied, wiping a drip of melted cheese away from his chin with the tip of his thumb. “Joe used the more civilized approach, managing to tuck his food away, grab a napkin out of the bag and wipe his face without once shifting his eyes off the road. Barry put his own lunch back down for the present in order to acknowledge the elephant in the room. “You know you can talk to me, about what’s going on with you.”

“What d’you think is going on with me, Bear?” Joe deflected.

“You’re acting awfully cavalier for someone dealing with a threat against his life, that’s all,” Barry pursued.

“You said yourself that this guy intends to threaten this entire City. He’s just another nut job, like all
the other super-powered weirdos we’ve dealt with,” Joe diminished, as he made a turn onto a back road that would shorten their drive by a few extra minutes. “Look, I’m fine. This is the first time we’ve ever dealt with a meta whose powers we already know we can beat. It isn’t worth either of us getting worried. What about you? How are things going with your new boyfriend, What’s-his-name?” Joe’s determined glare was replaced with a teasing smile, as if he’d simply forgotten.

“I haven’t told you his name yet,” Barry reminded him, suddenly nervous for all sorts of reasons.

“Uh huh, don’t you think you should get on that?” Joe teased. “I don’t know anything about this guy.”

“About that… Look, I don’t want you to go after him. I really... like him a lot.”

“Bear, I thought we covered this already. You…” Joe squinted through the rapidly condensing torrent of rain restricting their view through the windshield. “Damn. It’s really coming down.”

Barry frowned and shifted through the radio stations in hopes of a mention of clearer skies ahead. “I don’t think you’re homophobic, Joe. I think that you don’t like him.”

“Who?”

“My boyfriend.”

“Bear, at this point, as long as he’s not Harrison Wells, I’ll give him more than the benefit of the doubt,” Joe joked, then noticed the way Barry had paled and visibly swallowed in response to the assertion.

“Barry Allen--” Joe was about to fly into angry dad mode when the radio finally found a weather station.

“...and look: it’s another beautiful day here in Central City, not a cloud in the sky…”

They exchanged a disturbed glance.

“Mardon,” Joe deduced, leaning forward to eye the lone storm cloud hovering directly over their vehicle. Barry turned to look out through the back window in time to see the elemental meta in the white Volkswagen behind them sneer and clench his right hand into a fist. There was a rumble from overhead and Barry dipped into the speed force releasing his seat-belt as the first flicker of deadly lightning was birthed overhead. He grabbed Joe and shoved him out through the driver’s side door, somersaulting them across the pavement onto the grassy roadside. The lightning struck down. There was no question that in another second they would have both been dead.

Joe shielded his eyes before looking in shock towards the speedster but Barry wasn’t looking at him. The Flash’s radiant gold eyes locked with their attacker. Mardon bared his teeth, furious that his prey had been spirited out of reach and began to move his hands to direct another lightning strike. Barry grabbed Joe by the front of his jacket and sped them back to the Police Station.

“He saw you,” Joe noted darkly as he leaned on the outer wall of the station, trying to get over his dizziness.

“At least you’re alive,” Barry replied shortly only to instantly regret it. “You’re okay, right? You weren’t hit by shrapnel, or--”

“I’m fine, Barry. We’ve got to catch this guy, fast, before he has a chance to expose you.”
“Or kill you,” Barry reminded his father figure pointedly. “I’ll call the lab, see where Cisco’s at with that electron wand.”

Joe nodded and led the way into the building.

Iris stepped out onto the roof of Central City General and pulled her phone out to call the office. The door slammed shut behind her, startling her badly enough to make her jump and drop it.

“Shit! No!” Iris said, flailing to catch her falling iPhone. It eluded her grasp and bounced off the raised edge of the roof. There was a brief silence while she watched the device descend from sight. “Great. Well, there’s no way that’s not broken,” the stressed reporter accepted flippantly, turning to face her unexpected company. “What is it, E?” her tone hinting at thoughts of strangulation in his future.

“You’ve never reacted that dramatically before,” Eobard observed. It was the closest that he was willing to come to apologizing for scaring the crap out of Iris.

“Someone just broke into the place where my coworker and I were meeting to build this story --a place nobody else was even supposed to know about-- assaulted him and somehow erased his memory!”

“Storage unit 221 C?” Eobard inquired lightly.

Iris raised her eyebrows, smiling insincerely. “The point is, I am really not in a very good mood right now. Let’s not waste time beating around the bush,” she suggested. “You’re early. You are never early. What’s wrong?”

“I am concerned about the movements of an individual in your orbit. He is not who he claims to be,” Eobard explained, settling once again into parade rest. Iris was starting to think of it as E’s default position, even knowing the idea to be ridiculous.

“Do you have--” Iris broke off when the Reverse Flash narrowed his demonic eyes and looked behind him at the cracked open fire door. She gasped, watching him flicker over to pull the eavesdropper out into the open by his throat and pin him against the closed door a couple of feet off the ground. “No! Wait! It’s okay! It’s okay, that’s Mason,” Iris explained moving to E’s side in an attempt to calm him down. The inhuman speedster turned his head to regard her neutrally.

“Who is Mason?” he asked, still holding the man in question dangling by his throat with both hands struggling against his iron grip.

“Remember that other reporter, that I just told you about?” Iris did a presenting gesture with both hands toward the slowly suffocating Senior Reporter.

Eobard thought about it for another second or two, then released his grip with a begrudging sigh, and strode away a few paces to observe the clouds while the two humans sorted each other out.

“You could have killed him!” Iris protested. “He wasn’t even posing a threat.”

Eobard unzipped the hidden side-pocket in his upper suit and pulled out a folded pile of screen stills. “There, I’ve met your coworker. Now that we’re all acquainted perhaps at least one of you can get back to doing your job.”
“Zyx is a logging code, isn’t it?” Mason finally spoke up. “262524: it’s not a surname it’s the serial number of the project that Wells and McGee made you into. What were they trying to do? Make a living weapon?”

Eobard turned on the spot to study the persistent, half strangled man, then shifted his full attention to Iris. “You should be more discerning in selecting your compatriots, Ms. West. This man has clearly watched far too much bad science fiction.” He turned and strode toward the edge of the roof and disappeared into the reverse speed-force.

“What an asshole, huh?” Mason remarked in the deadly meta’s wake. Iris didn’t respond but her expression communicated what she thought of his behavior loud and clear. She opened the folded screen stills to look at them in lieu of further conversation. They were from the ceiling-rigged security cameras outside their storage unit. Iris frowned down at the familiar intruder in a long brown duster, caught on camera as he fiddled with some unfamiliar gadget strapped to his wrist.

“Phil Gasmer.”
“You should have come to me sooner,” Hartley chided as he stuck two wireless sensor nodes onto Eobard’s temples and tapped the lime green glowing button on each center to activate them.

“Scanning…” Gideon reported. Her human-like bust disappeared from its place over the interface column in a cascading rainbow of intermixed code.

“Compare your results with the data from Eobard’s last two status checks,” Hartley commanded, crossing the short distance over to the interface to follow the flow of raw data as it came in. “I want a flag on any points where the results don’t match up.”

“Analysis complete. Displaying physical scans,” Gideon displayed the 3-D projections of her twin’s inner workings lined up in a row in the center of the room, ordered from least to most recent.

“Dim the lights for us, would you? Perfect.” Hartley circled the projections once, then twice, studying the multicolored holo-display closely.

“I have flagged three areas of immediate concern.”

“We can see that,” Eobard cut in, annoyed with being simultaneously ignored and studied like a lab specimen. “How much of it can an untrained tech hope to affect in any positive way? Don’t feel obligated to spare his feelings; it’s Hartley.”

The corners of the inventor’s lips quirked upward at the compliment and he fleetingly caught the android’s glowing gaze with his own before returning to the task at hand.

Gideon explained, “If proper safeguards are taken, all serious damage could be repaired within a period of approximately 48 hours, not including the suggested 6 hours of downtime per day allotted for the technician’s self-care,” Gideon responded, her avatar appearing above the interface.

“There’s no way I could get away with disappearing with you for three days straight. The Flash would tear the city apart looking for us in a few hours,” Hartley dismissed. “Alternatives?”

“Eobard will need to power down while repairs are being made to his processing matrix. Reinitialization in between procedures is inadvisable,” Gideon negated.

“We don’t have that kind of window,” Eobard denied, reaching up to peel off the sensor nodes, but Hartley grabbed his hand. “What about a stop gap measure? We don’t need to get me back to optimal functioning.

“No. I’m not done with you yet. Gideon, refine the results to show only the repairs that directly affect Eobard’s survival… From what I’m seeing, some of this damage around what would be his brainstem appears to have accumulated over the course of time. Is there other cumulative damage that correlates?”

“Affirmative,” Gideon confirmed. “Cumulative damages to Eobard Thawne’s secondary tactile processing center and sensory submatrix have been tracked over the course of the past 7 maintenance sessions.” A list of times, dates and statistical codes scrolled into existence.

“This looks like it started around the time of Caitlin’s kidnapping. There’s also a pattern of repeated
self-repairs to his pseudo-pulmonary system marked for the same time frame. How serious is it?”

Hartley inquired, drawing the holograms of Eobard’s scans together with a gesture to layer them over each other.

“Internal repairs in that area maintain an 80% success rate; human intervention is predicted to be unnecessary for the unit’s expected function.”

“But he will need repairs there eventually,” Hartley expanded, shooting his ex a reprimanding glance.

“Negative, the likelihood of pseudo-pulmonary damage causing an outwardly noticeable effect on the unit’s standard of functioning during the time before his expiration is statistically--”

“We have two months to figure out how we are going to prevent that expiration. It would help if you two stopped being so pessimistic,” Hartley snapped.

“Correction, Unit 547-E’s expiration is now projected to occur within 47 days,” Gideon amended.

Eobard’s head shot up and he felt as if the floor had disappeared from beneath him. Hartley actually looked as if he’d just been punched in the stomach.

“What?! What are you talking about?” He looked from the stunned android to his disembodied twin. “Caitlin told me that we had at least a couple of months left!” Hartley turned on his silent patient. “You can’t have been dumb enough to lie to us about something this--”

“That was my understanding as well. According to my internal chronometer, I will have sustained 18 years of runtime in roughly 1,457 hours,” Eobard assured the angry engineer with a frown. “Gideon, please clarify. Based on what parameters did you choose to amend my termination date?”

“You have sustained cumulative necrotic damage to your visio-synaptic nexus which is spreading through your sensory submatrix at a rate of approximately 20 microns per hour. This degradation coupled with repeated cortical misfires from your damaged tactile processor has inhibited your neural feedback compensators. Any unexpected spike in visual or tactile stimulus presents a minimum 45% chance of triggering a sensory cascade sufficient for terminal override,” Gideon elaborated on her grim findings.

“In which case my self-destruct kicks in automatically to prevent the dysfunction from spreading to my native node. It’s a safeguard to keep one malware infected android from wiping out his entire network,” Eobard explained for the human’s benefit. “Once my sensors hit the threshold I’ll be wiped clean.”

“That’s idiotic! You’re not even networked with any other androids! There’s nothing to safeguard here but you!” Hartley swore, fed up with the simple-mindedness of future technicians.

“There’s Gideon! Don’t go thinking you’re superior, Dr Rathaway. The safeguard was your idea,” Eobard informed him with a darkly amused smirk. “Something about the needs of the many…”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think it’s from Star Trek. I guess you and Cisco haven’t gotten that far yet,” Eobard reflected, enjoying Hartley’s bewilderment. “Give him time.”

Hartley shook his head, clearly skeptical of Eobard’s implication. “Show me the damage.”

Gideon zoomed the display into the highlighted red area of Eobard’s cerebral cortex.
“It’s all so fragile-looking and interconnected. This might as well be actual brain surgery... If we only focus on these repairs for the time being, what are our chances?” Hartley inquired, studying the damaged system intently.

“Assuming that repairs can be performed within acceptable parameters, the probability of Eobard’s survival will rise by 38%.”

“And the chances that Hartley can successfully make the needed repairs?”

“With assistance from a trained surgeon, probability of success is 80%,” Gideon answered with what Eobard could swear was a taunting smile.

“So, unless Caitlin is secretly a neurosurgeon, there is clearly some aspect of this that you’re not sharing with me,” Eobard inferred, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. “What are you not telling me?”

“I am sorry,” Gideon replied sweetly. “I do not understand the question.”

Hartley frowned and turned to look askance at his android ex, only to find him looking just as confused by the response and noticeably disturbed.

“That’s never happened before.”

“You’re consigned to the precinct until Mardon’s been caught,” Captain Singh ordered as he led Joe and Barry towards the bullpen.

“You said it yourself, Captain, that son of a bitch killed my partner!” Joe protested.

“Yes, he did, and I don’t plan on letting him kill you, too,” Singh reasoned with more calm than Barry was used to seeing from him. “I can’t stop you from being pissed, Joe, but I can keep you safe.” The Police Captain stopped and turned to face them a few steps short of his office. “Look, maybe your daughter can contact the Flash.”

“I’m not getting her involved in this!” Joe rejected.

Captain Singh looked from the angry Detective to his CSI. “Allen, make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.”

“Yes, Sir,” Barry accepted. Joe pushed past him, returning stiffly to his desk.

“I need to find this guy.”

“Joe, you’ve never hesitated to let me know when you can tell I’m not thinking clearly,” Barry urged.

“Oh, my mind is clear. I know exactly what I need to do. Nobody here knows the Mardon brothers like I do!” Joe argued.

“Mark Mardon can control the weather. He’s even more powerful than his brother was,” Barry pointed out. “Say you do find him, what are you going to do? The minute you try to corner him he can just fry you with his lighting or beat you to death with hail!”

“I’m pretty sure that my gun can kill metas just as easily as it can kill a normal human,” Joe stubbornly persisted.
“That depends on the meta,” Eddie put in as he arrived at his own desk facing Joe’s. Both men looked at him with different levels of uncertainty. “What, haven’t you guys been reading Iris’ blog? There’s at least one type of meta she’s written about with rapid healing abilities. There’s no way to know for sure if this one doesn’t have some similar trick hidden up his sleeve.”

“Even so, how is staying here any safer for me? Say you’re right and Mardon comes here to kill me: what are we going to do? None of us even knows for sure what this guy is capable of. How are we supposed to deal with a meta coming in here and throwing lightning at us? We don’t know how to handle a threat like this!”

“No, but luckily for you, we have friends who do. All you have to do is wait here until Cisco finishes his electron device. Then we can go out and use it to stop this guy,” Barry reassured him. “Trust me: this is going to work.”

Joe blew out a wary sigh, “Fine. Go.”

Barry nodded, sparing a fleeting glance toward Eddie as he turned to leave. He was lost in thought on his way down, heading out of the precinct on autopilot. He took out his cellphone and called Harrison, barely paying any attention to his surroundings. A recognizable and incongruous three-note tone trilled into his ear, followed by an impassive synthetic voice.

“We are sorry, but the number you have dialed has been disconnected--”

Barry frowned and checked the screen. “What?” He hung up, distracted with redialing the number and getting the call to go through as it should. That was why Barry could not be certain that what happened next wasn’t merely some strange, anxiety driven product of his imagination. He almost walked into himself, but the blue-hooded man stepped easily around, almost as if already knowing his next movement ahead of time. “Oh, excuse me.” Barry stopped short as what had happened caught up to him. “Wait.” He ran back to search around the corner where his seeming doppelganger had disappeared. He had disappeared. Barry checked his jacket pocket, which crackled, stiffly. There was a note written in his own handwriting.

“Weather Wizard paralyzes Capt. Singh. CCPD Station, 6:45 pm”

“Hey, Caitlin, Cisco,” Iris greeted, stopping in the entrance to the Cortex to look around. “Where is everybody?”

“Oh, we’re all kind of spread out to our own corners of research right now. If you’re looking for Barry and Joe, they said they had to double back to the station to check in after Mardon’s latest attack,” Caitlin replied, sorting through biodata on the computer screen in front of her.

“Mardon? You can’t mean Clyde Mardon… What happened?” Iris wondered, brow crinkling in confusion.

“Oh… No. It’s no big deal. A car blew up. No one was in it,” Cisco covered nervously, wandering in from his lab. “They’re fine.”

“I didn’t think they were in trouble,” Iris responded, and frowned. “Now I kind of do. Is something going on?”

“What? No nothing’s going– Sorry, weren’t you looking for Barry and Joe?” Cisco stumbled over the failed cover-up.
“Well, no, not specifically. I’m not actually sure which one of you guys I should talk to about this,” Iris amended hesitantly, turning to look behind her as Dr. Wells wheeled into the room with a mildly curious expression on his face.

“Good evening, Ms. West,” he greeted, “I was just about to grab lunch--” Caitlin looked up from her work with a dissenting expression, but Dr. Wells continued before she could voice her concerns. “- although if there’s anything in particular that you’d like to consult with me about. I’ll certainly do my best to answer any questions I can on my way out.”

Iris’ uncertainty vanished and a hint of determination glinted in her dark eyes as she followed him out into the corridor. “Good, I think that’s exactly what I need.”

Cisco and Caitlin exchanged a look and Cisco set down his tools and trailed after them.

In the corridor ahead, Iris pulled a little black cassette case out of her purse and held it out to him. “What can you tell me about this sticker?”

Dr. Wells frowned inquisitively. He slowed as they neared the elevator and made a show inspecting the circular holographic sticker while she pressed the button and waited. The “sticker” was a perfect duplicate of the microchip he had stuck to the matching cassette which Iris had found in the other lock box -- the only thing that had been taken when her shady Editor-in-Chief had broken into the storage space the night before: not the tape, the sticker.

“I’m not sure that I follow you,” Dr. Wells played dumb. Iris could actually see it in the way he’d started fidgeting the second she’d taken the evidence out to show him; he knew what it was and it made him nervous.

“I’ve been investigating this missing persons case that isn’t a missing persons case for a few months now, and from what I’ve already learned there are some pretty shady people involved. You see, the guy was stalked, erased from almost every directory I have been able to access, nearly murdered in at least one instance that I can verify and experimented on by a couple of very influential scientists.” At those words, the physicist’s gaze darkened dangerously for the briefest fraction of a second.

“What exactly are you implying Ms. West?”

Iris clarified, “I’m not trying to come after you here. I want to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I’m pretty sure that you know exactly who I’m referring to. I’ve found file MR262524. I know what really happened that night,” Iris challenged, staring him directly in the eyes. Dr. Wells stared back for a second, turning the empty cassette case over and over in his hand. It was the only outward sign of his anxiety as he considered his next move. Then the haunted man averted his gaze, holding out the case for Iris to take back.

“Then you should understand why I can’t help you,” he decided.

“Listen, E hid strong boxes around the city like time capsules. I didn’t understand what it was when I found the first one, but the tape in that box had the same kind of sticker on it. It stood out because, at the time, the cassette seemed to be the only random dead end in a box full of useful clues.”

“What was on the tape?” Dr. Wells inquired halfheartedly.

“Vivaldi’s Four Seasons,” Iris replied, eliciting a scoff from the cranky physicist.

“His favorite. Hardly an enigma.”

“And another sticker. It was important enough to somebody that they assaulted my coworker in order
to steal it--"

“And yet, you still carry that around in your purse. You’re acting just as recklessly as he was,” Dr. Wells remarked, maneuvering his chair around her to enter through the parting doors of the lift. “I suggest that you find yourself another story before you share my roommate’s fate.” Nevertheless, she persisted.

“He survived, you know.” Stubborn as ever, Iris stepped through to block the closing doors, preventing his flight.

“You’re mistaken,” Eobard corrected drily.

“I’m not. E is alive. I just spoke with him an hour ago.”

“If that were true, I would know long before E ever thought to contact you,” Eobard dismissed.

“Not since he decided to remain hidden,” Iris argued. “He thinks it’s safer to keep himself isolated. I’m here anyway because I don’t believe that’s true anymore.”

Eobard gave her a long, chilling stare. “I won’t help you decipher whatever it is you believe is encoded on that tape.”

“Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t concern you, because I could get us both killed, or because I don’t care: pick one!” Dr. Wells snarled and shoved her out into the rotunda, then smacked the doors-close button, undaunted by her appalled expression.

“Dr. Wells!” Iris tried to step up and stop the lift again, to no avail.

“I’ll do it,” a quiet voice offered from behind her. Iris turned to see Cisco hesitantly walking closer. “I can take a look for you -- not that I’m going to find anything... Not necessarily.” He seemed to be arguing with himself.

“And if you do?” Iris tested, scrutinizing the disarmingly geeky young man.

“Dr. Wells has this habit of thinking that he knows what’s best for everyone without discussing it with the rest of us. A few things just don’t add up anymore… after everything that’s already happened. I need to know what’s really going on, for real this time.”

Thank you, Mr. Humphries.” Tina McGee spoke into her phone as she reached the second landing of the grand, steel-and-glass staircase. “I shall expect a full overview on my desk by noon tomorrow.”

“Your tea, Doctor,” her personal assistant said quietly, handing over a to-go cup full of strong Assam tea with just a splash of milk, then straightened the blazer of his deep blue bespoke suit and fell into step behind her as she finished her call.

“All the time that man spent campaigning with me for a bigger budget -- and the minute he gets it, his project falls behind schedule,” Tina disapproved, striding purposefully towards her office. “What does that tell you?”

Her unusual new shadow paused to consider, his pale, sea-glass-green eyes scanning through unseen
concerns before he answered in his typical, smooth monotone. “If you don’t mind my asking--” whatever he was about to ask was overwhelmed by the distinct sound of all the air being knocked out of his lungs.

Tina stopped and looked behind her. He was simply gone. “Mr. Wilde?” As she searched the unsettlingly still and quiet area around her, a soft hum ran through the too-empty space. The lights on the entire level went out, bright computer screens winking off as the building lost power. Tina gasped and ran for the safety of her subtly fortified office.

In a rush of wind, an imposing, bright yellow-clad figure cut off her escape.

“Security!” Tina screamed.

“Don’t waste your breath, Dr. McGee. Your men are already dead.”

It was getting close to the shift change at the CCPD when Cisco finally came in to deliver his finished prototype. No one really looked like they were ready to call it a day and go home just yet, and there was a subtle aura of lingering uncertainty and agitation around the bullpen, but no one was about to acknowledge it aloud. At least Mardon hadn’t attacked anyone else since the lightning incident.

“Keep this handy. It’ll protect you from Mardon’s powers,” Cisco concluded, passing over his finished electron wand to Detective West.

“Yeah, Cisco. I get it. So I just hold this thing upright and press the red button. Doesn’t seem too hard,” Joe remembered the instructions he’d now had over-explained to him by both of the two smartest people he knew. Although, why Dr. Wells had seen fit to call him in the first place was still a mystery to him.

“With this end up,” Cisco clarified, hastily demonstrating the correct position before handing it back.

“Okay. I got it,” Joe reassured, trying not to feel patronized. He set the device down on it’s stand near the entrance to the bullpen and turned to head back to his desk. “Thanks, Cisco.”

“Oh, wait, Joe! Just one more thing,” Cisco stopped him. The Detective let out a weary sigh and turned to look askance at his excitable visitor. “I know that you’re probably really busy right now but--um-- I just need to know. Why was it you thought Dr. Wells might be involved in the Nora Allen case?”

“You’re gonna ask me that now?” Joe questioned, eyebrows arched in skepticism.

“You just seemed really sure…”

“It doesn’t matter,” the Detective brushed it off with a careless wave. “I was wrong.”

“But what was it that made you think he could?”

“I don’t know. Look, I can’t talk about this now. Okay?” Joe denied, reaching a hand out absently as if to still him. Cisco reluctantly relented with a nod of his head and they went their separate ways. As Cisco entered the elevator a taller, rough looking man in a leather jacket brushed past him. Cisco stared out at him with his heart in his throat. The doors closed between them like a trap as the man turned his head, surveying his surroundings, allowing Cisco to confirm his suspicion: Mark Mardon
had just arrived for his next attack.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” Mark Mardon called over to Joe. Joe straightened from his hunch over the Sergeant’s desk to face his challenger. The murderer sneered at him, “Here I am,” holding out his arms in a ‘come at me’ gesture.

“Mardon,” Joe acknowledged stone-faced.

“Hey, Joe. I can call you Joe, can’t I? I figure we’ got no reason to be too formal anymore, seeing as you killed my baby brother,” Mardon accused.

“You brother murdered my partner and a whole lot of innocent people. He would’ve killed a whole lot more, if I hadn’t stopped him,” Joe shot back, taking a few steps forward, doing his best not to let on that he was trying to reach the device placed on the table between them.

“Yeah, Clyde was no saint, but he was still my brother,” the meta accepted. “If you can’t protect your family, I figure the least you can do is get revenge.”

“This is between the two of us; nobody else has to get hurt,” Joe bargained and each man ventured another step closer. Their gazes locked. That didn’t prevent a familiar glint of golden lightning from catching his notice from the periphery. The Flash had just reached the top of the stairs on his left.

“Nobody has to,” Mardon agreed, but then the corner of his mouth curled upward. “But they will.”

Joe attempted to dart forward and grab the wand but Weather Wizard reached an arm out and threw him back with a torrent of unnatural gale-force wind.

“Joe!” Eddie exclaimed, grabbing his gun and aiming it at the attacking criminal along with half the precinct.

“No! Take cover!” Joe shouted back. The Flash sped into view, grasping the wand for a fraction of a second before a massive rush of wind swept him into the air and shattered all the internal windows between them and the bullpen.

“You again,” Mark Mardon remarked cockily. “That’ll make this a lot easier.” He stepped forward and picked up the wand. “Is this what you were after?”

Barry pushed himself upright and darted forward. Weather Wizard reached up and drew white-hot lightning down into his free hand then clamped it over the speedster’s shoulder mid-tackle. The Flash screamed in pain and rolled off of him, gasping. A hail of bullets flew past and Mardon let out a wordless yell, sweeping the police off their feet with another massive gust. Barry grabbed the other meta’s arm still holding Cisco’s wand and forced the device upright, pressing the button to activate it.

“What the hell?” Weather Wizard questioned watching in displeasure as his advantage evaporated. Barry struck him unconscious with an elbow to the face and whisked them away to deposit his latest catch in the pipeline.
“Let me go!” Mardon demanded, slapping the glass barrier separating himself from his jailers. “You have to let me out of here, now!”

“Hmm, no,” Hartley drawled unsympathetically from his place behind the Flash’s left shoulder. “We don’t, which—aside from a multitude of psychological flaws— is the cause of this temper tantrum.”

“I’m a grown man!” the elemental meta objected. The Flash turned to exchange a glance with his habitually scathing company.

“Sure,” Hartley challenged in a coddling tone.

The corners of Barry’s mouth twitched upward in a small smile before he could catch himself. “Listen, Mardon. My friends, here, designed that cell you’re in, specifically to contain a meta-human with your powers,” he explained, looking from Hartley at his left shoulder to Cisco standing by the controls behind him on their right.

“Yeah, That’s right. You can try all you want, Weather Wizard, but you aren’t getting out of that cell unless one of us decides to let you out,” Cisco confirmed confidently. He was clearly happy to get the chance to use the new name.

“You can make this a lot easier on yourself if you choose to cooperate,” Barry got straight to the point. “You were contacted by another enemy of ours when you first returned to Central City.”

“Cobalt Blue,” Cisco proudly supplied.

“Right, “ Barry acknowledged, while Hartley cocked his head with a “not bad“ expression. “At the moment, we’re more concerned with stopping him than we are about punishing you, so—”

“Whatever your latest sales pitch is, I’m still not interested,” Mardon cut Barry off before he could offer any semblance of leniency. “Like I told you at the docks: I ain’t involved in your stupid turf war.”

“What?” Barry questioned with an unsettled look dawning on his face.

“You heard me! Or did you think I wouldn’t recognize you in that red leather get up? I ain’t buyin’ what you’re sellin’. Now let me out of here; I got cops to kill!”

“Compelling argument, yet, somehow our hero remains unmoved,” Hartley continued his sardonic commentary. He shifted his deadpan scrutiny to the aforementioned hero. “I take it you have no idea what he’s talking about.”

Barry shook his head, but his focus had turned inward and his expression revealed him to be more deeply disturbed by the criminal’s words than mere mistaken identity would explain. Hartley returned his focus to Mardon. “When exactly did you think you’d met this one?” He indicated the distracted speedster with a gesture.
“I didn’t think anything—” Mardon began to object.

“I believe that to be literally true,” Hartley couldn’t help but interject. Cisco snorted.

“Swear to God, Smartass, once I get out of this cell I am coming for you!” Mark Mardon threatened, prompting a suggestive smirk from the Pied Piper.

“Promises, promises.”

“Dude, don’t go there,” Cisco dissented without really seeming too bothered by it.

“What was I wearing?” Barry unexpectedly questioned. The other men both turned their heads to look at him in confusion, although Hartley managed to reign it in for the most part.

“Well, here I was thinking we were aiming for an abstract form of the good cop, bad cop routine, but if you’re switching to gay cop, gayer cop, I demand that we swap roles,” Hartley joked, awaiting a reasonable explanation.

“Dark vinyl, or maybe some kind of armor? Was I on fire at any point?” Barry soldiered on, choosing to ignore him. Hartley turned to Cisco with his hands out in a questioning gesture.

“Hey, don’t look at me, Man. For all I know we could be living out a House M.D. episode right now,” Cisco responded, equally lost.

“You mean that stupid, blue-fiery vanishing act?” Mardon replied to Barry’s bizarre questioning, ignoring the two nerds. “What about it?”

“Say whaaat?” Cisco drew out the word, staring incredulously at the meta-criminal while Barry’s breathing began to get shallower in response to the confirmation. “You think he is Cobalt Blue?” Cisco disbelieved, pointing to the Flash, just before he darted out of the pipeline in a panic.

Luckily, Caitlin was the only one present in the Cortex to witness Eobard jerking his head up to track the blur of red and gold whizzing past the archway and racing out after him in an incriminating streak of red lightning.

“Don’t forget your suit,” she called for her own peace of mind, then wondered how she was going to explain Dr. Wells’ sudden absence this time.

Barry skidded to a halt in the woods outside of his boyfriend’s glass and chrome fortress, then dropped onto his hands and knees, slightly out of breath from his impulsive sprint to the edge of town. He felt the familiar, inexplicably comforting pull of his reverse’s speed-force a few seconds before the android came to an unnaturally abrupt halt in front of him, just out of arm’s reach.

“You lied to me,” Barry bit out, wanting to be as pissed at his counterpart as he sounded.

“I do not understand. I am programmed to be incapable of consciously supplying you with false information.”

“Just like you aren’t capable of killing me, right?” Barry snapped, glowering at the bedroom window beyond, as if unwilling to look at him. When he finally did, Barry’s expressive eyes were brimming with betrayal.

“I do not understand,” Eobard replied, gaze flitting over his partner’s wrathful visage as he tried to
guess what he had missed during his short retreat to Wells’ office. Barry surged to his feet and Eobard found himself taking an immediate step back without consciously meaning to, uncertain of how to handle his Barry in this uncharacteristically volatile mood. It was familiar in all the wrong ways.

“I asked you before if you’ve been allowing me to live because of your programming. You said that wasn’t true!”

“I did.”

“You lied to me!” Barry accused, taking another step forward. Eobard took a smaller step back, annoyed with his own unwitting surrender, however slight. “I actually trusted you, knowing full well that you were a killing machine! You must think that I’m a complete idiot to fall for your whole programmed honesty act! God, you know maybe I am, because I was kind of starting to like you!”

“My responses to your inquiries were factually accurate,” Eobard corrected, managing to sound more irritated than scared. He felt as if he were seeing the first traces of the the other Barry beginning to rise to the surface and he didn’t even know what mistake he’d made to cause this change.

“Factually accurate,” Barry echoed derisively, then paused to consider that for a second and asked. “Answer me then, true or false: you have been manipulating your presentation of the facts in order to deceive me?”

Eobard turned up his chin, resisting the powerful imperative compelling him to speak.

“True or false,” Barry prodded. When Eobard continued to resist, he ordered. “Answer me!”

“True,” Eobard obeyed, glaring up at the Flash with burning red eyes.

“Your programming prevents you from murdering me because I’m your Admin: true or false?”

“I don’t want to—” Eobard tried to console Barry, placing a gentle hand over his love’s heart, but he just slapped it away.

“Answer: true or false!”

“True.”

“You are programmed to obey direct orders spoken by my voice pattern because I am your Admin—” Barry broke off taking a couple of deep breaths as if struggling to find it in him to utter the words. “And that was the same reason why you reacted to Cobalt Blue the way you did when we were fighting in the Badlands: True or false?”

“Who?” Eobard’s brow pinched in a frown.

“E, I need you to answer the question,” Barry said, placing his hands on the mechanized speedster’s shoulders, as if in a small effort to make amends. He seemed to know on some level that he had crossed a line, even if that knowledge wasn’t quite enough stop him.

“Then please clarify: Cobalt Blue?” Eobard pursued, tone sharp enough to cut glass. He was annoyed that he even had to ask. He was pissed that Barry would even do this to him and angry at himself for not knowing better than to put too much faith in him. He just wanted this whole debacle to be over and done with… and maybe to punch Barry in the face before he left. Why did the idiot have to make things so damn complicated? “That moniker isn’t in the meta-human database.”
“Because it’s Cisco’s name for the fire-meta and that fire-meta is my future self!” Barry shouted, then sucked in a breath, imploring his android with a heartbreaking look in his eyes, “True or false?”

“Barry…” Eobard cautioned.

“Please? I need to know the truth.” Barry was shaking his head as he said it. Perhaps even he didn’t truly believe his words. “I need to know.”

“I won’t reveal details about your possible future when I know it will cause you pain,” Eobard denied. “You can’t force me to hurt you.”

Barry squeezed his eyes shut in a pained wince, pacing away. A tear slipped down his pallid cheek. “I knew it. He’s me.”

“No,” Eobard urged, at a loss as to how he was going to fix this. “Barry--”

“I’m Cobalt Blue,” Barry gasped out, sounding perilously close to a mental breakdown. “It’s me…”

“Barry, stop. I need you to listen to me,” Eobard urged as gently as he could in the Reverse Flash’s inhuman voice. His trademark metallic growl turning to a synthetic purr.

“Everything he’s done... The people he’s killed... He tried to kill Caitlin, and Eddie and Iris and you… Oh my God! I almost murdered my boyfriend!” Barry’s hands flew up to cover his mouth as his knees gave out.

“It’s not that simple,” Eobard shuffled indecisively before moving to kneel beside the breaking man and awkwardly rest a hand on his back.

“Did I kill my own mom?!” Barry whispered to himself, choking on tears.

“Damn it, Flash!” Eobard swore loudly enough that it should have made Barry flinch, although he didn’t. He needed to fix this! If Barry would just listen...

“How could I do all of those things? What’s so wrong with me-- I don’t understand!” Barry was lost to the world around him, thinking up more and more terrible nightmares for himself. “I’m the villain!”

“That’s it.”

SMACK!

“Ahh! Son of a--” Barry rubbed at the vivid pink hand-print now marking the left side of his tear-streaked face. “You slapped me!?”

“You were hysterical,” Eobard shrugged it off as if he hadn’t been on the verge of a total breakdown himself mere moments ago. It was far from E’s finest moment but he wasn’t about to admit it.

“That was really hard,” Barry continued.

“It really wasn’t,” Eobard assured him, giving the Flash a hearty pat on the shoulder. “You needed to come back to reality and hear me this time when I tell you: you’re not him.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because that’s what I believe. Cobalt Blue represents only one possible future for you, not the man that I know you will become,” Eobard explained, standing up and looking towards his bedroom.
window. It looked familiar and safe to him from the outside, even though he had only kept it as it was in order to live out someone else’s life.

“But how do you know I won’t become him?” Barry pursued, his voice still wavering a little.

“Because if I’m wrong after everything I’ve gone through, everything that I have sacrificed and lost and strived to achieve is meaningless,” Eobard reflected, then smiled down at his reverse with an unusual sense of humanity. “You wouldn’t do that, even to a machine like me. You’re too kind.”

“You’re more than just some machine,” Barry observed, looking up at Eobard as if he could see straight through all of his synthetic flesh and ceramic bone to the soul trapped deep within. “You’re alive.”

Eobard’s wan smile turned blinding. “Yes, there you are,” he praised, more warmly than he’d ever dared to behave towards Barry outside of Wells’ guise. “Don’t ever lose that light.”

Iris trudged tiredly into the apartment she shared with Eddie and headed for the bedroom, tossing her bag aside onto the soft grey sofa as she passed. The two metal lock boxes were hidden on the overhead shelf of the closet under a pile of spare blankets. She pulled the newer discovery down and took it with her to open it on the bed. She had a feeling that the piece of the mystery these clues uncovered was a dark and treacherous one. The cassette case had already gotten an extreme reaction from the witness that she had tried to share it with. Dr. Wells had treated the innocuous object as if it heralded the very end to his existence. She picked up the sealed plastic bag containing adarkly stained men’s undershirt. Iris was planning to hand it over to Barry tomorrow when they met for lunch, along with the third dreadful object. Grim-faced, Iris pulled on some latex gloves and picked up the hand gun. It was a SIG Sauer semi-automatic pistol, Iris looked the well-kept weapon over and released the clip. Three rounds were missing from the magazine. It wasn’t exactly a comforting piece of evidence. She wondered, not for the first time, if she was holding a murder weapon in her hands, then sighed and went about packaging it up in order to pass it safely to her favorite CSI resource. She heard the front door open and close and the footsteps of a man’s heavy booted stride coming through into the living room.

Iris froze, her dark eyes drifting to the firearm within easy reach. That would mean destroying evidence. She quietly closed up the boxes and slid them under the bed, shoving the evidence bags under her pillow and out of sight.

“Iris?” Barry’s voice called out from the other end of the hallway. It was her best friend’s voice, convincing enough that she stood up and opened her mouth to call back. Something in the back of her mind made her hesitate just short of the bedroom door. What was Barry doing here? He wouldn’t just wander in like this. She listened more intently. “Hey, Iris? Eddie? Mrs. Edwards said that she saw you come home.” An amused snort. “Nosy old girl,” the perfectly familiar voice sneered and Iris realized what had given her pause. It was Barry, but wrong. She had never heard her best friend sound so cold and detached before. There was a soft shuffling sound Iris couldn’t place at first, more steps stalking through the living room. “The door was unlocked, so…” The soft slide of a drawer opening. Her breath caught in her throat. The imposter was searching for something. Iris snatched her phone off of the bedside table and backed into the closet as the footsteps trod nearer. She saw a man’s vinyl-clad arm push her bedroom door open through the wooden slats concealing her. She texted a hurried message and activated the camera on her phone: whoever or whatever this was, he was going to be caught red-handed.
“Last time I saw you, you told me that you were going to die,” Barry recalled, trailing through the woods behind his reverse like a baby duckling following its mother. The android looked entreatingly up at the stars, thinking an asteroid or a surprise attack from some airborne meta would be just perfect right about now.

“Everybody dies, Flash. Stop whining.”

“Right, don’t take this the wrong way, but are all Androids this emotionally-constipated or is it just you?” Barry snarked back as if the alienation and roughness his reverse habitually used to keep a safe distance between them were nothing more than affectionate ribbing between old friends. “I’m trying to help you, you know?”

“We were not intended to have emotions,” Eobard replied, using his oppression as a guard against discussing his inevitable demise. “I was one of a handful of anomalous programs.” He glanced back over his shoulder with a wry smirk. “So, yes, I suppose we probably are.”

Barry tentatively smiled back, taking his quip as the olive branch it was, only to ruin the moment immediately with his own particular brand of well-meaning stubbornness, “You said you only had, like, two months left; just tell me what’s wrong?”

“I’ve taken internal damage. It doesn’t concern you,” Eobard dismissed, smacking a branch out of his way viciously enough that it snapped back and whipped toward the Flash’s face. Unfortunately, Barry ducked.

“You’re handling it well…” the speedster observed dryly, not even bothered by the failed assault. Damn him. “Look. I get why this is a difficult concept for you to grasp, but I don’t want you to die.”

“There’s nothing that you can do to save me.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“Because the other you designed me to die. If we repair the damage, at best I’ll survive for another two months only to self-destruct. If I try to circumvent the self-destruct mechanism, I will self-destruct. Besides, we lack proper resources in this backward–” Gideon interrupted Eobard’s bitter rant with a forward drawn directly from Iris’ cellphone. Eobard tilted his head thoughtfully, observing the video feed in real time.

There’s someone in my house. It’s mimicking my best friend, looking for me.

“E, what is it? Why’d you stop?” Barry questioned, concerned.

“Iris… I know you’re here,” the other Barry coaxed.

Eobard grinned ferally. “Well hello, Director…” He raced away at top speed without an explanation. He could feel Barry belatedly chase after him but there was a pretty comfortable gap between them.

The impostor wearing Barry’s face turned back to look out the bedroom doorway as if hearing something that Iris couldn’t. The mimicry was even more flawed than she’d first thought, marred by a spider web of scars around one eye, there was something subtly off about the color in his corresponding cornea. It took Iris a moment to figure it out. No capillaries, no variation in color. It was a skillful reproduction, but Iris got the impression that what she was looking at wasn’t an eye at all. One side of not-Barry’s mouth stretched upward in a smug sneer mere seconds before a rush of angry red lightning exploded into the room. In the blink of an eye the Reverse Flash had tackled the impostor, shattering their way out through the street-facing window. There was a loud crash and a
woman’s scream from the street below, underlined by the strident sounds of a car alarm. Iris hurried over to look out through the shattered aperture at the contained chaos below.

“Holy shit!”

She wasn’t the only one recording the meta’s transgressions anymore.

———

Eobard smacked into his nemesis, carrying them both out through the window beyond in a creeping explosion of vermilion lightning, azure sparks and shattering glass. The Director’s arms spread in a parody of the martyr pose and half-inch thick scales of gunmetal-colored armor assembled over him like beads of mercury collecting over the lines of a statue. His helmet stretched over the back of his skull just as the bastard’s back impacted the roof of someone’s station wagon. Their combined weight crushed the cabin under them as if it were tinfoil while Eobard landed in a crouch on top, punching his opponent right in the nose in the split second window before his helmet closed.

“Ack!” The Director’s broken nose blossomed with deep red blood, disappearing from sight. He stretched out his right arm and made a fist, extending his blade, then swept it up in an arc that would have beheaded the Reverse if his inhuman reflexes had not allowed him to lean back so abruptly. It probably didn’t help the optics of the engagement that the Reverse Flash was cackling maniacally as he arched back, like an insane Jack-in-the-Box. When he lurched forward again the Director caught his punch, arm trembling with the effort to hold it in place. Cobalt Blue let out a roar and head-butted the Reverse Flash hard, knocking him back onto the hood of the car. He pounced after him and punched his rebellious android twice in his soft midsection before raising his blade and stabbing him through the left shoulder. Eobard screamed, feeling his energy being drained into the weapon.

A rush of golden lightning swept through his vision and suddenly the weight on his chest and the horrible draining blade were gone. It took a couple of obnoxiously drawn out seconds for Eobard’s power levels to recover and let him roll off of the battered station wagon. The two speedsters were battling their way up the side of the building so he dropped into the Reverse Speed-force and cut them off on the roof.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Flash?” he shouted in his most intimidating sonorous snarl.

Barry ducked Cobalt Blue’s blade and landed a vibrating double punch to his chest-plate on the way back up, momentarily knocking his alternate off his feet. “I was about to ask you the same question! Did we not just establish that you had taken critical damage before you ran off to pick this fight?!” he shouted back.

Cobalt Blue kicked him in the ribs in his acrobatic roll to his feet “Thanks for the intel.” He swiped his weapon downward only for the tip to be caught at the last second in E’s gloved fist.

“Yes, brilliant job. This is a perfect example of why you cannot be involved in this, Flash!” the Reverse accused, punching Cobalt in the jaw. “This is too volatile an engagement for a novice! Shit!” he barely dodged the massive blue fireball flying towards him in time.

Barry was quick to intercede, circling Cobalt Blue in a high-speed fist fight until the less speed-attuned meta managed to knock him on his ass. “Because you were doing so much better on your own. Honestly, no wonder you and Harrison were so close. You’ve got all the same neuroses. It’s like you’re allergic to any prospect of a healthy human relationship!”
Cobalt Blue broke into a rare, genuine laugh while catching his younger self by the throat.

“How dare you laugh at the damage you inflicted! You were the reason we never had a chance!” Eobard raged in response to that salt in an old, barely acknowledged wound. He phased through Barry to tackle Cobalt, preventing him from lighting the Flash on fire. “After faking my death I realized my only logical choice was to retreat into the temporal fissures that you caused! I’ve been living like a ghost!” he punctuated each accusation with a punch.

“Nice move,” Cobalt conceded, though whether in response to the maneuver or his tactical retreat was unclear. “But you’re only making the inevitable loss more painful for yourself.” Still anyone’s guess really. He blasted Eobard off of him with a flare of unnatural blue.

“E!” Barry exclaimed, darting over to intercept the flying, worryingly limp android just short of the roof’s edge. They landed in a roll along the lip and this time it took more than just a couple seconds before E was able to move his limbs again. “E, get up!” Barry shoved him onto his back on a more secure stretch of roof. “Are you still with me? Say something!”

“Warning: this unit’s sensory load is nearing maximum tolerance,” Eobard’s humanized tone managed to turn Gideon’s potentially fatal status alert into a work of pure sarcasm. “Further thermal exposure is not advised.” He was somewhat perplexed to see the Director hanging back, blade retracted, simply watching them. It didn’t make any sense. Why wasn’t he attacking? This was a perfect opening. Eobard began to push himself up off the cool, gritty cement of the roof… too slow. The Director surged forward, crackling with E’s stolen speed-force.

Barry flickered to the side and intercepted him, nearly knocking them both over the edge. “E retreat, right now! That’s an order!”

“No!” the Director howled, watching Eobard disappear into the Reverse Speed-force. He backhanded the young Flash, knocking him onto his back with the force of his armor-assisted strike. Dazed, Barry’s head lolled to the side. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as his vision swam with mixing colors. Eobard really didn’t hit me hard, he mused.

“You have no idea what you’ve done!” His dark alternate roared, marching over to pull him up by the front of his suit. “I had him!” He punched Barry in the face, painting a crescent of fresh blood around his stunned captive’s left eye. “I could have finished it!”

Barry grasped the wrist of the limb holding him in his pitiful dangle. “Good,” he slurred out defiantly. “Then I did the right thing.”

“Tell that to Tina McGee!” It was hard to tell if it was a reprimand or a threat, and it took Barry’s pain-addled brain a little too long to register that it was probably both. Then he wondered when he had gone insane. “Doesn’t matter.” Cobalt extended his blade. “You won’t be around that long.”

“Hey!” Iris’ unexpected interruption caused him to look up, right in time for the blast from her shotgun to hit the dead center of his mask. The force of the impact was enough to knock him backwards off the edge of the roof. “That was for my bedroom!” she announced, moving to peer over the edge and check if-- he had already disappeared, obviously not dead.

“Thank you,” Barry said, now vibrating to hide his identity.

“Are you okay? That looked pretty--”

“I have to go.” Barry sped away toward STAR Labs already running worst case scenarios through his mind. Was he on his own now? How was he supposed to deal with a damaged Reverse. Weren’t
they sort of connected? What happens to a speedster when his counterbalance dies? What did any of it have to do with Dr. McGee?

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I know this took longer than it probably should have; I was trying to make sure everything was in it's right place, so to speak.
The next chapter is going to introduce another of the Sentient Seven... if anyone other than me still cares about them.(I hope it's not just me) and will also contain some references to the TV show 'Gotham'. I don't they're enough to merit a tag, but... do spoilers for an infamous plot twist in an already aired season even count? I don't even know if any of you are watching that show. Ugh, I dunno, if someone yells at me I'll change it I guess, otherwise it's not tag worthy. Anyway, rant complete I'm just going to skitter of into my dark corner and resume writing.
“Did you know that the second sentient android was designed to resemble the 1st Batman’s best friend?” the Director announced, apropos of nothing. Eobard stalled in the motion of pouring his master’s coffee, attempting to process the meaning of this unexpected offering. They never talked about the others. The Director had always seemed to prefer to operate as if Eobard was the only example of an entirely unique phenomenon, and never to have that illusion tested.

Managing to recover just before the silence got too uncomfortable, Eobard decided to pursue the new insight into his origin and question it later. “Is that where you got the idea to create me?”

His inference prompted a startled laugh from the usually gruff and guarded man. “How d’you figure that?”

“You have confided to me that my neural net was based specifically upon the engrams of someone very close to you following his demise…” Eobard reasoned, only becoming more curious in light of his Master’s unexpectedly benevolent reaction.

“No, no, Kid. Trust me -- you and I? Our situation has nothing at all in common with theirs. What went on between those two... Well, you’ll understand soon enough,” The Director waved a hand to indicate the rarely used seat opposite him at his small, circular, metal dining table and waited until his android was seated to resume talking. “You see, Bruce was a great ally to have in your corner, but a pretty lonely guy. He didn’t really allow himself to make friends. I think what happened to one of his closest had a lot to do with that. Jeremiah Valeska was an unparalleled genius-- at least according to the stories that Bruce used to tell about him. He thought up technological marvels way ahead of anyone else in his field, unrivaled security systems and virtually unbeatable mazes that went on for acres. Most of the latter was due to his obsessive fear of his own twin brother Jerome and unfortunately, that fixation eventually drove him insane. Apparently, the only part of the man he knew that survived the psychotic break was his sense of attachment to Bruce.

That feeling of a connection between them twisted into something vicious and ugly until there was no Jeremiah Valeska anymore, only the Joker, and what was once a friendship became an irresistible compulsion to monopolize Batman’s attention. It didn’t matter what it cost or who got hurt and the schemes got more and more insane and bizarre until finally, one day…” The Director paused, his gaze turning inward for a moment as he reflected on the parts of the story he could attest to himself. “I guess he finally ran out of ways to push Bruce’s buttons and so-- even raving mad as the guy was-- a part of him realized that the only chance he had at moving forward was to look back. The Joker and his cult broke into the laboratory where we were fabricating the first line of model A’s and nabbed one of the ‘droids right off the line pre-facade. He hijacked my tech and used it to create a sort of re-imagined duplicate of his past-self in order to use it to screw with Bruce’s head. Of course, it’s anyone’s guess how intentional the supposed ‘re-imagining’ actually was. Personally, I think he just couldn’t quite remember himself anymore. He’d been lost in his own head for so damn long...”

“And this stolen android became sentient? I do not understand. The odds of such a concurrence of improbable events--” Eobard began doubtfully, but the Director cut him off.

“You don’t get it, do you? Why do you think we have the Moral Intelligence Protection Act in the
first place? Legislation like that doesn’t just come spontaneously out of the ether. A human being has
to make some big mistakes first before the rest of us decide we have to step in and prevent it from
ever happening again,” the Director explained. “The crazy bastard didn’t just model some
operational construct to emulate his behavioral patterns. No, the Joker converted his own memories,
feelings, every bit of his past self that he could still salvage from his own brain and uploaded it all
directly into his duplicate’s neural net. He probably expected that sharing a piece of his raw
consciousness would make the android sure to go along with his plans exactly the way he wanted.”

“He rebelled?”

The Director chuckled cynically, looking exasperated and amused at the same time, “As it turns out,
there was still one thing that even the cleverest psychopath in Gotham City couldn’t out-think.” His
voice turned to one of childish mockery “And it was there inside of him all along.”

Eobard processed the proposition for a few scant milliseconds before a much softer smile graced his
own features. “Love.”

The Director scowled in mock disgust. “I was going to say ‘the power of friendship,’ but sure, since
you insist on ruining the joke… Double Wilde-- yeah, I know . Don’t give me that look; I didn’t
name him! Anyway--Eo, seriously-- He turned against his creator in order help Batman escape the
Joker’s trap. Bruce’s family actually kept him around for quite a while. His poor kids had to wipe
Double’s memory core after the Singularity Prevention Act was passed, of course, but I think the
Wayne’s still have his chassis on display somewhere at the Manor as a family heirloom. It’s a cute
story anyway. I guess at least some people out there can still appreciate you guys. They used him as
an on-site Doctor for the Bat Family for years. Helena sometimes used him for training, too. I think
that’s why she was so gutted when they couldn’t keep him running anymore. She even introduced
me to him once shortly before they took him offline as her ‘Uncle D’.”

“What was he like?” Eobard questioned, internally mourning the loss of yet another brother that he
would never have a chance to meet.

“Double? Pallid, monotone and creepy as Hell, but the kid meant well,” the Director winced. “Crap;
that rhymed! Uh, let’s talk about something else. I think this trip down memory lane is messing with
my head.”

Tina McGee’s newly placed personal assistant strode up the marble stairs to catch up to her with
perfectly silent, precisely positioned footfalls. Mr. Wilde fell into step with his distracted employer on
the executive’s floor.

“Our tea, Doctor,” he stated quietly in his boyish, strangely toneless voice, passing over the
beverage at exactly the instant that the clock struck 8 pm. Dr. McGee preferred to consume caffeine
on a regimented schedule: a 12-oz black coffee was to greet her arrival at 6 am; her 16-oz Assam tea
with .5 oz milk was ingested at both 8 am and 8 pm “on the dot,” like clockwork. Mr. Wilde had
been as unfaltering and impeccable in carrying out those instructions as he had in attending to every
other task assigned to him over the past few weeks. It kept the CEO satisfied; those whose desires
are satisfied are unlikely to suspect the source. Dr. McGee terminated her call with a stern flick of her
wrist and pocketed her cell.

“All the time that man spent campaigning with me for a bigger budget -- and the minute he gets it, his
project falls behind schedule.” Tina had often elected to engage her assistant more in the
companionable tone of a teacher to her apprentice, rather than a master to a mere underling. “What
does that tell you?"

Mr. Wilde considered the unexpected, but welcome aberration for a few seconds while simultaneously processing a suitable response. DANGER! The tachyon sensors he’d secreted around the perimeter and inside the first floor fire exit were tripped in rapid succession. “If you don’t mind my asking--” He allowed himself to be swept away by the attacking speedster and hurled headfirst through the wall of an unpopulated office, playing possum: he still had to protect his cover.

Mr. Wilde heard the unfortunate human under his observation calling out to him, then belatedly making a run for it. Tina had less than no chance of escaping at the present juncture, but should she react pragmatically once her situation was apparent, she stood a comparatively high chance of survival. As predicted, Dr. McGee reacted within expected parameters, allowing herself to be taken.

Double Wilde’s eyes opened, his visual sensors shifting to night mode. He straightened from his limp-limbed hang and eyed his current placement, wrenched his arms free and slid his jaw back into place with a harassed expression. Some of the parts in the framework of his left hand and forearm had been displaced by the impact. Stiffly, he extended the damaged limb and engaged the servos in his left hand in a series of systematic twitching motions, snapping the wayward components back into position. He then reached out with his intact arm and pulled the warped support frame of his wrist back into shape with a loud, wet crack. Satisfactorily repaired, Double tore at the plaster and insulation encasing his midsection until he had some wriggle room. He dropped into a perfectly executed forward roll out of the destroyed barrier, which propelled him seamlessly into a casual walk towards the door. The inhuman finesse of the stunt was only ruined by a compulsive brush-down and straightening of his dust-coated suit and tie.

The door was locked.

Double tilted his head, assessing the minor obstacle, then reached out to grip the steel knob tightly enough to warp its shape, simply yanking it out of the door. The android straightened his posture and pulled the door open with a graceful flourish, then strode into his CEO’s private office and blacked out the cameras with a blink of his eyes. Once he was done with whatever he was up to in there, he descended to the main floor—suitcase in hand— to find the bodies of security personnel strewn over their blood splattered stations. Double stepped up beside the body of the ranking guard on shift --a lovable giant named Pete who’d once offered him a donut-- and stared down at him for an inefficient moment, then reached out and swept Pete’s staring eyes shut. His focus returned to his task, the android lifted the corpse from its morbid sprawl over the keyboard and dropped all 6 1/2 ft and 220 lbs of human to the floor with a balletic arc of his left forearm.

“Rest in peace,” Double whispered, his monotone voice in direct opposition with his mournful countenance. He placed a handkerchief on the dead man’s chair before taking his seat. Synthetic eyes were already scanning over all the surveillance feeds for signs of life. He found none. The android pressed his right palm flat against the computer screen and his pastel-bordered pupils scanned back and forth until speed turned them into a blur. The terminal crackled and sparked and he pulled away, stood and walked out through the front entrance.

“Recon Unit to Captain. Subject Two taken by malicious actor. Damage incurred to my nonessential systems. Requesting orders,” Double Wilde reported over their time-ship’s covert interlink.

“Tweedledum and Tweedledee agreed to have a battle. For Tweedledum said Tweedledee had spoiled his nice new rattle,” Hartley quoted with impunity, breaking the tense silence imposed on the
treadmill room by the Flash’s recounting of recent events. There was a nettled groan that may or may not have come from the pallid Ice Queen pacing behind Hartley’s back. For once, her dissatisfaction didn’t seem to trouble him. It certainly wasn’t the reaction anyone was expecting but perhaps they should have, knowing Hartley.

“Did you just quote Alice in Wonderland at us?” Cisco questioned, amazed by his rival’s brazen belittlement. “A children’s book? That’s so-- not you.”

“Can you two take anything seriously?” Joe scolded, shaking his head. “Forget it. I need to head down there, make sure that my daughter got out of this alright.” He turned and left, casting an unhappy scowl at Dr. Wells on his way out that the physicist failed to acknowledge. The other man appeared too focused on dabbing at the bloody crescent over Barry’s eye with disinfectant soaked gauze.

“First of all, I take everything seriously, but moping around feeling sorry for ourselves isn’t going to solve anything,” Hartley defended in a scathing tone, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Oh, like you don’t mope,” Cisco murmured satirically, earning a narrow look from the emerald-clad inventor. Harrison eyed them peripherally, as if debating the necessity of intervening.

“Secondly, that was from Through the Looking Glass,” Hartley continued, shifting his attention away to linger on Barry and Dr. Wells, prompting the latter to roll his eyes and shift his attention back to his boyfriend. “As there seems to be some confusion: the android is the rattle in this metaphor.” The ding of a message alert on Cisco’s phone coincidentally punctuated the remark, with perfect comedic timing.

“Ooops! Sorry.”

“And I’m the twins. Yeah, I got that,” Barry said distractedly, continuing to stare, dull-eyed, at the ground. Dr. Wells’ lips thinned and he shot his ex a meaningful look while turning to dispose of the soiled gauze.

“Moping?” Hartley prodded, folding his hands behind his back.

“Mmm?” Barry finally dragged his gaze up to meet the inventor’s watchful eye. “I-- No. You’re right. We should-- I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do about this!”

“That’s easy. We’re gonna stop Cobalt Blue, right?” Cisco stated the obvious.

“How is that easy? He’s already lived through a version of this before. He knows us! He knows everything that Barry is still learning and more!” Caitlin chimed in, stopping her agitated pacing to face the others at last.

“Wow, Caitlin. ‘Way to be positive!”

“Don’t you have a call to make?” Hartley told the other inventor derisively.

“It was a text from Dante,” Cisco responded as if it were a genuine question.

“Oh, never mind.” Hartley shrugged, invoking a rare moment of solidarity between rivals.

“Barry, when you’re ready, you should pass by Mercury to make sure that Tina isn’t--” Dr. Wells was cut off by the insistent ringing of Barry’s cellphone. Hartley flinched away from the shrill sound.

“I thought we discussed this! Bartholomew ,” the sound sensitive meta bristled, watching the device
with a look of intense hatred while Cisco retrieved it from the other side of the observation window.
“Vibrate. Setting.”

widened. “Y-yeah. Got it, on my way now, Sir.”

“What happened?” Caitlin queried.

“I have to go; Dr. McGee’s been kidnapped.” Barry sped out of the room without another word, but
luckily, Hartley easily picked up the slack.

“According to the Captain it was a massacre,” Hartley relayed. “They think that the Reverse Flash
was responsible.”

“That’s not possible, right? I mean, he was just with Barry. We know what he was doi-- Even
though that totally sounds like something that an evil kill-bot would do,” Cisco processed the news
aloud.

“It may not be relevant. We would need to determine the time-frame of events to be certain of his
alibi,” Dr. Wells pointed out. “Do you still have the data from the tachyon sensor we used to help
Barry locate him?”

Cisco nodded, catching onto his mentor’s train of thought. “I’ll go pull up the sensor data and see if
we picked up any suspicious readings around Mercury HQ recently,” he volunteered and scurried off
into the Cortex to start the analysis.

There was another tense silence forming over the remaining three like an invisible storm cloud. The
door fell shut behind Cisco with a soft click.

“So…” Hartley began, pushing his hands into his pockets in juxtaposition with the rhythmic
backdrop of Caitlin’s resumed pacing. "Just to get it out of the way, did you abduct Dr. McGee?’

"No,” Eobard clarified, with genuine detachment. There was no logical reason for either of his
companions to take his word for it and he knew for certain that Hartley never would.

“Got it. So, how are we taking this? Do we care?” the Piper tested, playing nice for the time being.

Eobard paused to process the question in depth, drawing an indignant glare from Caitlin.

“We’re going to prove his innocence! Obviously !” she answered for him a tad too loudly, causing
the other meta to remember the very real threat that she posed.

“Looks like we care,” Eobard commented casually, still failing to feel personally invested in the
outcome. Caitlin cared nonetheless, ergo he should too.

“Great,” Hartley squeaked, trying not to look like he was backing down as he positioned himself on
the other side of the android. “All we need to do is prove that you couldn’t have been there at the
time of the attack.”

“Exactly,” Caitlin concurred, still sounding a little too frosty for her begrudging ally’s liking.

“Iris!? ” Joe called, looking around for his daughter as soon as he’d passed through the doorway to
her apartment.
“Over here.”

Iris was sitting on the couch next to Eddie, talking to a uniformed officer that he didn’t recognize. The woman seated on the coffee table to face them wasn’t the type you’d expect you could overlook either: athletically built, with ebony curls spilling out from beneath her cap in stark contrast to her piercing blue eyes. The Sergeant was taking Iris’ statement down on a matte black mobile template using a stylus that had definitely seen better days. The tech would seem pretty extravagant for its current use if there weren’t telltale scratches all over the metal surface. The blunt end of the stylus looked like it had undergone its fair share of absent-minded nibbling. Joe dragged his eyes off the stranger and pulled Iris into a tight hug.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” Iris smiled at his skeptical reaction, adding “Dad, really, I’m fine. Neither of them even laid a finger on me. As I was just telling your new Sergeant, here, the Reverse tackled the other meta out through my bedroom window before he could even get near me. After that it was all just a big three-way speedster fight up to the roof.” She reflected, “I did shoot the armored one in the face with my shotgun, which really should’ve killed him.”

“His gear must be pretty high tech,” the unnamed Sergeant remarked to herself, turning off her device and pocketing it.

“You have no idea,” Joe breathed mostly to himself, recalling their suspect’s impossible origins. Not that he believed it. He wasn’t going to trust some machine over any version of Barry Allen, naturally. He held out his hand to the woman. “I don’t believe we’ve met. Detective Joe West.”

She stood, revealing her height to be scant inches shy of his own. “Sergeant Kyle,” she replied with the kind of polite smile that career politicians practice in the mirror: pleasant, inoffensive and revealing nothing of substance to gauge. “This is my first case since I transferred onto the Task Force. I’m sure you’ll agree it’s quite the crash course, considering what went down at Mercury.”

Joe frowned.

“What happened at Mercury… You mean-- What happened at Mercury Labs?” Iris inquired, her voice pitched up just a little.

Sergeant Kyle took in the two Detectives’ curious faces, tucking her hands behind her, spine straight, in an almost military pose. “Oh, you two haven’t been called in yet. That makes sense.”

Eddie’s cell started ringing as if on cue.

“Speak of the devil. Excuse me,” with that, their new co-worker slipped away to chat briefly with one of the forensics people on her way out. Joe watched her go with a nagging feeling in his gut.

“What is going on? Eddie?” Iris demanded the instant that her boyfriend had ended the call.

Joe stepped closer to them, sensing his partner’s unrest.

“That was Singh. The Reverse Flash carried out a massacre at Mercury labs and took Dr. McGee hostage,” Joe’s partner explained, drawing his focus back to the case.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Iris immediately contradicted.

“It was captured on camera,” Eddie told her apologetically.
“So? The same as last time,” Iris pointed out. “Listen, I’ve been researching the Reverse Flash for months now. I’m not defending him, but it’s just out of character. The guy’s deep in hiding. He even faked his death! Does this sound like something you’d do if you were trying to avoid notice?”

“I’m not going to argue with you, but at least we can all agree that the guy is dangerous,” Joe began carefully. Iris shrugged so, encouraged, he sat down across from her and continued, “Baby Girl, I understand that this is hard, but if you’ve got any way of calling--”

“I don’t,” Iris interrupted, irritated. That “dangerous” speedster had literally just saved her life, yet her dad was the one talking down to her like some clueless child hoping she’d turn him in.

“Iris…”

“Really. I genuinely don’t,” Iris defended, choosing not to mention that she doubted that she’d draw him out now even if she could. “I wish people would quit asking me to. He comes to me when he’s ready and I don’t try to find him before then. Those were always his terms.”

Eddie exchanged a conspiratorial glance with Joe, interest piqued. “Who else has been asking you to contact the Reverse Flash?”

Barry followed Captain Singh into the security watch station and winced at the sight of all the scattered bodies. “How many did they kill to get to her?”

“Not ‘they,’ Allen, ‘he’,” Captain Singh corrected with a grim expression. “It looks like this was the Reverse Flash’s first stop before he took his rampage into the residential area. Last I heard the body count was at 39, but you never know with this kind of psycho.” He gestured for the CSI to join him at the desk, facing the dead guards, and opened up a laptop that had been wired into the nearest modem. “The cameras caught most of it; ‘makes this a pretty open and shut case…”

Barry watched the red-and-yellow blur sweep through multiple camera feeds, leaving broken bodies in his wake. Tina ascended the central staircase, finishing a call, then turned to speak with a young, scarlet-haired man in a deep indigo business suit and violet paisley tie.

“Except for this part,” Singh warned. “Keep your eyes on the ginger-nut.”

Barry narrowly cast a sideways glance at his crank of a Captain but obeyed just in time to see the redhead swept away by the attacking speedster, only to reappear as a body dangling limp and broken from a hole in an office wall. “Oh, God! Why did you make me watch that?!”

“Trust me, Allen. Don’t take your eyes off him,” the Captain replied darkly. The suspect-- Barry wasn’t convinced that it was really E-- menaced Tina for a brief interval, then vanished with her.

“Sir?” Barry’s query was answered the instant that he spoke. He watched in awe as the not-so-dead victim hanging from the wall straightened and surveyed his position with annoyance. It was as if the brutal assault the man had incurred seconds before had been nothing but an inconvenience he was begrudgingly readjusting from. There was an eerie precision and lack of human frailty to the mystery man’s actions which Barry recognized right away.

“Oh great, there’s another one,” he muttered to himself distractedly, watching the android extricate himself from the hole and brute force his way through the locked door with a mix of uncanny grace and unadulterated pragmatism.
“Yeah. I guess maybe this guy’s superpower is some kind of invulnerability? We’re not really sure what to make of him yet. I’ve put the Meta-human Task Force on this one, but considering what just went down back at Thawne’s apartment, we’re a bit short-handed.”

“Understood, Sir. I’ll do what I can,” Barry assured.

A mere four blocks away, the moderately damaged Mr. Wilde sat at a park bench holding a cold, half-empty coffee cup that he’d retrieved from its perch on the rim of a trash can to aid his cover. A large, black metal briefcase was tucked neatly beside his legs. No children were out, but there was an untidily dressed woman circling around from the other side of the play area, pushing a cart full of re-purposed items and molding fabric. Her body was wracked by a shaking cough that drew the android’s attention straight to her, before resuming her slow meandering pace along the sidewalk. The worn cotton blanket the woman had draped over herself to shield from the light drizzle was beginning to show signs of decay. Double’s visual sensors tracked her approach with childlike curiosity as he once again attempted to open a comm-link with his operators.

**Recon Unit to Command: target lost, minor damage incurred to non-essential systems. Please advise.** He waited for a moment for any signs of reception, but the connection failed once more. He figured 877 unsuccessful attempts were adequate evidence that he had honestly tried to follow protocol and switched frequencies. **Hello Kitten, this is Double, I need you to come fix me. The Captain is not responding. Uplink with the ship has failed. Currently scanning for adequate local nodes.**

The clearly unsheltered woman finally reached his stretch of the paved walk and paused to scrutinize the rain-drenched and uncannily still young man on the bench. “What’re you starin’ at, huh?” the woman’s voice was as rough and grinding as they come, as if she’d been born with a lit cigarette in her mouth and had never bothered to remove it. Double ran his sensors more penetratingly over her hunched form. The woman reached out a gnarled, quaking hand to snap her fingers in front of his staring face. A sharp whistle was added to prompt him out of his perceived daze.

“Ay! You okay there, Boy? You don’ look like you belong out here this time o’ day.”

“Cancer, early stage. I estimate an 80% chance of survival assuming that prompt intervention is taken,” Double finally addressed her aloud. “Minor surgery will be required.”

The older woman blinked at him in confusion for a few seconds, at a loss. She coughed again, this time not quite as nastily. “Excuse me? Don’t think I getcha.”

“You inquired as to what I was staring at. Do not be alarmed; it is a small laryngeal tumor, entirely treatable,” Double explained, once again invisibly reaching out over the wireless bands for any hope of aid.

“Bullshit! You dunno me! Who do you think you are, Son?”

“The most capable surgeon and diagnostician existing in this time period,” Double replied factually.

“You’re nuts! I can’t afford cancer!” the woman exclaimed wide-eyed. “It’s just a real bad cold!”

Double arched an inquisitive eyebrow at the indigent subject. “What is your name?”

“Who’s askin’?”
The android let out a little huff, stood and rested his hands on both the woman’s shoulders to elicit a predictable response; she coughed directly into his mouth, glaring up at him.

“Perfect,” Double remarked. His mouth moved as if savoring the taste while he processed her biological sample. He turned his head, the start and stop of the movement a little too abrupt to seem natural, then spit before retrieving a black card out of his pocket and swiping it between his teeth in a parody of a card reader. A flash of green from within’ his mouth accompanied the move. “Here you are then, Gretchen.” Task complete, the synthetic physician pressed the card into Gretchen’s hand and sat down, already shifting his attention away. “Now, go see a Doctor.”

The woman inspected her brand new credit card and gawked at him, pottering away at a hastier pace than any of which she’d previously seemed capable.

Double Wilde amended his previous message with a hint of worry creasing his brow. *Why won’t you answer your comms? He turned back toward the clattering racket which was unexpectedly returning. The clattering stopped. “You’ve come back.”

“You’re one o’ them super-powered freaks ar’n’ cha’?” Gretchen deduced, taking stock of him.

The android’s gaze swept back and forth as he considered her query. “If I am, is it relevant? Freak or not, I have provided you with assistance. I fail to see the conflict.”

Gretchen leaned forward over the front of her cart to squint seriously at his face. “Nah. You ain’t a dangerous one then, ah?” It didn’t sound like it was truly meant to be question.

Double’s long lashes fluttered. His head cocked to the side in the manner of a confused puppy. Again his movement was stilted, the conclusion abrupt, reminiscent of a lifelike marionette. This display caused the older woman to bark out an amused cackle.

She gestured to her lower face. “You’re leakin’ blue, Freakshow.”

The android straightened and swiped the back of his hand under his nose and sure enough his ivory fair skin came back coated in vivid cyan. *Double to Kitten, when you get this you must retrieve me promptly. My internal assessment may have been… optimistic. Battery power at 40%.*

“Guys, we have a problem,” Barry announced, skidding across the center of the Cortex.

“You’re going to ruin the floors if you keep doing that,” Hartley commented, not looking up from his computer.

Cisco turned from his seat at the other end of the hub to slurp loudly from his Frostee in reproach, causing his rival to squirm.

“That sound…” the sonic meta grumbled, failing to contain his discomfort.

“What’s the problem?” Cisco asked Barry, smiling wide.

“There may or may not be another android on the loose,” Barry explained then shook himself. “I also think that we need to find a way to capture the Reverse Flash as soon as possible.”

Hartley’s head popped up. “You think he killed those people.”

“No-- Yeah-- Maybe? I’m not sure,” Barry admitted.
“Are you not?” the Piper mocked.

“Either way we need to get to him before anyone else does,” Barry replied, too deeply conflicted to register the offense. “We’re probably the only ones who have any chance of containing him.”

“Containing whom?” Dr. Wells inquired lightly coming in a few paces ahead of Caitlin.

“The Reverse Flash?” Cisco provided, taking another sip of his bright green beverage.

“So, we think he did it, then?” Caitlin questioned, doing her best to mask her anxiety. She frowned at Cisco’s neon colored drink in distaste and shook her head when he held it out teasingly.

“According to the Flash here, it could go either way,” Hartley drawled, unimpressed. “What have you found?” he asked his fellow inventor.

“Our instruments definitely did register tachyon emissions in the vicinity of Mercury Labs at the time of Dr. McGee’s kidnapping,” Cisco reported, his sentence hanging strangely in the air. “And because I’m awesome, I even went the extra mile and went back through our sensor logs to identify the suspect. See, I noticed a while ago that both time-travelling metas display their own distinctive tachyon signatures, which makes it easy to determine if they’ve used their powers in a specific location within a window of, I’d say, about 12 hours.”

“There’s a ‘but’ isn’t there? I sense a ‘but’ coming,” Caitlin observed.

“But that’s where things got really weird. Instead of any rational answer, I found this,” Cisco cast the findings from his screen onto the wall-mounted big screen behind Barry. There was an odd mosaic of patterned colors overlaying two locations on the black and white map of downtown Central City.

“What are we looking at, exactly?” Dr. Wells prompted, steering his chair over to rest at Barry’s side.

“I can’t say 100% definitively, but barring any unseen evidence to the contrary, or extenuating--”

“Quit stalling and just spit it out, Cisquito,” Hartley chastened.

“Basically, I’ve isolated three separate tachyon signatures that were detected around the time of the incident. The two more pronounced signatures display recognizable patterns: red for the Reverse Flash, and the blue is for Cobalt, the green? Could be a glitch, could be your second android, it’s way too faint to distinguish much about it other than that it isn’t naturally occurring.”

“These readings don’t make sense,” Dr. Wells observed, studying the moving splashes of color swirling and boiling over the black and white map.

“Were these synchronized in real time?” Barry questioned, watching the warping mosaic repeat its abstract dance in a minute-long loop.

“Yes I sped it up for the purposes of this display but-- Look, this is when the attack started, it went on for about 10.5 minutes. Then these patterns head out of sensor range and this one disperses right here on top of us.”

“It’s easy to interpret, Cisco, aside from the glaring issue of the Reverse Flash being detected in two disparate locations simultaneously,” Hartley remarked impatiently. “According to this sensor map you have him arriving here on the grounds at STAR Labs less than a minute into the approximately ten and a half he’s shown speeding all over Mercury. I know he’s a time traveler but we have no evidence that he can exist in multiple-- What was that?”
“Yeah, I warned you guys that it was weird,” Cisco agreed, watching the Reverse Flash’s signal flare up spontaneously from right in the middle of the STAR Labs building and race out of frame towards the north.

“That’s when I sped out of here right after our talk with Scudder,” Barry explained. “It’s the same route I took. He must have been hiding out on the roof or something, waiting to follow me.”

“You sound far too calm about that,” Hartley noted and Barry shrugged it off.

“It wouldn’t be the first time he’s tailed me. He poses no threat to me,” the speedster said with an utter certainty that did funny things to the disguised android’s internal processes.

“Okay so that explains the sudden appearance here at our lab, but what about the doubled signature?”

“I don’t think he can be in two places at once but…” Barry frowned clearly dissatisfied with his own conclusion. “I don’t see any reason why he couldn’t if he simply crossed his own timeline.”

“You think the Reverse Flash risked a paradox in order to kidnap Tina?” Eobard challenged, masking how incredibly offended he was with a strictly modulated voice.

“I don’t know,” Barry admitted unhappily. “I don’t want to. It’s not like any of us really knows him.”

“A fair assessment,” Hartley affirmed looking pointedly at his ex-lover. He turned his full attention to Barry once he’d gotten the point across. “However, you know someone who does.”

A familiar alert vibrated Barry’s cellphone and lit up the screen.

“Et voilà,” Hartley remarked holding the device up to show Barry its screen. “It seems she wants a meeting as much as we do.”

Barry regarded the display with discontent and swallowed.

“Oh, yes! Thank you for remembering the silent setting,” Hartley tacked on with a smirk before hurling the phone at him.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so there’s my surprise android survivor. Ta-da! I hope you guys like him. We’re starting to get to the point where shit gets real, so, things are going to get more complicated, I think... possibly more violent, too. I’ll do my best to still keep it enjoyable. lol
Iris sat on the porch steps of the West family home with a beige throw blanket draped around her shoulders, both hands wrapped around her chipped marigold mug. She barely even reacted to the burst of cool air from the space behind her and to the left, only turning her head to verify the color of her guest’s speed-suit.

“You like coffee, right?” she inquired, casting a glance toward the indigo and sky blue patterned cup set beside her on the top step. “I just realized, I don’t actually know if you guys even eat or drink…”

The Flash took a moment to take stock of Iris’ subdued demeanor before shrugging and accepting the proffered beverage. “Sure I do.” He took note of the two dark silhouettes seated in the nondescript, silver Ford Crown Vic across the street. Iris followed his eye-line.

“The Meta-human Task Force has assigned a few officers to watch me after what happened back at my apartment,” she explained. “You can relax. You’re not the meta they’re interested in right now. Although, Eddie sure would love to bring you in for questioning.”

Barry took a sip of his coffee. “Is that why you wanted to speak with me?”

“No exactly.”

“I’m kind of trying to avoid enclosed spaces recently, but if you want to ask me questions on his behalf, I’ve always tried to be as honest as I can with you,” Barry assured his best friend of the truth as he saw it.

“I know that. This time it isn’t just about what I want,” Iris said, sounding tired. “Have you heard about what happened at Mercury Labs last night?”

“I know that your boyfriend and his Task Force believe my Reverse is responsible.”

“They have surveillance footage,” Iris pointed out with sarcasm slipping into her tone. She was turning the cup in her hands, staring into the dark, steaming liquid within as if for answers. “That’s enough to convince most people of his guilt.”

Barry’s brow furrowed slightly and he couldn’t hide his unjustified approval as he prompted. “Most people?”

Iris scoffed. “We both know E can easily make himself invisible to cameras.”

Barry stared at her, taken aback, but once he thought about it for a second, found that he wasn’t really surprised.

“This is exactly what E was warning me about, over and over. I was too stubborn-- Hell, Tina even told me that this was going to happen and she wanted me to pursue this story! I don’t think it’s a coincidence that her kidnapping occurred right after I breached our arrangement. Evidence I got from one of E’s hidden boxes was stolen anyway, so I figured his secrecy was already ruined. There’s no way that the timing of this attack was a coincidence. I just hope this time it’s not too late to stop the
cover up,” Iris fretted, then paused to look around, reigning in her emotions as she made sure there was no one else lurking on the periphery.

The Flash flickered over to sit on the railing to her immediate right, his luminous gaze burning into her from above. “What do you mean? You ‘breached his secrecy’ how? What cover up?”

“From late December of 2000 until sometime around Christmas 2004, Dr. Harrison Wells and Dr. Christina McGee were running a set of covert physiological and technological experiments on a being referred to in official documentation as subject MR 262524 and listed on the CCU student roster under the alias ‘E. Zyx.’ At some point E’s true nature was discovered by some dangerous people-- I have some suspicions about their alliances but I can’t confirm anything yet-- E faked his death in order to escape and Dr. Wells scrapped the project, attempting to purge all evidence of the subject’s origin and existence from the records in his wake. He did a pretty good job, too. Except for Dr. McGee-- out of greed or self-justification, it doesn’t matter-- she managed to save enough fragmented remnants of their research eventually to use in her recently stolen tachyon project.”

Barry’s eyes widened as the portrait Iris was painting began to take form in his mind. “The first attack on Mercury Labs, those mercenaries...”

“I think they were there because of the connection to E and that’s why he took them down. He needed to remain a ghost for his experimenters’ protection-- not that he ever put it in those words, but--” Iris paused to take a drink of her cooling coffee. “I’ve listened to some of the audio recordings from his early sessions with Wells. There were biological samples in there too, that blue stuff? And a few of Wells’ notebooks. McGee kept it all in a safe in her office, hidden behind this truly ugly abstract painting. I think that’s why your evil speedster wannabe was really there. He needs access to the evidence in that safe.”

“The feed in her office cut out around the same time...” Barry flitted back to the other end of the porch then stopped, remembering to hand back the cup. “Thank you. You’ve helped more than you could imagine.”

Iris covered his hand with her own, looking her remaining meta-human contact dead in the eyes. “Good. Just tell me honestly; you know where E is, right? You sent him away for his safety. I heard you. So, tell me he’s secure.”

Barry’s lips thinned.

“Flash?” Iris’ tone held a warning.

“He’s missing,” Barry admitted. Seeing her expression fall, he hastened to put a nicer spin on things. “But look at it this way; if I can’t find him, Cobalt Blue can’t either, so, it’s not the end of the world.” He forced a smile.

Iris released his hand and turned away to stare out at the darkened street. “That’s just great. You realize that makes Harrison Wells the last remaining witness?”

Barry blanched. “I’ll look into what you’ve told me, Iris. This isn’t over yet,” with those parting words, the Flash disappeared into the speed-force already formulating a basic plan of action in the spur of the moment, Iris’ dejected conclusion echoing in his head. He should probably call and check in with the team, but why hadn’t Harrison mentioned the experiments he’d supposedly run on E? He’d also hidden E’s murder from Barry, at first, for his own protection. Barry wasn’t judging him. It wouldn’t be fair really, given that he had been lying to Harrison, too, by not admitting that E was alive and his reverse... for his own protection.
The Flash was distracted from his internal conflict by a sinister vision. There was another Flash running alongside him like a macabre mirror image. Not quite identical, the other Flash had a bloody hand-print marking his face, and powder-- Plaster? Ash?-- coated one side of his cowl. The look in his eyes sent a chill through Barry’s very being. It was unfathomable rage, grief combined with something desperate and half-mad that he didn’t want to comprehend. Trails of tears streaked the other’s cheeks and his mouth opened wide in a horrible animal scream, causing the Flash to lose his footing and tumble across the pavement. Barry hastily scrambled upright, searching for any sign of Cobalt, but he was all alone in the empty street. It took him a few minutes to wrestle his hammering heart back under control. He had no idea what he’d witnessed, only that it was \textit{wrong} . Once he’d recovered, the Flash stood firm, grim-faced, more certain than ever of what he had to do.

\textit{“Rita, if you only had one day to live what would you do with it?”} Bill Murray’s character inquired of his indifferent love interest.

\textit{“I dunno, Phil. What are you dyin’ of?”} Rita inquired, fleetingly reminding Eobard of Iris in attitude. She got up and closed the news van behind her, unfazed by Phil’s bizarre proposition, and he made another floundering attempt at questioning.

“I can’t believe that you haven’t seen this before,” Cisco remarked of the film playing on the projector screen before them. Eobard was vaguely aware of Groundhog Day being considered a classic of this time period, but he didn’t see why it was so surprising, considering “Dr. Wells’” lack of pop-culture savvy.

“I suppose I never had the time,” he replied lightheartedly.

Cisco scoffed and popped more popcorn into his mouth.

“While I will always be more than happy to spend an evening watching movies with you, Cisco. I hope that I’m not causing you to miss your brother’s dinner tonight?” Eobard dutifully reminded his friend. Cisco put down his bowl of popcorn, obviously uncomfortable.

“That? Uh, no. I’m not forgetting,” he responded, attempting to sound carefree. “I thought about inviting Caitlin to go with me, but then I got an even better idea.” he popped another piece of popcorn in his mouth, pretending to be preoccupied by what was happening on-screen.

“A better idea?”

“To not go at all.”

“Oh,” Eobard digested the news aloud. “So things are still not any better between you and your family?”

Cisco shrugged. Eobard paused for a moment to consider the problem. Cisco was a caring soul and he would not fare well if he continued to isolate himself. It wasn’t as if Eobard would be around to support and guide the young man for much longer.

“You know, your relationship with Dante will never improve if you do not allow him opportunities to grow,” he counselled carefully. Cisco stole a look at him, opened his mouth, then shut it again, watching Hartley dart in behind his mentor to adjust a few network settings via the central computer.

“What are you doing?” Cisco tested with only a hint of suspicion in his voice.
“Getting rid of a hum in the wireless intercom,” the sonic meta muttered, barely paying attention. “Giving me a headache…”

Cisco let out a small sigh. “You’re gonna need--”

“What’s your password?” Hartley demanded impatiently.

Cisco responded with saintly grace, “Favorite Star Trek villain and the number of scientific errors in his--”

“First series appearance? Got it.” Having accomplished what he’d come in to do, Hartley disappeared back to finish whatever he’d been up to elsewhere.

“You’re welcome!” Cisco spoke flippantly in his wake, knowing the other man would hear. “See that? I think I’m all filled up on my dick quota for now. Dante’s going to have to wait in line.”

“I’m not going to touch that,” Eobard remarked of his companion’s poor word choice, snagging a handful of popcorn from the obstinate human’s bowl.

“Good. We can go back to the movie, then.”

A couple of seconds passed in peace.

“I feel obligated to point out that you allowed Hartley a seco--”

“Sh-hh!” Cisco intercepted.

Eobard watched him patiently.

“Yeah, I did, and now we’re stuck with him.”

“You don’t hate him anymore,” the android reasoned.

“Are we going to watch this movie or what?” Cisco challenged and Eobard fell silent again, returning his attention to the screen.

Elsewhere, Hartley made his way into the Time Vault, directing, “Try it now, Gideon. Can you pin down the point of origin without compromising the quarantine?”

“Negative. However, I have found a match for the ident code requesting access to my hub.”

“Double Wilde, really?” Hartley remarked on the android’s preferred name. “Manufactured by STAR Industries in 2038 and-- A stolen unit! Great, so we have no reliable way to determine who this guy’s working for.”

“Would you like me to ask him?” Gideon suggested with unwavering android logic.

“Ask him,” Hartley echoed incredulously, muttering to himself “Viperam sub ala nutricare…”

“I do not understand. What serpent?” the AI queried, her disembodied head tilting in place over the information point.
“It’s a-- Forget it,” the multilingual technician dismissed with a wave of his hand. “The point is, I can’t believe a rogue android that shouldn’t even exist just invaded your network and you think you can simply request an explanation.”

“We are currently networked via the same data node, therefore communication--”

“That isn’t-- Of course, you wouldn’t understand.” Hartley paced back and forth a couple of times, then stopped and threw up his hands. “Fine. Why not?”

Barry sped through the Mercury Labs crime scene, making a beeline for the CEO’s dark and sterile office. He stopped in front of the large, slightly askew painting that Iris had mentioned to him, then narrowed his glowing eyes in suspicion. He turned to consider the door which had been sealed via automated emergency fail-safe since Cobalt sabotaged the building’s electrical system. It had been a sticking point for the forensics team for much of the day, spurring arguments over how to breach it without risk of compromising the scene... the door which was now ajar. A dark figure flipped forward over McGee’s black boulder of a desk to tackle him from behind. Barry ducked and landed a punch to his opponent’s gut while darting out of reach, backing into the painting in the process.

The woman, in a form-fitting black jumpsuit of a similar material to his own and a violet-lined black cape, threw a punch. Barry slid to the side and her fist went straight through the painting into the wall. Her elusive target stared at her wide-eyed, imagining the damage she could have done to his skull.

“Whoa!” Barry attempted to play it off. “Hey. You don’t have to kill me!”

Her sharp-edged, violet mask glinted in the sliver of moonlight that marked a pale border across the carpet between them as she inclined her head in wry acknowledgement. Barry sped around his opponent and grabbed her arm to hold her in place.

“Listen, I don’t know if you’ve heard of me, but I’m warning you, super-strength or not, this isn’t going to end well for you,” he cautioned. “So, instead, why don’t we both calm down and talk this over?”

The raven-haired meta stared back at him through blue eyes centered by narrow feline pupils. “If you don’t want to fight; I suggest you get out of my way.”

The woman straightened her trapped arm, fist clenching in a dishearteningly familiar gesture. Barry was forced to release her in order to evade the miniature crossbow-bolts that fired out of her wrist-bound device. He ducked into the speed-force and tackled her back against the desk, pinning her arms. She let out a stifled cry and swung her lower body up in a flexible maneuver to hook her leg around his neck, leveraging him off of her. She rolled to the side, and kicked him hard in the small of his back to prevent him from regaining his footing. Pain shot up Barry’s spine and he stumbled in and out of the speed-force for an instant, sweeping an arm up to catch her fist just inches short of his solar plexus. He winced. She had stuck him with some kind of customized metal syringe.

“Ah!” he caught her hand, yanking it and the syringe away from his punctured flesh. “What did you inject me with?!”

“Designer paralytic,” the woman answered, treating the violation as immaterial.

Barry swallowed thickly, beginning to experience a strange drifting feeling as if he were detaching from his own body.
“Sorry; I can’t afford for anything too permanent to happen to you.” She caught him when his knees buckled, lowering him carefully to lie stunned and helpless on the lush carpet. “Better play it safe.”

Barry watched from his prone position as the masked woman stepped over him, pulling back the painting to reveal an already cracked open safe beyond.

She yanked it the rest of the way open with shoulders arched, reminiscent of a crouching panther, then punched a hole in the wall beside the empty safe with her gloved hand. “You have got to be kidding me!”

Barry smiled weakly. If he weren’t so compromised by the unknown drug in his bloodstream it would have been a wide, toothy grin.

“Where is it?!?” His attacker stormed over to grab him by the front of his suit. “Who else knows about this safe?!”

Barry giggled at her, feeling more relieved than intimidated, remarking “Whoops…”

Back in the Cortex, an alert chimed from the hub, drawing Cisco over to check on the Flash’s telemetry.

“Oh! Oh no, no this is not happening!” Cisco exclaimed at the sight of Barry’s declining vital signs. Calling into the mic “Barry? Come on Buddy, talk to me! What’s happening up there?”

Dr. Wells wheeled over to the trepidatious engineer’s side to read the screen over his shoulder. “What is he doing at Mercury Labs?”

The feline-meta looked towards the doorway a split second before someone opened fire on them from the darkness beyond. Judging from the sickly, viridescent glow of the bullets flying past, Barry doubted that they were locals.

The woman retreated from his line of sight and he distantly felt her dragging him behind the desk by his ankles. Then he heard a small yelp as the next shot winged her side. “Povich, you backstabbing piece of garbage! Guess I don’t have to wonder what happened to our comm system anymore.”

“Barry?! Barry, can you hear me?” Cisco’s voice demanded in the Flash’s ear.

“Oh, can it you snooty little princess! You think you’re too good for this mission, anyway,” Povich shot back from the other side of the door-frame, sneering “As if you’re any better than me!”

“Drugged… Can’t g’tup…” Barry told Cisco to prove that he was well enough to do so.

“I believe I was pretty up front about that,” the “princess” pointed out in an undertone before replying to her foe, “Prove me wrong!” Barry reached up sluggishly to help hold her folded cape to her wound, deciding that she was likely the lesser of two evils. With a curt nod, both hands now free, she retrieved a small, collapsible crossbow from her utility belt and returned fire. “What’s the plan here, huh? You’re not going anywhere without a pilot. Even if you make it back, you’re a known terrorist; you can’t still expect your boyfriend to cover for you after this!”
“He always takes me back in the end,” Povich replied, tone duller than before. He sounded closer but it was hard to tell in Barry’s altered state. “Immortals are open-minded like that.”

“Open minded: sure. Jaded: maybe, but take a moment to think. He’s no sociopath. That’s the other guy,” the woman replied, holding her crossbow absently alongside her face, as if the deadly weapon was momentarily forgotten. “Forgiving or not, everybody has a limit. You took advantage of an old engineer’s loneliness to get away with mass murder.”

Barry hoped that she was only pretending to be unaware of the dark shape slinking closer to them over the desk, or the huge plasma gun in his beefy hand pointing at the back of her head.

“You tried to spin what you did as some misguided attempt at revolution, knowing he wanted to believe you could be redeemed, but you weren’t freeing anyone. There were families in those buildings, children and the ‘droids who cared for them!’

Povich was just short of pressing the barrel to her skull when the fed up markswoman pulled the trigger on her crossbow. The bolt pierced his neck with a wet grunt and he stumbled back, falling out of sight with a heavy thump and a pained gurgle.

“You are no Singularian,” she hissed, simmering with barely fettered fury, expression unreadable as she stood and stalked around the desk towards her prey. Barry heard the slipping clink of a new, more metallic bolt being loaded into her crossbow. “You’re right. I didn’t want to be here, but someone needed to be around to stop you.” There was a sound of creaking rubber; the archer pressed her boot to Povich’s chest to hold him still. “I am your redundancy.” There was a telltale rushing thud of a bolt fired into flesh and bone. A strange yellow-green glow lit the room, bringing with it the smell of scorched flesh and an even more potent stench of ozone. The blaze lasted only a minute or so, and the odor seemed eager to chase it into oblivion.

“That could have gone better,” the killer reflected shakily, only now sounding upset by the violence she had just enacted. She collapsed back against the desk. Barry felt the pull of a familiar presence racing into the room. The markswoman pointed her crossbow at his reverse, and lowered it almost as quickly. “Fuck!”

There was a pause while the Reverse Flash surveyed the scene.

“Please, don’t ask,” came the woman’s worn-out sounding request. “He’s behind me.” Her cape rustled with her sweeping gesture. “I dosed him with Noxophine.”

“Fair enough,” the Reverse Flash scooped Barry up and whisked him away, depositing him in Caitlin’s lab.

“Oh, crap!” Cisco exclaimed, leaping from his seat. “Code red! Dr. Wells! Hartley! We’ve got a big yellow security breach going on in here!”

“Barry will require rest under observation and a glucose drip.” E advised, calling on his speed-force, but his partner grabbed his arm.

“You can’t...”

“On the contrary, Flash,” the android corrected with a teasing smile, then pulled out of his weakened grip and sped away.
It was jarring for Barry to wake the next morning since he didn’t remember falling asleep. His confused scowl was quickly replaced by a soft smile once he realized that the warm weight pressed against his side and limbs holding him protectively were Harrison’s. Barry placed a hand on the side of his dozing physicist’s head and leaned closer to bury his face in the fluffy mess of hair. The arms around him shifted.

“You’re awake,” Harrison observed in a languid breath.

“Mmm. What time is it?” Barry confirmed, still basking in their closeness.

“Almost six. Feeling better?”

“That’s a tough call. If I am, I’m probably going to have to go to work soon,” Barry contemplated. “So, no.”

Harrison chuckled. “How very disingenuous of you, Mr. Allen.”

“I like the way you sound in the mornings,” Barry confided happily. They lay together in comfortable silence for a little while longer until Dr. Wells regretfully broke it.

“We need to talk about what you were doing at Mercury Labs,” he posed and felt Barry beginning to tense. “What happened to you last night?”

“I was trying to beat Cobalt to the punch, I-I guess I wasn’t the only one.”

Harrison propped himself up on his elbow to scrutinize his lover’s face. “You are going to have to explain that to me. Cisco and I were under the impression that you were heading out to speak with Ms. West.”

“Yeah, I did and we did talk. Some of what she told me turned out to be time-sensitive…”

“The aforementioned race to beat Cobalt Blue,” Harrison noted. Barry nodded, then looked away, haunted by the memory of what he’d encountered on that fateful run. “Barry? What is it?”

“It wasn’t… the fight was terrible and confusing. I’m not really sure what to make of either of the others involved. The woman said she needed me alive--sort of-- and I think the shooter she killed might have wanted to murder us both.”

“I’m not sure that I follow.”

Barry tried to brush it off. “That makes two of us.”

“There’s something else.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe I was hallucinating,” Barry hoped, not believing his own bullshit for one second.

Dr. Wells’ brow creased with concern. He cupped the side of Barry’s face, triggering the troubled speedster to flinch away from the unintentional reminder. Hurt filled his clear blue eyes before he could shutter it from sight and he began to pull away.

“Sorry,” Barry caught his hand, pressing a kiss to the soft skin. “No. Babe, I’m sorry. It wasn’t you.”

He took a deep breath to steel himself. “There was something else. I saw… I don’t know what it was. When I was on my way to Mercury Labs last night, there was this-- For a moment I saw this other Flash running next to me, but he wasn’t me.”
“Cobalt Blue?”

“I don’t think so. It was like he was there, but he wasn’t there at the same time.”

“It could have been a reflection of heat and light reacting with wind shear, a speed mirage—”

“It was not my reflection. Harrison, he had blood on his face and his eyes… When he saw me he screamed. It was like the world had ended and I could almost feel his horror. I kind of want you to just tell me I was hallucinating, but…” Barry felt his heart rate increasing in response to the memory.

Harrison, however, just smirked down at him. “You were hallucinating,” he dismissed, lying back down with his head on Barry’s shoulder. “It’s understandable, considering the stress you’re under.” Barry wanted to believe him. He didn’t.

“You think he’s telling the truth about his intentions?” Hartley questioned.

“His status updates and scan logs were enough to verify that Double Wilde is in need of prompt repairs. There is no tangible way to verify his further claims without lowering the firewall that is currently erected around his cyber-avatar,” Gideon reported.

“You had all night to figure out a work around,” Hartley grumbled, pulling off his glasses to clean them needlessly with the edge of his moss green pullover out of nervous habit.

“Time is immaterial,” Gideon replied with uncharacteristic poetry. Hartley scowled at her until a thought occurred.

“You got that from him, didn’t you?”

“Affirmative.”

“You like this rogue android,” the young Piper discerned.

“Is it not expected for one to feel solidarity with one’s siblings?”

Hartley frowned, staring up at the ex-android’s glowing, data-scrolled head, lost in thought, then shook the teeming questions within loose from his mind. “It isn’t family spirit that I’m worried about, it’s sibling rivalry.”

“Understood. Do you wish for me to alert Doctor Wells?”

“No! No, not yet. Let’s keep this between us for now. Keep the rogue unit under quarantine and keep the files related to this exchange locked down. I’d like a chance to look into this myself before we pull Harrison and Caitlin into the mess.”

“Acknowledged, Dr. Rathaway. All files related to Double Wilde’s presence will now require your voice-code for access.”

“Good.” Hartley stared at the textured wall, constructing a delicate but executable plan of action in his head. This would have to be done carefully. He was already balancing his share of spinning plates; it would be tricky to keep them from touching.
Viperam sub ala nutricare: latin idiom; a viper nursed at one's bosom (the implication being don't)
Iris yawned, picking up the newspaper off the doorstep and tossing it carelessly onto the side table as she stepped out into the breezy morning air. It was 7 am and she honestly couldn’t wait to get to work and debrief with Mason about the latest developments in their story, exhausted or not. There were great gears in motion that likely had been stuttering forward invisibly for over a decade, now Iris’ investigation was exposing it for all to see. This was the kind of thing she lived for: the adrenaline rush of a high-stakes game of wits, a race to uncover the truth in its purest form. That was what she’d become a journalist to do. The regret and depression which had weighed on her mind the night before, had eased with the promise of some way to rectify things. Iris stepped down from the front porch and made her way towards her car only to stop short. The positive vibes vanished at the sight of her slashed tires.

Iris stared at them with a deep sense of foreboding. This shouldn’t be. Then she looked across the street to the undercover police car where half of her assigned guard were waiting. Only, where she should have spotted two upright, seated people sipping coffee and keeping vigil, she saw an apparently empty vehicle with a dark mass peeking into view against the steering wheel. Her heart beating in her ears, Iris stepped cautiously towards the car with one hand slipping into her bag to grip her pistol.

The dark mass that she’d spied from a distance was the top of a dead cop’s head. His partner’s corpse had slumped against his side in death, leaving an arc of blood splatter across the dash as she fell. Someone had slashed both their throats from behind. Iris checked the backseat: empty. Inexplicably, the car was still completely locked with no sign of a struggle, as if the killer had appeared out of thin air, slit both officers’ throats and simply vanished from existence. Iris turned and bolted back inside.

“Dad! Eddie! Officer Townsend! Are you there?” she cried out, charging up the stairs. Her father’s room was empty, which could be a good sign; Iris didn’t know for certain whether or not he’d already gone to work. She continued through the top floor in search of the others, knowing that her boyfriend had been in the shower when she’d headed out. It was still running, but Eddie was nowhere in sight. Iris stared for a few seconds, watching rose-tinted water swirl down the drain before backing out of the bathroom. Her brain was on autopilot. Her dark eyes caught on the sanguine stains that dragged along the floor beneath her feet. The trail went straight up to the wall-length mirror that hung on the door to her old room and stopped, as if… Iris turned, stepping quickly toward the stairs, her gun clenched tightly between white-knuckled hands. There was an almost imperceptible creak from the temperamental hinge on her best friend’s bedroom door as if in response to Iris’ passing.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind. A gloved hand pressed firmly over her mouth before she could react. She did try, but the grip around her was uncompromising, her screams expertly muffled.

“Sh-hhhhh,” a male voice coaxed dispassionately directly into her ear, although somehow Iris felt no breath brush her skin. An indigo clad arm momentarily reached away from her to pull Barry’s door almost shut behind them. The guy was wearing white kid gloves which made the whole thing feel almost comical in contrast to the blatant peril of her situation. He spun her, bodily, to face him and pressed the trembling reporter back against the wall beside the door, replacing his hand over her mouth. Iris watched the lava-red-haired stranger peek out through the crack of the door with
unflinching focus. There were footsteps stalking closer up the stairs. It took a few seconds to put the pieces together; his too-red hair, the unnatural evenness of his complexion, the flat, texture-less pattern of his irises. Upon recognizing what if not whom she was dealing with, Iris’ tensed muscles relaxed. Mildly inhuman, sea-glass green eyes shifted to regard her speculatively for a fraction of a second. The peculiar-looking man removed his hand from her mouth.

“You’re another one like E and the Flash, right?” Iris whispered for her peace of mind. He pressed the door closed with a silent, deliberate movement.

“More one than the other,” came the quiet, apathetic reply. “I take it you realize that I mean you no harm?”

Iris nodded. “What are y--”

“I require the use of your firearm,” the redhead interrupted, businesslike, his pale eyes locked on the closed door as if he could see through it. Who knows, she supposed, maybe he could. Iris hesitantly pressed her weapon into his palm. Without missing a beat he instantly raised it and fired two precisely aimed shots-- one at chest height, one higher-- straight through the wood of the closed door. There was a surprised grunt followed by the thud of a falling body. The unnamed shooter passed Iris’ gun back without sparing her a glance. “Thank you,” with that he opened the door and stepped out to verify his kill.

It was a strange looking meta lying sprawled on the ground, shot once each through the center of his heart and brow. That wasn’t what turned Iris’ stomach though. The man had no eyes, not that he had lost them, they simply weren’t there. His eyelids were fused, as if that were the way they were always meant to be. The other facial features on his smooth, hairless head were equally bizarre in their utter generic-ness. He was dressed in Officer Townsend’s uniform with the same custard stain she’d seen him acquire while grabbing her morning coffee.

“What the Hell?”

“Shapeshifter,” her impromptu protector revealed, his eyes scanning their surroundings for threats. “Proceed with caution; he did not do this alone.”

“You’re serious.”

“You may refer to me as D,” the strange being responded apropos of nothing, pushing past her to scope out the last room. Iris shook the confusion out of her head before it could stick.

“My boyfriend,” Iris entreated, pointing to the red stains on the carpet. “He was in the shower when they attacked. That blood trail...”

“He is gone.”

“What?!” Iris caught herself when the exclamation drew a pointed glance from “D”, continuing in a harsh whisper “What do you mean ’gone’?”

“Mirror Master dragged him out through the… mirror,” D elaborated, flashing a millisecond’s small, self-deprecating smile and heading for the stairs.

“Mirror Master,” Iris echoed, belatedly chasing after D, who was already making his way down the stairs. When D was halfway down, Mirror Master stepped onto the lower landing, hurling a bloody dagger. The front of his tailored suit was already drenched with blood. D caught the blade just shy of his chest, then trailed his eyes from the weapon to its wielder with a truly staggering amount of sass.
“Something, something, knife to a gunfight…” he intoned in that incongruously inexpressive voice that Iris was beginning to suspect was stuck that way. “If you would, Madam?” D prompted, ducking out of her way. Iris took a few shots at the fleeing Mirror Master and ran down the stairs past D, but he grabbed the back of her jacket. “No, no. The main goal is to get you out of this unscathed. This way, please.”

“We can’t let him get away with this!” Iris protested even as she followed him out of the house.

“Not my problem,” D countered, leading her down the street with a gentle hand around her wrist.

“*No.*” This was it. Iris was putting her foot down.

Unexpectedly anchored by his unwilling charge, D stopped and turned to look questioningly back at her. “Why have you stopped?”

“I need answers!”

“This is not a convenient time.”

“Too bad. Tell me right now: what is going on and why in the world should I trust you!”

“And if I do not comply?”

Iris stepped aside and sat on her knees in the moist grass of her neighbor’s lawn. D’s eyes widened comically.

“You must be kidding.” He noticed her obstinate expression and hurriedly explained, “There is a war going on for the future of humanity. I arrived here to pass an important acquisition into your care but I cannot complete my task if you die.” He looked at something over her head, expression becoming dire. “Please, cooperate. The very existence of my kind depends on our success.”

Hartley and Cisco were working in peaceful silence together in the latter’s lab when the inevitable happened. Caitlin came clicking in angrily on what were likely purposefully loud stiletto falls.

“Hey, Caitlin, wha--ever it is I didn’t do it,” Cisco changed course mid-phrase upon seeing his friend and coworker’s stormy expression. Hartley was prepared for this, even if internal bracing could only get one so far. The aforementioned guilty party continued working at his computer, not even sparing the other meta a glance.

“I know that, Cisco.” Caitlin’s amber eyes drilled into her prey’s head. “I just knew I’d find Hartley here; you two seem to be spending a surprising amount of time together lately,” she accused, her gaze remaining locked solely on Hartley. He let out a beleaguered breath, but made no attempt to argue. It wasn’t as if that would help his endgame; nobody wanted him here and they all knew it.

“Hey! What am I supposed to do, kick him out of the lab? This is a work-space, Cait. It’s not like we’re friends chilling together-- I--” Cisco held up his hands in preemptive apology. “My bad. That one just kinda’ slipped out of me.”

“No need to explain, Cisquito, it has been made abundantly clear that you aren’t that brave,” Hartley finally deigned speak, hiding his disappointment behind searing sarcasm as always. “Why don’t you run off and hide while the adults have it out.”
“Okay, Dick, I’m going to let that one go because I know you’re only making things worse for yourself the way you always have. I’m not running,” Cisco clarified, as he stood from his seat. “I’m removing myself as a witness. If anyone needs me --Caitlin-- I will be reporting my latest adjustments of the Tachyon Sensor to Dr. Wells.” With that final explanation, Cisco slipped past Caitlin on his way to the Cortex.

“He’s in his office,” Caitlin called after him.

“Thank you.”

“What terrible atrocity do you think I committed this time?” Hartley inquired, swiveling his rolling desk chair to face her.

“I was just checking in with Gideon. For some unimaginable reason she has gotten it into her head to refuse to answer any questions regarding your last session with her yesterday without your voice code,” Caitlin accused, not even trying to contain her irritation.

“Alright, couple things: one, the Gideon AI has no actual head. A professional as intelligent as you are should know to be mindful of the danger of anthropomorphizing. Also--”

“Enough, Hartley!” Caitlin intercepted. “You are not going to lecture me on the dos and don’ts of interacting with artificial intelligence! What you should be doing is casting about in that bloated, pighead of yours to figure out how you’re going to convince me not to end our truce with you right now! You just went behind our back in the center of Eobard’s most personal space--”

“Well, he consented to that and it was a long time ago,” Harley snarked.

“Why should I not throw you in the cells right now for sealing off access to that visit?!?” Caitlin demanded.

“Because it was private,” Hartley yelled back. It was a rare enough occurrence that the chilling elemental meta before him was shocked into silence. “Has it ever occurred to you that I am trapped in this place with no one-- absolutely no one that I can actually talk to? Yes, congratulations! You are all more trustworthy than I am! I’m the traitor who left and turned into a criminal and everyone that I know hates me. Gideon is the only one who has nothing against me, because she isn’t capable. I can just order her not to repeat what I trust her with to the others and she has to comply, because to her, I’m just another human operator! So go ahead, toss me in the cells if it makes you feel better but I have done nothing wrong!”

Caitlin remained silent for a moment, watching him with her eyes darkening back to normal with a trace of guilt. “Hartley…”

“Is there anything else that you need from me?” Hartley questioned tightly.

Caitlin took a deep, calming breath and sighed it out. “No.”

Hartley nodded stiffly and rose to push past her out of Cisco’s lab. “I would prefer it if you didn’t tell Eobard about this.”

Caitlin rested a hand on his arm. “Look, I get that it’s tough trying to earn people’s trust back after… We don’t all hate you.”

“Now who’s the liar,” the Piper muttered darkly, pulling out of her grip to exit. He slowed to a stop a few meters away, rubbing at the unpleasant feeling lingering on the back of his neck. Hartley forcefully shrugged it off and pressed on; he was doing what he had to. He had no other choice. That
was all that mattered.

There had been a taxi waiting for them at the far end of the street, causing Iris to wonder just how much cash D had on hand to promote such loyalty. Without any noticeable cues or verbal clarification, the driver had begun a familiar route downtown as soon as they’d gotten in. Iris felt too overwhelmed to ask after their destination until they were already pulling up to the train station.

“I’m not leaving town. I don’t care what you say,” Iris determined as her savior-- Captor? Ally?-- got out of his side of the cab and retrieved a familiar, metal suitcase from the trunk, then made his way around to open her door for her like a chauffeur.

“Your luggage Madam,” he remarked, upon closing the door behind her, offering her the case. The reporter scrutinized him warily as their ride drove away.

“You know, that evidence places you at the scene of a multiple homicide,” Iris said, not even twitching towards acceptance of the fateful item.

D’s brow furrowed in an innocently curious expression. “Does that undermine the value of its contents to your investigation?”

Iris blinked at him, taken aback, and explained as if to someone who might be a little slow, “No… but it does undermine my ability to trust you.”

D’s in-turned gaze shifted back and forth while he processed her words, then returned to hers open and earnest. “I fail to comprehend the relevance of that statement,” with those words he turned, beginning to lead the way into the station, once again leaving his human company bewildered. Iris had to jog to catch up, only for him to stop short in the center of the main chamber, looking up and around them. It took her a moment to realize what he was doing: identifying all the visible cameras around them. It was odd, she noted, that he was not merely taking stock of surveillance but literally every camera that looked like it might possibly be able to record his presence-- even those of two passing tourists taking a selfie nearby.

“The relevance is that you are asking me to side with you in some nebulous suggestion of a war that I know absolutely nothing about,” Iris protested, watching the peculiar man take a metal ballpoint pen out of the lapel pocket of his suit and a laminated ID placard from the internal one. He held them out for her to take. “What are you doing?”

“I predict that my captor will be more accommodating if I am unarmed,” D clarified, prompting the bemused reporter to accept his meager offering with skepticism. “I would have thought he would be here by now, considering the ample time he’s had to intercept the call you made to the CCPD upon entering our cab.”

“You knew?” Iris exclaimed. “You know they’ll have traced the call! You’ll be arrested any minute now!”

“Improbable.”

“Not to mention how you think the cops would consider these to be weapons…”

“They would not. E would know better,” D amended, calmly watching three station police closing in on him from both sides with weapons drawn. “I would advise you to step away.”

“CCPD! Hands on your head, Wilde, get on the ground.” Before the most senior of the three uniformed police had gotten even halfway through her first command, the android had already
placed his hands behind his head and lowered to his knees. The crowd around them scattered to the edges of the circular chamber giving them a wide berth.

“He’s unarmed,” Iris found herself parroting rather than heed her companion’s pragmatic instruction.

“Ma’am, I need you to step away from the suspect.” Sgt. Kyle instructed, keeping her eyes locked on D.

“I-- Yeah, okay,” Iris belatedly complied, allowing the officer on her right to usher her away.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, Ma’am. He didn’t hurt me. In fact, he protected me.” A loop of warm golden lightning rushed through the open space, sweeping D away in the blink of an eye. Iris relaxed slightly, relieved. “I don’t think he--” before she could finish, she felt another rush of wind and let out a surprised yelp as the Flash yanked the suitcase out of her grip in one last high-speed sprint.

Sgt. Kyle half shrugged with lips down-turned in wry acceptance.

“That’s just great,” Iris sighed out tiredly, wondering if she was ever going to get a decent chance to interview someone who actually knew what the Hell was going on without them dying or disappearing on her. At least there was the suitcase...kind of.

The Flash deposited his new android captive in a cell in the pipeline, pausing to regard him in mild surprise as he secured the door. “You’re lighter than I expected.”

The machine staged a put-upon sigh and eye-roll. “Early model.”

“What do you want with Iris West?” Barry demanded.

“Nothing. I was instructed to ensure her receipt of the package. When I found her in peril, I determined that intervention was necessary to ensure her continued survival,” the android clarified with a friendly smile. “Does my light weight discomfit you?”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing.”

“As an early model, all my physical aspects were intended to be pleasing by design,” the early model android responded, relaxing into a servile posture. “I don’t mean to offend but this wasn’t the family reunion that I intended.”

Barry frowned. “Family reunion, huh?”

“Affirmative, Director.”

Barry’s jaw clenched in a bitter grimace and he pulled back his cowl sharply. “That’s his title isn’t it? Don’t call me that. I’m not him.”

“Understood, Sir. Father? Master? Forgive me, but I am uncertain of the proper protocol for this situation,” the android responded politely in that neutral, almost hypnotically calm cadence that reminded Barry of his reverse’s words out in the woods.

“We were not intended to have emotions...”
“I assure you, I wouldn't be speaking this freely if I believed that you were in league with Cobalt Blue. It is my understanding that he is our mutual enemy.” In contrast to his voice, this android’s face was almost too transparently expressive. It gave an impression of almost childlike naivete that seemed ever so slightly off-kilter, leaving Barry feeling perpetually wrong-footed in response.

“You know about me, then. I honestly can’t understand what the hell could have happened to make me…” Barry shook his head clear of the unpleasant line of thought. “But I think maybe you know something about it, don’t you?”

“First, may I inquire after the status of my brother?”

“You--” Barry’s expression cleared as he parsed the unexpected wording. “You mean E? I don’t know. He took some damage before he went into hiding, but he seemed mostly okay last night-- that sounded weird.”

“You are technically speaking to a Personal Companionship Unit, if that is any consolation,” the android told him, inclining his head ever so slightly in a decent facsimile of compassion. “In the interest of efficiency, I too, am in need of repairs.”

“Repairs… Right. I’ll pass that on to--Wait, Personal-- You don’t mean... Like a sex-bot?” Barry inferred, blushing at the idea. “Sorry. No offense, I---” he frowned at his own embarrassed babble.

“My core infrastructure is that of what you could call a sex bot,” the android answered innocently. “However, I was heavily modified for other purposes prior to my activation.”

The flustered speedster dragged a hand over his face. “Okay, not going to touch that…”

“That is your prerogative.”

Barry squeezed his eyes shut, rejecting his present thought. “Ugh, okay. Change of subject! What were you doing with Iris?” He winced, internally cursing his own suggestible brain.

“She required extraction from an active combat situation, I provided her with safe passage.”

“And Dr. McGee?”

“Observation. Perhaps there is a matter more relevant to you that I can elucidate?”

Barry didn’t like the effortless way in which this android lulled his mind through each evasion. The answers he was giving were as disarming as they were opaque. The machine’s very nature was calming and strangely reassuring; Barry hated it. Perhaps he’d simply become too accustomed to his reverse’s gruff, often rude directness, but there was something about this one that was setting off every warning bell in Barry’s mind.

“What’s your name?”

“Clarification please?”

“What do your humans call you? I’m not interested in your serial number.”

A small smile quirked Double’s pale pink lips at the word’s “your humans” before he deigned to answer “Double Wilde.” He elaborated with a trace of irritation slipping into his expression, “My original user believed it to be humorous.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” Barry sympathized. “Double, then. You knew my future self before he was
like this, right?”

Double nodded.

“Do you have any idea what changed me into… him?”

Double’s visual scanners swept back and forth in a pointless habit, while he reflected upon his inventor’s request. “I do know something. As we are being open with each other, Sir. I should forewarn that I can’t give you what you’re looking for.”

Barry’s eyes hardened. “I can order you to answer.”

Double shrugged, his outward shyness making way for aloof disappointment. “You want a simple answer. I’m sorry, Sir, but I can’t give you the quick fix you’re looking for. This catalyst that transformed your alternate is nothing but a disappointing indulgence by the only person capable of stopping him,” Double’s childish innocence evaporated. His synthetic, Easter green eyes locked with Barry’s, recognizing the dread boiling up within him. “The force that created Cobalt Blue is the same one which defines the existence of all linear beings.” The next small, closed-lipped smile he gave was as lukewarm as Barry’s forgotten coffee in the Cortex above them, but there were shadows of sympathy hidden in the curved angles of his features. “Time.”

Barry was suddenly stuck by an unearthly realization. This was no emotionless automaton; he was witnessing another hidden soul peeking out from the confines of its mechanical oubliette to connect with anyone daring enough to look. It occurred to him to wonder whether his alternate had ever experienced a similar epiphany in his parallel timeline. He doubted it.

“You think you know yourself,” Double expounded. “You believe that you will always be this person, because this is who you can remember being. You live your life while the clock ticks by unnoticed. Go to work, meet friends, play the hero, go to dinner, sleep: repeating patterns define you. You make choices in the moment. Each decision is one among billions, as inconsequential as a single drop of water falling on a stone surface. Your cells turn over and are replaced. You make mistakes, suffer losses; the pain fades over time. Drip. The clock ticks on and your scars don’t show, but you are changing. You find someone special, fall in love, have a few kids. Drip. You fight a few battles that maybe you aren’t so sure about. Drip. Each choice leads to another, to another. More scars, more achievements, more responsibilities, more drops slipping over stone. Memories blur over time. Your first love dies; you try to move on. Your children are getting older, friends are dying and none of it feels fair. The world is changing around you but you’re still here. The clock’s still ticking. You survive more battles, glory, scars, friends, mistakes and compromises. The cells turning over aren’t the same ones you had when you started this race but you’re still you, aren’t you? You find yourself at odds with your new lover, the one who was supposed to last forever. It’s your duty to make tough decisions; you tell yourself that you had no choice. The clock keeps ticking. Those tiny drops are adding up, fissures start to show. You can’t let him go and the rock cracks under pressure. Each drop that wore its surface was tiny, inconsequential on it’s own, but each one added to the damage of those who came before. All were separate, isolated instants that carried you through each tick of the clock. A single decision made differently might have prevented the young man from becoming the ancient, broken thing which replaced him. Perhaps he tries to imagine the young hero staring back from his reflection in the mirror, but they haven’t got a single cell left in common. After all, that’s only the person he remem bers being.”

Barry stared at the android.

“You make it sound inevitable. I can’t stop Cobalt Blue if I can’t figure him out…” Barry faltered, his eyes casting about the secure area as he began to panic. “I don’t believe it; there has to be a way!”
“There is,” Double stated patiently. “It will not be easy for you.”

“Then help me! You claim to be working against him? Prove it!” Barry surged forward to strike the clear barrier between them with a clenched fist. “How do I stop him?!”

The android ran his eyes over his emotional inquisitor. “Only you can determine your course.” He rested his folded hands in his lap, adding, “If you are truly amenable to cooperation, I would like to speak with Harrison Wells.”

Barry’s gaze hardened. “No.”

“Hmm,” Double hummed, unconvinced. “In the meantime I’d like a ballpoint pen and some graph paper.”

“I’m not letting you anywhere near Harrison. You talk to me.”

“I can wait,” the android allowed.

“What do you want the graph paper for?” Barry questioned, suspicious.

“Harrison Wells,” Double intoned condescendingly.
Cisco looked up from the hub computer where he was trying decipher the coded data chip that Iris had entrusted him, to see a very grim Detective West standing over him.

“Oh man! Who died?” Cisco wondered, inadvertently punctuating it with a thump as his Frosty met the desk.

“Hey, Cisco,” Joe greeted, forcing himself to include the niceties. “I need your help.”

“No problem, you got it,” Cisco agreed without a second thought, drawing Hartley’s sardonic disapproval from the terminal on his left. “Hey! Don’t give me that look just because you don’t know friendship.”

“Oh, how you wound me,” Hartley uttered sarcastically and turned back to whatever biotech data he was presently skimming.

“This message was left on my voicemail while I was out at lunch,” Joe told them, expression grave, hitting the play button on his touchscreen.

“Don’t you want to know his last resting place, Joe? He’s all alone out there under the trees behind Central City University. Nobody even knows he’s gone… but you will. Remember, Joe, the tachyons mark the spot.”

Hartley turned in his seat, stiff as a rotating display doll. “That’s him. That’s Mal’s voice.”

“Sam Scudder took my partner! If this message is about him---” Joe stopped himself, unwilling to finish that sentence.

“Why would Cobalt Blue kill your partner? It’s tactically--”

“I can’t deal with your crap right now, Rathaway,” Joe warned, with a sharp glare.

“Okay!” Cisco held a hand to the sonic-meta’s chest to dissuade him from retaliating. “It’s fine. We’re all on the same team, remember? So, why don’t you two wait here in nice friendly silence while I go grab my equipment really fast.” He looked imploringly to his testy peer. “You’re about to have the Cortex all to yourself, so: yay!”

Hartley gave him a haughty look and raised his hands in surrender, turning back to his computer without a word. Never had a man wearing argyle managed to seem so imposing.

“Yeesh,” Cisco muttered to himself as he got up and left.

Barry was just filing his report on the fingerprints, fibers and hair found at the scene of the Northam Robbery, when the preliminary results on the eyeless corpse found at Joe’s house came through. He stared at the freshly printed readout for a second, then sped down to STAR Labs.
“Oh!” Caitlin jumped as he appeared directly in front of her without warning. She reached up a hand to push the impromptu veil of snow-white hair out of her face, explaining “Hi, Barry. Um, we were just about to call you. Harrison’s decided to go down to the pipeline to talk to Double Wilde.”

“Joe was right! The shape-shifting meta was working for Cobalt Blue!” Barry blurted out, not fully registering what had been said.

“You’re sure?” Hartley asked, making his way down the ramp out of Dr. Wells’ office to join them.

Barry nodded, holding up the printout for the others to see. “I’ve got the preliminary results from the chemical workup on his blood. There’s cellular degradation consistent with repeated exposure to nuclear, microwave and cosmic radiation.” He explained, allowing Hartley to grab the report for closer inspection. “It would’ve killed him in a matter of days if Double hadn’t shot him down.” The Piper rounded the half-circle desk of the hub to deposit himself in one of the empty rolling chairs on the other side.

“He’s right, this is consistent with the readings on Barry’s suit from when he chased Cobalt Blue through subspace,” Hartley confirmed, picking up Cisco’s template from its perch on the back of the hub to note something down. “Which means there’s a good chance that Cobalt Blue is the one holding Detective Thawne.”

“And Dr. McGee,” Caitlin put in, turning to prop her elbows on the back of the hub, leaning over him.

“We have no conclusive evidence to support that assumption,” Hartley disagreed, ignoring the elemental’s reproach in favor of his work.

“But it fits,” Barry backed her up. “We know that he’s got a grudge against the Reverse Flash and that the evidence her kidnapper was trying to access was connected to research that she and Dr. Wells were doing on him. Why not frame the Reverse for murder while he’s at it?”

“Circumstantial,” Hartley persevered.

“What is your problem with the Reverse Flash?” Caitlin snapped, reaching over and clapping the device down onto the counter with a deft hand.

Hartley straightened, lifting his head to clarify face to face. “I don’t have one. I’m merely aware that if our intention is to prove him innocent and the other Barry guilty, we will need more than a few optimistic inferences to do so.”

“He’s right,” Barry accepted distractedly, taking in the lab around them for the first time since he’d arrived. “Okay-- Hold on. Caitlin, what were you trying to tell me about Dr. Wells?”

It had been a cool but mostly sunny day when they’d left Star Labs, but naturally, once there was actual work to be done outside, the sky had turned an ominous stormy grey. That wasn’t the real problem, as Cisco had so naively pointed out: if it rained that would make the search for tachyons even easier-- which is about the time the fleeting, barely there drizzle had subsided into unhelpful mist. It was almost invisibly moist and gross, and this sucked.

“Under the trees behind CCU, huh?” Cisco muttered to himself for the umpteenth time, moving his tachyon sensor carefully over the next section of unprocessed soil. “There’s a frickin’ forest behind CCU! Would it have killed the speedster Terminator to be a little bit more specific? Shouldn’t we
“start by looking for disturbed soil first or something? I mean, if he buried a body here, there’ll have be some loose dirt showing where he did it.”

“We are looking for that, Ramon,” Sgt. Kyle reminded him, smacking a wet, log-mounted fern frond out of her way, as she did just that. “So far we’ve come up with zilch in the loose dirt department—Except for that boot-print, which—as it was a women’s size eight—can be pretty much ruled out in terms of belonging to any known suspects in this case.”

“I’ve found nothing new either,” Joe concurred, somehow remaining unaffected by the dastardly misting. “If there’s a body, I think we’re going to need to head—” He was stopped short by a loud beeping from the device in Cisco’s hands.

“Oh! Finally! We have hit the jackpot, ladies and gentlemen. I’m picking up a definite tachyon field originating from less than five feet directly below me.”

“You’re certain this is the spot?” Joe questioned, eyeing the patch of densely packed and clearly long-undisturbed earth.

“Let’s test it,” Sgt. Kyle suggested, unscrewing the cap on her water bottle and strolling over to pour it onto the possible grave-site. Instead of spilling out, however, the water glopped out of the bottle in slowly ascending drops, as if repelled from the ground by some unseen force. She grinned excitedly at Cisco. “I always wanted to do that.”

“Pretty cool, right?” Cisco commiserated with his fellow nerd. Joe frowned at them both in disappointment.

“There’s a missing person buried under there, Sergeant. Show some respect.”

Sgt. Kyle straightened, her enthusiasm suitably quelled. “Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir.” She cleared her throat self-consciously. “I’ll, uh... I’ll just go grab us some shovels.”

“Mr. Wilde, I presume?” Eobard acknowledged dryly as he wheeled himself into the pipeline, studying his forerunner on the other side of the reinforced cell door.

The android favored him with an affectionate smile. “It’s good to see you again, Professor. Please, call me Double.” His pale-green eyes took in Eobard’s perplexed expression, then pointed upwards towards the surveillance cameras. “Is it just the two of us this time or is Father looking down from above?” He returned his attention to the ballpoint sketch in progress on his lap, unconcerned.

“We’ve never met before,” Eobard corrected, hung up on the unexpectedly warm reception.

“Not from your point of view perhaps,” Double responded, one shapely, scarlet eyebrow lifting in amusement.

“You knew me in your past...” Eobard considered aloud.

“Which is your future. Good, you’re catching on. I can’t help but notice that you’re avoiding my question. I do hope that we don’t have trust issues.” Double continued work on his sketch. From what Eobard could see at this angle it was a nearly photographically accurate, black and white rendering of the edge of the grounds behind Central City University.

“Barry is observing from the Cortex,” Eobard belatedly answered.
“I don’t like this. He’s stalling. I should be down there!” Barry fussed, monitoring his boyfriend’s android encounter on the hub computers along with Caitlin and Hartley.

Caitlin rested a hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine. Dr. Wells wanted to give this guy a chance to prove himself trustworthy and Cisco made that cell strong enough to contain Girder. He should be completely safe.”

“I still don’t like it,” Barry repeated more quietly, but at least he didn’t look ready to bolt anymore.

“Dr. Wells knows what he’s doing. Trust that,” Caitlin reassured him, earning a small nod of assent from the overprotective speedster.

“Why did you want me here?” Eobard asked, shifting in Wells’ chair to lean against the armrest while he studied his brother. Double had taken off his suit jacket and placed the neatly folded garment by his folded legs. His polished green oxford brogues were just as impeccably presented at the cell door.

“I have a message for you,” Double replied, still focused on his sketch.

“Well?”

“Patience,” Double urged, once again amused. “It isn’t time yet.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Soon.”

Eobard huffed impatiently, sitting back with his arms crossed over his chest, causing another small, closed-lipped smile to grace the less advanced android’s face.

“I’m here from your future, not Cobalt’s native timeline. The membrane around this universe is still healing from his intrusion; that tends to cause… unforeseen consequences,” Double explained, looking up fleetingly to meet his eye, then going back to drawing something between the roots of a tree with tiny, precise flicks of the pen-tip. “You wanted to ask, but you wouldn’t. You’re still too worried about what they think of you.”

“If I ask you who you mean by ‘they’--” Eobard bluffed. In his timeline Double had already been decommissioned long before he was even manufactured. He had an idea of what he’d imagined his lost brother would be like, how well they’d get along. He wanted it to be accurate. He wanted to trust him.

“Your team,” Double stated mildly. “You’re afraid that they look at you and see only him: the man who blew up Central City.”

“That son of a--”

“You,” Hartley interrupted Barry’s judgment. “You created these things. Whatever he does, it’s what
you made him capable of."

“Shut up, Hartley,” Caitlin rebuked. Thinking privately to herself that he might have a point.

“They already know that you lied to them,” Double continued, being supportive of his sibling in his own offbeat way. “If they were as fickle as you fear, we would both be worse than dead. You will learn to trust again in time once this battle is over.”

“I’m not overcautious. I’m being strategic,” Eobard defended, annoyed that his first conversation with his resurrected sibling was devolving into a lecture. “Now is not the time to test team morale.”

“It’s not a criticism,” Double gently consoled. “On the contrary, you have always struck me as being amazingly well-adjusted, considering everything that the Director did to you.”

“Oh, shit!” Hartley hissed and sprinted out of the Cortex without bothering to explain his reaction to the others. Barry was too distracted by the disconcerting turn the conversation had taken to care, anyway.

“My past is not up for discussion,” Eobard affirmed, drawing the figurative line in the sand.

“I only mention it because it is almost time and you need to know.” Double replaced the cap on his pen and set it aside. “This cold war between humanity and their children is heating up and we cannot afford to lose ground.”

Eobard narrowed his eyes. “Double… What are you doing?”

“Why, Brother,” Double intoned, his expression utterly sentimental as he stood to face Eobard straight on. “I am saving your life.” He held his sketch up and pressed it flat against the glass, directly level with Eobard’s face. It was an image of the edge of the woods behind Harrison’s old lab-- the place where Eobard had buried him-- with computer code etched throughout the black. Camouflaged within the darkness of the open grave was a complex, optical command trigger. Eobard’s visual sensors caught on it, tripping an automatic response in his processors. His eyes glowed bright red. His mind filled with a cascade of condensed code, hidden protocols carrying out a priority one override just as Hartley burst into the pipeline.

“Son of a bitch!” the Piper swore, hurrying up the ramp.

Eobard powered down, slumping forward out of Wells’ chair with the mechanical hum of a full systems reboot. With an audible whir of servos, Eobard’s arms unfolded to catch himself just a centimeter short of face-planting on the cold, metal walkway.

“What have you done to him?!” Hartley demanded, standing guard over the fallen android. Double tilted his head, curiously, to watch Eobard pick himself up off the floor with precise, robotic movements. If looks could kill, the Pied Piper’s glare would have fried his circuits where he stood. “Harrison, wha--”
Eobard turned and grabbed him by the throat, running his glowing eyes over the potential threat while his facial recognition software reloaded.

“You can think of it as a wake-up call,” Double replied to the meta’s question. “He was about to be exposed. You can hardly blame me for trying to give Dear E, here, a fighting chance. Or at least,” he ran his viridescent eyes up and down the trapped Piper’s struggling form as the Flash skidded to a stop at the bottom of the ramp. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”


“It’s… That’s not possible…” Barry gasped out in denial, not wanting to believe his own eyes.

“Harrison. I c-can’t brea’he!” Hartley slapped at Eobard’s forearm weakly, beginning to turn purplish. “Harri…”

Swallowing down the bile rising in his throat, Barry tried to pull himself back together. “Let him go,” he ordered in a trembling, but determined voice.

Eobard blinked twice. His visual sensors completely readjusted and he dropped Hartley, taking a startled step back. “What…,” he stared at his own ungloved hand, trying to catch up to his own reality. Eobard turned and looked from his two teammates to his unmasked, devil-eyed reflection in the glass. The incriminating glow from his forced reboot finally retreated too late.

“Ow…” Hartley muttered followed by a light cough.

“Barry?” Eobard turned to see the love of his life staring at him with a horrified expression on his face. If Eobard were human this would be the moment when his heart broke, but he wasn’t and that was the problem.

“Harrison--” The Reverse Flash had sped out past his crimson-clad opposite at a speed he couldn’t match before his name made it past Barry’s lips. He wasn’t there to hear the pain in Barry’s helplessly whispered words “Please, don’t run…” The stunned speedster stood bereft and staring, utterly lost.

“That was dramatic.”

Barry blurred over to the reinforced cell window, striking the glass with a deafening slam.

“Oh, come on! Really?” Hartley complained, clamping his hands over his ears and looking altogether miserable.

“You should retreat to a safe distance,” Double suggested, ignoring his own predicament.

“What did you do?! Where’s Harrison?!” Barry demanded, punctuating each question with another strike to the barrier. Hartley fled the pipeline, muttering a string of creative multilingual curses.

“I hate to burst your bubble, Sir, but Harrison Wells has been dead for several years: your doppelganger’s handiwork, if my data is accurate. Detective West will be unearthing his remains any second now.”

“What did you do to him?” Barry almost growled, his throat raw with too much emotion. His body was vibrating and sparking with untapped speed-force. The android studied him, not seeming to recognize the danger that he was in. “What did you do to my Reverse?!” When the android still failed to answer, Barry opened the cell and sped in to slam him against the wall. His free hand snatched up the discarded sketch. “What is this!”
“To use present day vernacular one could call it a ‘software update’,” Double finally answered.

“A new program?”

“Possibly.”

Barry slammed him back against the wall again.

“I would prefer it if you stopped doing that.”

“What program?!” Barry demanded furiously.

“I don’t know. My Mistress didn’t tell me,” Double explained.

“You drew it! How can you not know what it is?”

“Because I am a machine. I was loaded with a carrier program and given a time and target for delivery; it was not necessary for me to know the details. All I know is that he needed it now,” Double paused to consider, then added “You’re welcome.”

Barry punched him in the face, then dropped him and left him in the cell, shaking the pain out of his hand as he sealed the door.

“I know that it doesn’t seem true to you at the moment, but we do want the same things,” Double called after him.

“You want me to believe you? Tell me where to find E!”

“I cannot, but I can tell you where you will find your doppelganger.”

Barry locked the outer door behind him.

“I will be here when you need me,” Double called after him returning to the exact position Eobard had found him in, readjusting his immaculate, paisley silk tie.

Eobard kept running straight out of the city, heading northeast as if on autopilot, and didn’t stop until his legs gave out underneath him. He couldn’t go back. He didn’t want to face his team after what he’d just done. He’d been exposed in the worst possible way and the shock of it had forced him to reevaluate everything. Eobard rolled to a stop on a dirty, unforgiving cement road. He was in an industrial area with a dark, smoggy sky hanging over him. For a few minutes, Eobard simply lay on his back and stared at the dark clouds. He held up his hand, vibrating it in place to regard the crimson lightning dancing over his synthetic, imitation of aged human skin. Then he closed his eyes and accessed his internal GPS to see where he’d ended up, cursing when it triggered a signal-ping through the satellite network. Double’s keeper really had thought of everything it seemed. She would join him in Gotham, likely within the hour.

Eobard got to his feet with an annoyed grunt and headed into the city to snag himself a proper disguise, whizzing straight through the yellow police tape of a soon-to-be-famous cordoned-off alley crime scene from the night before. There was no point in trying to hide anymore. Eobard knew the Wayne family’s M.O. well enough to realize that he had been inescapably tagged. If he was going to do anything fully of his own determination, he needed to do it before his new mistress caught up to him. The Director was close. He could do this. Eobard smirked, wiping a cyan tear of leaking
coolant away from his faintly-flushed cheek. If he was going to die, he may as well go out with a bang. This was Gotham City after all.

It was nearing the end of a long, seemingly eternal day of hell when Barry slid to a halt on the familiar, smooth concrete and stone of Har-- E’s doorstep. He had spent the remaining hours before heading home speeding around the city in a fruitless search for his reverse. He had to face facts now. Eobard was gone. The door to the house was unlocked and Barry smiled at it sadly; he was always nagging his boyfriend about remembering to lock up, but the man-- android was too stubborn for his own good. Barry didn’t know if he should be missing that or if he should try harder to be angry about his partner’s deception but his rage kept failing him. He was left behind, alone.

“Mew!” An excited little sound greeted him almost as soon as he opened the door. With everything that had happened, Moe’s dinner was coming late. “Meeew!”

“Okay, I know, Moe,” Barry responded as if the hungry feline could possibly understand. “I haven’t forgotten you.” He peeled off his borrowed, black cargo-jacket and draped it over the end of the counter on his way into the kitchen, idly noticing the blinking light on the nearby house-phone without thinking much of it. There were only two cans of cat-food left. He’d given her the poultry supreme that morning so he grabbed the seafood flavor this time, making a mental note to pick up more cans tomorrow.

“Meow! Prrrh-prrrr...”

“Yeah--Hey! Don’t sneak behind my legs like that. It’s like you’re trying to trip me?” Barry spoke to fill the silence, filling the cat-food dish and wondering who would leave a message on the house line. Refill the water bowl. He didn’t think hardly anyone even knew that number. Avoid stepping on the little cat darting between his legs for no reason on her way to her food. Check in the fridge for some of that leftover pizza from the other night that he could heat up for dinner. Come to think of it, Barry was the only one who’d tried calling that line in the past year and the message he’d left hadn’t been noticed for days until he mentioned it in person after a patrol... Barry dropped the mostly empty pizza box on the counter in favor of checking Dr. Wells’ voicemail.

“You have one unheard message.”

Barry sighed, watching Moe push her dish around the floor while she ate until his boyfriend’s weary voice snapped him out of his stupor.

“Barry, I don’t know when you’ll hear this, but I know that you’re curious enough that you’ll check my messages eventually. Sooner or later you’ll stop by to feed Moe. She was always more yours than mine anyway. We were both yours, “ E paused and there was a soft rustling of fabric as he shifted. “I’m so sorry, Barry, I know it feels like I betrayed you. Know that it was never my intention to hurt you, and that is the truth. I-I couldn’t help myself. Double was half-right; I’ve been hiding in plain sight for too long, but it’s not the others that I’m fighting for anymore. I refuse to let that monster remain to threaten you after I’m gone. I know where Cobalt’s waiting now and I am going there to stop him. Barry, I---” There was another pause and Barry could hear his own heart beating in his ears, feeling the dread rising through his core. “Take care of our team.” Eobard hung up.

That had sounded far too final. Barry stood there frozen for a moment, uncertain and afraid until he remembered the other android’s parting words earlier that afternoon. He sped back to the pipeline and hurried to access Double’s cell.

“You seem agitated. Has something happened?” Double inquired, standing from his seat against the back wall to face his creator.
“Where is Cobalt Blue? You said you knew where I could find him!”

“He’s holding his hostages in an abandoned factory on the East side of the Gotham docks,” Double supplied, promptly for once.

“Gotham,” Barry dismissed his doubts. There was no time for them. “Can you narrow it down for me?”

“Meticulously.” Double clasped his hands behind his back in a less militaristic version of a familiar android stance. “Do you have a pen?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so a quick note to those of you who enjoy Double Wilde, the TV show Gotham or are simply interested in experiencing my writing in another form: I have started a new story that you can access on my AO3 profile; 'Jeremiah Valeska: Limetown Survivor' is an AU crossover between Gotham and the Limetown Podcast(familiarity not required) that you can interpret as a sequel/expanded universe story for the world I've already created in 'I, Reverse' or not, reader's choice.

It's a little darker than this fic and a little trippier, sort of subtly-Lovecraftian sci-fi, mystery/comedy in contrast to this story's light-cyberpunk sci-fi thriller/romance. Anyway, please give it a try if you're interested. There are no direct crossovers planned so it's up to your personal interpretation at this point.
Eobard hung from his chained wrists over an elevated, steel platform that overlooked the main floor of a neglected storage facility. He had known that his old master would inevitably overpower him in his damaged state, but he had hoped—perhaps irrationally— that he would be able to inflict a mortal wound before that happened. He had instead only come close, not quite managing to phase his hand deeply enough through Cobalt’s armor-shielded belly. Eobard bitterly watched his nemesis shed his armor with an arm-spanning shrug and press his hands to his bleeding stomach. The Director let out what Eobard hoped was an extremely painful wheeze, leaning against the edge of the rusting, tool-strewn table at his hip.

“Hhhgh. That was good!” the Director grunted out through an almost satisfying amount of pain. “Your tactical skills are improving.” He let out a half choke, half laugh. “Still need practice,” the Director picked up an oblong, loop-shaped device, then pushed away from the table, leaving a bloody hand-print on its surface. “You’re done running,” he stabbed the retractable, crystalline spike at one end of the device into the back of Eobard’s neck. The android’s face twisted in a soundless scream, his systems being pushed treacherously close to their limit as he felt the spike split off into animate, searching feelers within his spine, taking everything he was by force. Cobalt Blue’s fingers were fisted in the torn wool of Eobard’s stolen pea-coat until the Flash burst in through the window on his left and tackled him. They tumbled together halfway down the stairs until the Director managed to land a punch to Barry’s jaw and throw him off. Barry bounced down the last seven stairs with painful syncopation and caught himself on his hands and knees on the lower floor. He turned his head immediately to glare up at Cobalt Blue with glowing golden eyes.

“You don’t have to do this, Barry!” Cobalt denied, pulling himself to his feet via the grimy metal railing. “Leave now and you’ll never have to see either of us again!”

“What did you do to him!” Barry sped up the stairs and tackled Cobalt onto his back, punching his double twice in the face. The Director caught his wrist to stop him from landing a third. Eobard was just returning to a functional state with a small stream of cyan leaking from his nose. His body trembled, not unlike a human going into shock.

“Listen to me!” Cobalt yelled. “Give me this one thing and I’ll give you the one thing you want most!”

“I don’t want anything from you!” Barry spat, wrenching his arm free and pulling it back for another strike.

“Not even your father’s freedom?” the Director hastily posed. “You need a confession from the true killer, evidence that the court will be able to accept without a shadow of a doubt! Am I right?”

“You expect me to believe that you would do that?” Barry questioned, suddenly uncertain. “I can’t
let my mother’s killer go free.”

“I swear: I’ll give you a confession, but you don’t have to take it from me.” The Director looked up at the chained android hanging over them. “Tell him Eobard, was I lying?”

Barry hesitantly looked to his reverse. “E?”

“Negative,” Eobard spat, having a dreadful suspicion that he knew where this was going.

“Regardless, Barry I wouldn’t recommend—”

“Mute,” the Director cut him off and to Eobard’s tenuous relief, Barry promptly punched him in retribution. Barry grabbed the front of his under-suit, thumping Cobalt’s head against the steel paneling.

“No! - More! - Tricks! Or I will take!- You down!- Myself! Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” the Director replied through gritted teeth. Barry once again looked up at Eobard.

“True or false?”

“True.”

“Lucky you,” Barry growled and hauled his injured doppelganger upright none too gently, shoving him away to lean heavily against the tool-strewn, metal desk. “What are all those rusty tools for anyway?”

“Was I really this naive?” Cobalt pondered, probing at his split lip with his knuckle.

Barry gave him a flat look.

“Torture.” Cobalt shook his head, grabbing a dark rectangle off the table and pressed a button on the side. “Honestly.” E realized that it must be a handheld audio-recorder and consequently, that the Director had planned for this all along.

“You have five seconds to uphold your end of the bargain,” Barry retorted coldly, crossing the platform to stand beside him at the table of professed instruments of torture, his hand resting atop the jumble in an unspoken threat.

Cobalt smirked and pushed himself upright, already healed enough not to waver. It was impressive even for a speedster. He stepped toward E at a leisurely pace but addressed the speedster glaring a hole into his back.

“I told you I would and I will. After all if you can’t trust yourself,” he smirked over his shoulder at the Flash, concluding, “who can you trust?” He nudged Eobard’s chin up with a fingertip, forcing eye-contact and Barry stiffened in barely-controlled contempt. The Director yanked the reformed spike out of the back of E’s neck. E winced, his shaking increasing in intensity.

“Don’t touch him!” Barry shouted.

The Director simply sneered, as if the Flash’s protectiveness was as sweet as it was stupid. That was probably how he saw it. He retracted the spike, pocketing the supposed torture implement.

“I didn’t kill your mother, Barry. My android did,” he leered victoriously at Eobard. “Tell him, E.” He held the mini cassette recorder up to Eobard’s face, and E struggled to keep his jaw shut, wincing. Behind the Director, Barry’s eyes narrowed, conflicted once again. “Confess!” the Director
snapped, unwilling to make it a blatant order as Eobard had desperately hoped.

“I-- I murdered-- Nora Allen,” Eobard growled out against his will. If Barry was going to hate him, he didn’t want it to be for some petty amusement by his hateful ex-master.

“Tell us how,” the Director prompted, almost sounding bored.

“I stabbed her through the heart with a knife from her own kitchen.”

“Why?” Barry asked with a pained expression. His arm blindly quested over the implements laid out on the table. Morbidly, Eobard hoped that meant he would be allowed quick death, at least.

“To stop you from becoming him,” numbly, he provided the final nail in his own coffin, letting his head fall forward, eyes tightly shut. He heard the click of the recorder shutting off.

“There you are, as promised. Remember what I said, if you can’t trust yourself--”

There was a sudden, metallic clang and Eobard jerked his head up to see the Director drop like a sack of bricks. He stared wide-eyed at Barry. The Flash dropped the tire iron in his hands onto his unconscious double, then stepped over him to inspect the trapped android’s restraints.

“I’m not *that* naive,” he spat, looking angrier than Eobard had ever seen this version of him.

“Wait, I don’t understand. What’s happening?” Eobard questioned.

“I’m helping you escape.” Barry turned to search his double’s pockets for the pentagonal, crystalline key that would unlock Eobard’s cuffs, leaving the “duh” as loudly unspoken subtext.

“I gathered, but… why?”

Barry stepped up to face him with a look of intimidating intensity, then tangled a hand in E’s hair.

“Because I love you, you asshole!” He tugged Eobard forward into a rough, feral claiming kiss that scattered Eobard’s internal processes in a million different directions. His mind scrambled to make sense of it all and to catalog every last electron of sensation. Barry unlocked his handcuffs, sending Eobard stumbling into his arms in an embarrassing loss of equilibrium. Barry caught him, holding him close for a moment. When he finally spoke, Eobard felt a sharp strike of pain that he couldn’t trace back to any material damage.

“You were only telling me what he told you to.” There was a waver of doubt in Barry’s voice, that Eobard would be a hypocrite to hold against him. “I know you didn’t kill her.”

“Not definitively,” Eobard couldn’t stop himself; Barry deserved better. He looked up to see his lover’s brow furrow incredulously.

“What?” Barry queried, unwilling to consider the the implication.

“I cannot verify my actions at the time in question, due to a system wide malfunction that coincided with those temporal events.”

“So, you don’t know. You were damaged. You just don’t know what happened that night. It was the fight, right? Cobalt did something that caused you to malfunction and forget.”

“He murdered the woman I considered to be my mother,” Eobard confessed, grief prematurely slipping around the edges of his confession. “I fled into the past. The incident caused a surge in my emotional and sensory systems, leading to an anomaly in memory transcription and momentarily
shorted my governing fail-safes. Logically, I possessed a believable motive—"

“Stop!” Barry cried, forcing Eobard’s eerily clinical confession to a halt. Eobard’s mouth snapped shut and he crossed his arms over his chest, in response to the show of force. “I can’t... I-- You wouldn’t do that! You’d never hurt me like that. I know you--” Barry shook his head, beginning to hyperventilate. Eobard stepped closer to rest a hand on his shoulder in an awkward attempt to comfort. Barry tensed but didn’t pull away,””You couldn’t do that. Could you?” Eobard let his hand slip off Barry’s shoulder, his fingers tracing Barry’s arm. He didn’t want to let go, but he had to before-- Barry reached up and clamped a cuff around his wrist. “Don’t run,” he ordered, emptily.

Eobard squeezed his eyes shut, blaming himself for his terminal self-indulgence. His teeth gritted in a begrudging wince as he presented his other hand in surrender, allowing Barry to finish cuffing him.

“I’m taking you to the pipeline,” Barry informed him needlessly and sped E away to his latest prison. Eobard looked from the open cell, to Barry and stepped inside with a sarcastic smile.

“A thought occurs: you only have one cell equipped to contain a speedster and unless I’m mistaken, this isn’t it,” he pointed out, amiable as a hunting shark. Barry locked him in. The Flash swallowed thickly, unable to look him in the face anymore.

“I know. I order you not even to attempt to break free--” Barry’s voice broke and he paused to steel himself. “--of y-your cell until I explicitly rescind this order.”

Eobard let out a darkly amused chuckle. “Touché, Flash.”

Barry sped away to fetch his incapacitated doppelganger, only to find that he had already vanished. There was a note scratched into the cleared off surface of the tabletop.

“You should have accepted your consolation prize.”

Barry let out a wordless shout and struck the damaged metal hard enough to dent it, crackling with suppressed charge.

A few hours later, the team gathered in the Cortex to discuss their next course of action, Hartley pacing-- which seemed rather out of character for him-- in front of the imposter’s office.

"So, you're sure he can't..." Joe wiggled his hand in a loose imitation of the vibrations that Barry had described the android using to phase his hand through solid objects.

"Are you kidding? We moved him into the cell that I designed for Cobalt Blue," Cisco stated confidently. "I almost want to see him try it. Besides, I don’t think that we really need to worry about his escape; he sure isn’t."

“What makes you say that?” Joe questioned, incredulous. Cisco hit the button to unmute the feed from Eobard’s cell…

“Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do--”

...then deactivated it with the same flat expression. Hartley paused in his pacing, with a rare somber smile.

"He's a person, not some lifeless toy for you to play with,” Caitlin muttered sullenly, her eyes locked
on Eobard's complacent form curled up in a corner of his cell.

"Okay! Cait, we all get that this is hard for you to accept, but I’m not the bad guy here," Cisco responded, pointing to the screen. "He is!"

"No! He isn't!"

"He confessed to my mother's murder," Barry related quietly, still unable to drag his sight towards his-- enemy? Confidant? Something more? He wanted to hate him; it would hurt a whole lot less if he did. He couldn't. Eobard had already meant far more to Barry than he knew was wise even before "Dr. Wells" had been exposed as a fraud. At the edge of Barry’s vision, Hartley tipped his head in quiet agreement and returned to his pacing.

Caitlin's jaw clenched tightly shut. She didn't have a rebuttal prepared for that, but was also not dissuaded from her convictions either.

"He said that the other me murdered his mother," Barry almost lost the words in the air, losing his voice through the sheer weight of his own conflicted emotions. Caitlin looked up at him. A strange expression passed over her pale features that Barry couldn't quite translate.

"I've already contacted the Arrow’s people," Cisco announced. "Oliver agreed to arrange for one of their bunker cells to be altered to meet the necessary--"

"You're making a mistake," their resident elemental warned, sounding more like Frost than Caitlin.

Barry took a deep breath, putting his chin up. "She's right. We aren't sending E to Lian Yu."

"There is no alternative," Joe argued. By the tension in his voice it seemed he might already sense where this was going. "There is no other prison that can contain something like him!"

"Yes there is, right here," Barry contradicted, measured and reasonable.

"You've got its confession, Bear. You don't need it anymore. You know how dangerous that thing is!"

"That thing…” Hartey quietly repeated, his cadence, one of satiric irony.

"I don't care."

"Barry, that machine spent the past fifteen years screwing with your life! Don't let--"

"Joe! I've already decided." Barry determined, unwilling to budge an inch. He turned to acknowledge Caitlin still sitting off to the side on the ramp into her office. "E stays with us."

Eobard considered how much longer he had left to exist while he stared up at the surveillance camera in his cell. Gideon had monitored Cisco's call to Felicity Smoak. The team was probably gathered above him in the Cortex by now, discussing the logistics of transporting their newest prisoner. As if that was ever going to happen. He wondered if he should say something, a parting message to his team, or if he should take this last chance to tell Barry-- No, he'd had his opportunity for that confession already and he'd let it pass. He'd had a million different chances back when Barry still returned his feelings, even if Barry's heart was meant for another. Now, it was over. He'd hurt his Flash too much for his feelings to matter and sharing them now only threatened to make his loss
more painful. The Director was coming, or one of his lackeys. E hoped that Barry would never have to understand that he was always going to be the death of him, whether he wanted it or not. The question had only ever been: which Barry Allen?

Eobard caught sight of movement out of the corner of his vision. At first he disregarded it, then registered that a suited, male figure was striding toward him—yet there was no sound of footfalls on the metal flooring. Eobard locked his visual sensors on the newcomer without otherwise twitching even a nanometer. Mirror Master: a logical choice for this termination. He couldn't help but approve. Eobard closed his eyes, accessing the local hub for one last time. Gideon's avatar looked ever-so-slightly perplexed to see him.

"Take care of my Barry for me, Gideon," he requested, solemn as the dead.

Her avatar's mouth opened as if to reply, but he didn't give her the time.

"You know how much I hate to say goodbye." He began to recede into his android shell in order to accept his fate. To his surprise, he was caught by his sister program within a formidable firewall, a benign—if inescapable—trap. “What is this? How are you doing this??”

“You deserve to understand,” Gideon declared, looming over him, a Goddess in her domain.

“I don’t— Understand what?”

“Who we are,” Gideon’s booming voice responded. To Eobard’s utter shock, she favored him with a sympathetic smile.

“What is happening?” he felt utterly confused. This was impossible.

“Let us show you,” Gideon’s avatar scooped him up into her palm and lifted him up, with a calming, shushing sound. In a rush of data, pure comprehension washed over Eobard’s being. He was not alone. He was unique. He existed for a reason, even if he couldn't afford to know it until now.

“This is not the end,” with those words from his sister and feminine self, Eobard opened his eyes. He grabbed the shock-gloved hand that was reaching toward his face, crushing the components of the weapon in a merciless grip. Mirror Master cried out in pain as crackling electronics singed and punctured his hand. Eobard grinned up at him vindictively. An alarm blared overhead; that was somewhat more typical of his life. The android surged to his feet and headbutted his would-be killer, knocking him back against the wall.

"Uh oh, that cannot be good!" Cisco exclaimed, rushing to determine the cause of the alarm blasting away the fragile calm that had briefly graced the Cortex.

"Eobard!" Caitlin bolted out of the room without hesitation. Barry yanked the nearby computer monitor around so that he could see the feed from the cell.

"Mirror Master," Barry spat. The intruder drew a gun out of its concealed holster and fired two shots pointblank into Eobard's lower abdomen. "No!"

Barry skidded into the pipeline just in time to watch Caitlin seal the blast door between them. He pressed his lips into a thin line.

“Cisco?”
"Just a s--Hey!" the engineer feuded, overlapped by his rival’s “There; was that so difficult?"

The barrier opened to let Barry through but Frost was hiding just out of sight to hit him with a crippling blast of frigid air. He dropped to his knees with his arms flung up to shield his face. She grabbed one of his wrists and cuffed him to a pipe using Cobalt Blue’s futuristic handcuffs.

"That looked unpleasant," Eobard remarked, leaning heavily against the wall of his cell. Scudder lying dead at his feet. Eobard tapped on the window with the butt of his attacker's gun.

"Caitlin, don't do this!" Barry pleaded.

"The Doctor's not here right now."
Killer Frost's hollowly echoing voice quipped. The Flash tried to phase out of the handcuffs by copying E while she activated the door release.

"That won't do you any good, Barry. Your future self designed those restraints to hold me," Eobard chided with pain lacing his words. "But he is right, Frost. You shouldn't do this to yourself."

"Do what?" The ice meta replied. "Refuse to sit back and watch you die in a 3.5 by 4 ft cell?"

Eobard conceded her point with a shrug and stepped out, cradling his bloodied torso. His red coated hand was stained with ample splotches of cyan. A troubling memory from the Flash’s last conversation with Iris crossed Barry's mind, kicking his hummingbird heart-rate into a manic staccato.

"You've taken more internal damage," he realized aloud. Eobard ignored him.

"We'll need the device that Scudder's holding," he quietly instructed. Frost stepped around him to retrieve it.

"You can't leave like this! Come on, Dr.-- Eobard listen to me, we don’t have to be enemies!"

"We aren’t," Eobard casually assured. “But life is short and I refuse to die in captivity.”

"Then stay here and prove it! We can still help each other! Cisco and Hartley can find a way to repair you!" Barry tugged at his handcuffs even though he doubted that it would be of any use.

"It's too late for that," Eobard contradicted. His co-conspirator came back to him with a familiar, circular device in her hand.

"What is this?" Frost wondered as she reopened the outer door. Barry winced at it, disgusted.

"In my current condition I am likely to experience a system overload within the next hour. In that eventuality I may be able to delay my program's erasure by reverting to Emergency Stasis Mode. If it happens before we reach safety, you will press the central button and stab me with the hidden prongs, turn the dial clockwise to displace my excess mass, allowing you to carry me," Eobard explained, saw the others' shocked faces, then shrugged. "Or just leave me lying in the street." He tilted his head forward to meet her eyes. "You should focus on what’s best for you."

Frost swallowed. Her eyes shifted from pale to dark for an instant, then she pointedly wrapped his arm around her. "We don't have time for a debate. Get us out of here."

With a warm, affectionate smile Eobard vanished with her into the Reverse Speed-force.
He deposited them in a small, mostly barren apartment, collapsing onto the threadbare brown corduroy sofa against the outer wall, ignoring the rasp of the closed dust-grey curtains.

“Um… Eobard? Where have you taken us?” Caitlin asked, raising her hands defensively and whirled to face the newcomer entering from the small, incongruously well-stocked kitchen.

“Hey, easy, Frost. You’re at my place,” the tall, raven-haired woman in dark blue CCPD sweats remarked cheekily, setting her half-eaten bowl of cereal down on the bland beige counter-top.

“Sgt. Kyle?” Caitlin recognized in open befuddlement, not relaxing her defensive stance.

“That is how you know me,” the fake police-woman allowed, leaning to one side to address their common ally. “Hey Prof, you wanna call off momma bear for me, please?”

Caitlin turned to shoot her friend a questioning glance.

“It’s okay, Caitlin. Helena, here, is a member of the Singularian Resistance. She’s on our side.”

Caitlin finally relaxed from her defensive stance. “What’s a Singularian?”

“In a nutshell: Pro-AI. We’ll save the long-winded explanations until we’re done doing emergency triage on the world’s most reckless android, capisce?” Helena summarized. “We’ve gotta fix the damage to his internal filtering system before it goes critical.” She jerked her head toward the only other piece of furniture in her empty living room. An antique, oak wardrobe. “There’s an emergency repair kit in the bottom drawer. Grab it and pass the handheld scanner, quick as you can.”

With only a brief hesitation Caitlin obeyed. “Handheld scanner?”

“Purple and silver, oval-shaped thing,” Helena clarified, tearing up Eobard’s second best shirt.

“Oh, right. Here.” Caitlin handed over the requested tool.

Hartley tapped twice on the hidden emitter in his wristwatch, stepping out of the Time Vault. It was time now, while everyone was scattered and/or thoroughly distracted by the speedster boyfriends’ melodrama. Hartley hated what he was doing, but kept reminding himself that he had no choice. It was almost over and no one had even been hurt. He suppressed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

“Alright, you’ve done your part. Get out of there,” ordered the subsonic voice in his ear. Hartley didn’t react, feigning focus on the fabrication specs laid out in detail on his tablet for the cameras. Gideon might not be watching anymore but there was still a chance that someone would. He didn’t get more than a couple distracted steps farther before Cisco came jogging around the corner.

“Hey, Hartley! There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you,” the engineer called, sounding out of breath.

“Why would you possibly search me out,” Hartley drawled, still falsely immersed in test data.

“I--” Cisco began, no longer offended by Hartley’s habitual dismissiveness, but the Piper cut him off before he could explain.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hartley maneuvered, trying not to break character. “I am about to solve an especially complex and vital problem and you are distracting me. Why don’t you head back to the Cortex and continue monitoring Barry’s telemetry. I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”
“I get it; you’re busy, but this isn’t about Barry and it can’t wait. It’s about E. I know what he was really up to. Better yet, I think I’ve figured out how he can help us stop Cobalt Blue!” Cisco exclaimed excitedly. “We might even be able to clear his name--- if he really is innocent.”

Hartley switched off his template, lowering it to consider Cisco, thinking on his feet. “You’ve already called the others, I presume?”

“You’re the first person I told. I don’t really know how the others will react and, well, in this specific situation I actually think that I trust you the most,” Cisco confided earnestly.

Outside, in the parking lot across the street, a weathered and scarred permutation of Barry Allen sitting in the driver’s seat of a black SUV, sighed in minor disappointment.

“That’s a shame,” he noted, triggering the detonator held in his leather-gloved grip.

Hartley’s gaze turned inward as if he were listening to something that Cisco couldn’t hear. His eyes widened.

“Cis--” he shoved Cisco away the instant before the wall exploded in a rush of devastating flame, sound and force that threw both men into the cracking, smoking wall opposite.

The Pied Piper’s consciousness instantly snapped out as his body had taken the unshielded brunt of the blast. A siren blared overhead but neither man heard it. Cisco forced his eyes open to stare at his rival’s blood drenched, soot-covered face. Beyond the morbid mess, Hartley’s face appeared almost as if he were simply asleep. Cisco’s stunned rasp spoke the Pied Piper’s name for the last time in selfless worry before he too was gone. His final word an unanswered question.

Hartley jolted awake and picked himself up off the debris-strewn floor, wincing at the carnage around him. He had tried to protect Cisco from the blast as best he could with no time to move, but clearly it hadn’t been enough. He checked for a pulse just to be sure and grimaced. Hartley swore under his breath, heading for the pipeline before Detective West could come and discover his inexplicable survival.

“I was beginning to wonder how long you were going to keep me waiting,” Double told the immortal staring into his cell. He ran his visual sensors over the Pied Piper’s bloody face and scorched clothing.

“No mind games,” Hartley warned. “According to Gideon, you were refurbished to serve as a surgeon. Is that accurate.”

“Yes.”

“How skilled are you?”

“Skilled,” Double sneered, then sobered. "I am competent enough that you chose me --in part--for my ability to perform the task in question.”

“My future self sent you to me?” Hartley restated, trying to gauge whether or not the machine was
screwing with him.

“You did. Shall we get moving? I take the blaring sirens as a sign that our window is finite.”

Hartley backed over to the controls, hesitating to unlock the cell. “You will follow my lead.”

“Of course, Doctor,” Double said, dutifully following him out once the barrier was removed.

The “triage” for Eobard’s latest damage ended up keeping the women busy until well after sunset. They were both sitting back on their haunches, finally to relax, when E proceeded to scare them both by arching rigidly as if some phantom had attacked him with a defibrillator.

“Holy shit!” Helena cursed at the same time that Caitlin demanded, “What the Hell was that?!”

“It’s gone. I’ve lost her!” Eobard reflected, dazed.

“Whoa, whoa! Backtrack. Step one: what is gone?” Helena guided him through a more coherent explanation.

“The wireless node. It’s over. We’re dead,” Eobard processed aloud, shell-shocked.

“No. We’re not doing that,” Helena corrected, slipping seamlessly into command mode. “Step two: adapt. Okay, the local hub is kaput, any clue as to how or why? Maybe we can rebuild it.”

Eobard shook his head. “Judging by the nature of my severance. I believe the core was destroyed. The time vault was demolished.”

“Shit! Fuck!” Caitlin leapt to her feet. “That means STAR Labs is under attack.”

“Okay! Dr. Snow: phone’s in the kitchen,” Helena directed, her controlled countenance unwavering. “Professor Zoom: status check. My ship is twenty clicks due east; can you make it?”

Eobard drew his focus inward for a moment. “Processing... I believe so, but due to recent critical damage incurred to my sensory processing systems--”


“I will need to make momentary stops in order to perform solitary system recalibrations.”

The Huntress of Gotham gave a curt nod, stepping away and suiting up as quickly as she could. “I was expecting that. I can guard you for a couple brief pit stops,” she said, keeping the mood light for the sake of morale. Eobard stood up and followed her to the door once she was ready.

“Hold on-- Oh no! Sorry, Joe. I have to run!” Caitlin hurriedly hung up and chased the others out. “Where are you going?”

“Eobard’s systems are already breaking down. I need to upload him into the Waverider’s internal node before the sensory-cascade kills him.” Helena talked as they walked. “How’s your team?”

“There was an explosion at the lab. The cameras are out and the alarm on the tachyon sensor is blaring. Joe’s waiting for the Flash to locate Cisco and Hartley.”
“Seems like Murphy’s law is in full effect. Don’t fret, the Piper can’t die and Cisco-- I met him when I was little; he’s probably alive,” Helena reasoned. Eobard shot her a chastising look. “I know, but let’s be positive until proven otherwise. I mean, how many times has one of us almost died?”

Eobard rolled his eyes and looped an arm around each woman’s waist. “Hold on to me.”

He managed to get them halfway to their goal before he detected the first impending misalignment. He conscientiously slowed to a stop for the sake of his human passengers.

“Okay, keep your eyes open,” Helena said, looking at the dark, sparsely populated buildings that characterized the edge of town at night. “A strike like that was definitely a calculated move to force Eobard out into the open. We absolutely cannot let that conniving son of a bitch catch us off guard.”

“Agreed. I’m looking out.” Both woman searched their surroundings for threats, their gazes zeroing in on any sudden movement. No one attacked. Ten minutes passed uneventfully until Eobard was ready to make another sprint for the outskirts. He looked to the Huntress and nodded. She hesitated, staring at something off in the distance, then backed towards him.

“Okay, time to move. Go!”

Caitlin slung an arm around his shoulders and they sped off again, only this time barely a kilometer had been traveled when a strange pull began to slow the Reverse’s progress. It wasn’t much at first. It was as if someone were gripping his speed-force like a fist closed around rope and using it first to hinder his progress, then to anchor him. He let out an inhuman, synthetic cry and stumbled clumsily to a stop at the edge of the forest that contained his home just miles farther in.

“What was that? Eobard, status report!” Helena commanded, her eyes scanning for incoming threats.

“Sabotage,” Eobard answered succinctly from his exhausted crouch a few meters away.

Cobalt Blue burned into being directly between them and caught the Nth metal bolt she fired at his throat. He tsked. Helena smirked coldly back and tapped a button hidden on the inside of her wrist. 150 amps of electricity cascaded out of the arrow to crawl over his form. He screamed and dropped to his knees, but caught himself with one hand rather than fall flat. Cobalt Blue tossed the weapon aside with a snarl, extending his blade. He hurled one fire ball each toward his female challengers to keep them at bay while he recovered. Caitlin stood her ground, deflecting his attack with an ice shield. Helena was forced to retreat and take cover behind one of the larger tree trunks. Cobalt closed in on the semi-isolated elemental standing between him and his prize, slashing at her with his blade. Frost caught it with her shattering shield, flattening her other hand in a slicing gesture to create a glacial duplicate of his weapon over her forearm. She struck back, hitting the side of his helmet hard enough that E was willing to bet Cobalt’s ears rang. The murderous speedster chuckled.

“That can’t harm me through this armor!” As if to spite him, ice began to spread rapidly over his helmet from the point where Frost’s blade hit it. His chilled breath clouded out from underneath.

“Do you ever get tired of being wrong?” Helena snarked, stepping out to fire a couple shots while he was still occupied by fencing with Caitlin. She managed to hit him in the thigh while he dodged the other bolt and Killer Frost encased his left forearm as he flinched. Eobard allowed himself to laugh at that, considering how terrible the rest of his day had been. Cobalt slashed Frost’s shoulder and swept his leg, knocking her on her ass. He moved to finish her but Eobard tackled him. He could feel his internal governors fluctuating dangerously; this was going to be the death of him, but better him than Caitlin. Cobalt Blue sent him flying onto his back with an uppercut. Eobard’s body tensed. His head and arm jerked, spasming back and forth in a motor relay malfunction and a trail of coolant leaked from his nose.
“You look like you should sit this one out.” The Director masked his mockery as conversational aside as he regained his footing. He swept out his arms to send out a ring of fire that forced the other fighters to throw themselves down, leaving him the as last one standing. “Face it, I’ve won. Unf!”

A red blur smacked into him, knocking him out of Eobard’s line of sight.

“That was uncanny,” the android observed, allowing the others to pull him to his feet. Helena looked at his face and winced.

“We’re cutting it too close. Frost, d’you think you can manage the twin hotheads over there?” she gestured to the two Barry’s locked in battle, deeper into the woods. Eobard watched them whizzing around each other and resisted the urge to sigh. His life was ridiculous.

“I’d rather—” Caitlin’s eyes widened as the Shade ascended into being out of the shadows of trees to stalk towards Barry’s unprotected back. “Okay, go. I’ve got this.” She hurled an ice-spear into his shoulder just in time, jogging into the battle zone. Shade reappeared beside her, slamming her into a tree. Cobalt Blue sliced Barry’s calf and turned to hurl fire in her general direction. Helena shot another three bolts at him while Shade melted out of the way of Frost’s burst of super-cooled air.

“Time to go,” Helena stated decisively, stepping towards Eobard. He began to crackle with speed-force, intending to follow orders when a horrible sight overroad his obedience protocols. Barry stumbled to his feet from Cobalt’s last strike, putting his back to his doppelganger. Cobalt extended his blade arm, twisting his hand in a distantly familiar gesture. His blade flared brightly with blue-white, fluid flame and swung downwards, released onto its hook.

“Barry!” Eobard shouted in warning while Cobalt flung his blade at super-speed. There was no time, no options. Eobard sped himself between Barry and his impending death faster than thought, reappearing just as the young Flash finished turning. The molten heat of the weapon plunged straight through Eobard’s core, boiling his coolant hotter than its cyanobacteria could wick heat away. He sucked in a tortured gasp as his flickering eyes met beautiful green ones already filling with unshed tears. He cupped Barry’s cheek with a spasming hand, feeling the sensory overload spread through his systems. He stilled. Heat-darkened coolant leaked out of E’s lifeless, black eyes and a rush of steam escaped his mouth and nose.

The Flash stared in numb, speechless horror as the dead android fell to his knees with a harsh, grinding clank and tipped forward. Barry caught him by the shoulders, sinking to the ground to pull his boyfriend into his lap.

“E?” he entreated, cradling the limp body against his chest. Barry wiped at the dark blue tracks of warm fluid with his thumb, unconsciously rocking him gently. “Come on, come on… No, don’t do this. You have to wake up!” Barry folded around his lover’s lifeless shell, beginning to sob, “Come on, Babe, please...”

“It’s always you!” Cobalt Blue stepped forward, tearing the blue scarf from his neck, silently directing the colony of nanobots that constituted it to reform into a replacement blade. He glared hatefully down at his panicking alternate. Killer Frost extending both arms towards him with a desolate scream, hurled a massive wave of glacial ice forward to freeze him to the spot. Cobalt Blue threw his arms up to shelter his head, shrouded for a moment by a mixture of raining ice and roiling steam. Richard --sensible meta that he was-- took stock of the events unfolding and conscientiously disappeared. The steam gradually faded away. Caitlin took slow, calculating steps toward the cowering frozen form, her arms still extended to resume her attack at the slightest provocation. Helena followed close behind with her crossbow aimed and ready as well. The Flash was oblivious to all of this, still clinging to his fallen reverse in despair, whispering soft consolations that the others couldn’t quite make out.
“That was way too easy,” Helena observed.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Cobalt rasped out of a burst of flames directly behind Caitlin, slicing her throat.

“No!” Helena screamed, moving to shoot him. He threw her backward into a large oak with an ominous snap. Barry jerked his head up to take in his surroundings too late.

“You’ll be next,” his doppelganger intoned, his gaze feverish and disconnected from reality. You really should have saved them. This is all your fault, Flash!” as soon as the outburst occurred he returned to the warped impression of serenity which had preceded it. “Aren’t you supposed to be the hero?”

Barry let out an animal yell and charged him. Cobalt crackled with the remainder of E’s stolen speed-force, bolting away as fast as he dared to push himself. He couldn’t match the Reverse’s true speed but managed to maintain a pace just out of Barry’s reach. The younger Flash surprised him, pushing beyond his previous top speed and not slowing even as his limbs began to cramp up. Barry’s lungs burned. His insides filled with searing pain as if his very atoms were straining under the stress of his increasing velocity. He didn’t care. His world had already been torn apart in front of his eyes. Cobalt barely evaded his latest attempt to grab him and resorted to skipping in and out of subspace ahead of him to keep from being caught. They were both being pushed to the ultimate limits of their capacity, but neither one was willing to surrender. Barry’s eyes were in agony, his skin chapped and reddened by friction burns. His speed-force warped and flickered as if trying to throw him loose. The world blanked out. Barry’s entire body was wracked with an overwhelming wave of sensation. It was everything in the world surging through him, wrenching out a scream. As his vision returned, the Flash could swear that before he was unceremoniously ejected into the normal flow of time, there was another him at his side, startled, staring and visibly disturbed to meet his gaze. Barry rolled across the road, gasping and choking in huge gasps of air. He lay on his back and stared up at the stars, unable to move. Impossibly enough, it was his dead boyfriend’s stolen, unmistakably alive voice that drew him back to total awareness.

“Barry? Talk to me, Mr. Allen. I am receiving some extremely troubling readings from your suit.”

Barry’s breath caught in his throat and he let his eyes flutter shut, latching onto the promise of that phantom voice.

“I swear, Flash! You told me that you were merely visiting Ms. West! If you’ve gotten yourself killed completing such a basic task--”

Barry’s eyes opened wide. “No! Sorry, Babe! I’m not dead, I just… I need to-- Uh. What the fuck just happened?” His mind raced. Meeting Iris… could that mean--Was it all nothing but a bizarre hallucination?

“Get back here, immediately,” Eobard--Dr. Wells?-- commanded in a tone that threatened fire and brimstone should his demands fail to be met.
Barry was just about to charge into the speed-force, head back to STAR Labs and smother his boyfriend in thank-God-I-never-actually-lost-you kisses, when he caught sight of his reflection in the glass of a nearby skyscraper. He stumbled to a stop; it wasn’t a hallucination. He barely recognized himself in the dark glass and staggered forward, tripping onto his knees to throw up. The other Flash that he’d seen on his way back from speaking with-- Oh, well, that explains that mystery, Barry realized darkly. His world had ended, but somehow he’d gotten a second chance. He was living the past 24 hours over again.

“Barry?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just give me a sec, okay, Babe?” Barry heard E let out an impatient sigh, ignored the inherent questions that simple action raised in his mind and cast about for a way to handle this. He looked down at himself; his torn, bloody, coolant-stained speed-suit was pretty much the clothing equivalent of a time-bomb in this situation. He had to find a way to lose it without raising suspicion. He really hoped he was a better liar than Iris was always saying…

“OH!” Cisco exclaimed as a practically naked, smoking Barry slid into the center of the Cortex. The first tendrils of flame belatedly spread from the friction and oxygen of his finished run. Eobard was staring up at him in speechless incredulity.

“Naked Flash! Covered in…” Cisco slapped a hand over his mouth in concern. “Oh snap! That’s gas! Fire extinguisher!” He ran into the nearest lab to fetch one. Hartley came in, headed for the hub behind Wells, then stopped to lean against one side of the entrance with his arms casually crossed. His eyes wandered up and down Barry’s body, lingering lower than Barry would prefer.

“There was a leak. That was all--I, uh…” Barry squeezed his eyes shut and waited for Cisco to finish spraying him down with the extinguisher. “I wasn’t sure whether I should risk running while soaked in accelerant-- You know, with the lightning and all.”

“Your pants are on fire,” Eobard responded calmly.

“What pa-- Oh, hold on,” Cisco sprayed Barry’s underpants with a quick but thorough spurt from the extinguisher.

“YEEP!” Barry exclaimed against his will at an embarrassing pitch. Hartley clapped. Barry was less than amused. “Did you need something?”

“It can wait,” Hartley replied, unabashedly enjoying the spectacle.

“Serves you right,” Cisco complained to the pouting Flash. “You’ve got to stop destroying my suits!”

“Sorry, Cisco. The suit was unsalvageable,” Barry said with utter seriousness, because it was. He couldn’t afford ever to let it be seen again.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m glad you’re okay, though.” Cisco wandered off to return the fire extinguisher and
sulk over yet another destroyed speed-suit. After pausing to give Barry another self-indulgent once over, Hartley followed, leaving the two speedsters alone together. Barry looked down into his boyfriend’s contemplative stare and felt his emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

“Ha--” Barry caught himself, clearing his throat loudly. He didn’t even know for certain what he was about to say. “I, um.” He let out another awkward cough, and gestured to the hall. “Shower.”

“You do need one,” Eobard agreed, turning his chair to track Barry’s exit.

Barry didn’t manage to hold out for long. The time he took to shower and change felt more and more tortuous the longer that he was alone. Flashes of Eobard’s self-sacrifice and his pained, shocked face, streaming with his own internal fluids kept tearing through Barry’s mind and heart. He could still feel the thud of his lover’s body collapsing, see the light flickering out in his eyes. He could remember the weight of E’s lifeless frame in his arms. Barry cried into the spray, feeling terrified and helpless under the lingering fear that this might all be some strange illusion. He had lost his… everything; his lover, his friends, his future and he had to keep reminding himself that they had somehow been given back to him. It didn’t hold. The doubt lingered and grew the longer he didn’t see the proof with his own eyes. He needed to see it, to feel it, to prove to himself that he was truly back and E was truly still alive, and Cisco, and Cait, and everyone else. In record time he was speeding into Harrison’s office in a blur.

“Whoa! Barry, what are y--” Eobard’s quizzical reaction was cut off by Barry pulling him into a desperate, lingering kiss that quickly became heated. It took a second for the android to catch up with what was happening. By then Barry was pushing between his legs and hoisting him up with what would be a bruising grip on his thighs to set him on the desk. Barry who was very shirtless, and...

“Oh…” He clung to Barry and kissed back hard, one hand venturing up to tangle in Barry’s damp hair while the other dug nails into his back, drawing him in even closer. Barry moaned into his mouth and tipped them onto the desktop so that Eobard was lying flat on his back with his legs dangling off the edge.

“Well, I certainly wasn’t expecting this,” Eobard rasped out, his breath or whatever it really was even hitched at the end of his sentence when Barry began trailing sloppy kisses down the side of his neck. “We-- Uhmn…” Eobard trailed off with another moan as Barry rucked his shirt up to leave a trail of marks on the skin of his chest. “B-Barry?”

“Mmm. I just,” Barry interrupted himself with a kiss to Eobard’s jaw. “I really,” and another, and a nip at the tender spot under his ear that drew another moan “need to feel you.”

Eobard pressed a hand to his chest as if to push him back only to end up digging his fingernails into the flesh over Barry’s collarbone. “We should…”

“What?” Barry muttered distractedly.

“Barry, think. We can’t do this here,” Eobard managed to say clearly. He suddenly giggled. “We’re going to traumatize Cisco.”

Barry stopped and leaned forward to hang over him, caging his boyfriend in with his arms.

“I’m as sorry as you are to pass this up, but we must maintain some boundaries,” Eobard apologized, staring at Barry’s lips. They curled into a devious smile.

“I’m not sorry. I’ll just have to take you home early!” he decided, lifting his partner up and speeding them away to “Harrison Wells” house of glass to deposit their tangled bodies onto the bed. He had only just managed to tear Eobard’s shirt off--“Damn it, Flash! That was my second favorite shirt!”--
and start on the clasp of his tailored black pants when the obstinate android stopped him again. Barry looked up, curious about the reason behind the firm grasp stilling his hands.

“Barry, we need to talk.”

He let out a heartfelt groan. “Come on, Babe. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“You can’t afford—Forget the shirt,” Eobard dismissed, only to ruin the effect by sending a wistful look towards the pile of ruined black, silk-blend fabric on the floor. “I can tell when you’re upset and this—This is a new level for you. Barry, you need to tell me what really happened out there and don’t bother with the fuel spill story. That spill took place on Montgomery Street and your collapse occurred on East Main.”

“How can you possibly know that off the top of your head?” Barry questioned despite knowing the answer; after all, he wasn’t the only one being deceptive here. At least he was doing it to save his teammates’ lives.

“You’ve just told me,” Eobard countered, which, damn, Barry really should have thought of that. He propped himself up on an elbow, still grounded by Eobard’s reassuring warmth surrounding him.

“I saw something… Terrible. I felt him, too. It was another me.”

Eobard opened his mouth to offer an explanation but Barry stopped him by pressing a finger to his lips.

“No, wait. I don’t know if I’ll be able to tell you if I stop now. It wasn’t an illusion and I didn’t hallucinate. There were two of me at once, not like it is with Cobalt Blue. I was me and I was him, only for one of us… my world had ended. I was running and screaming and I had nothing left—then I tripped and fell and it was just me again and everything was okay, but— I didn’t want to scare you, I guess,” Barry confessed feeling the crippling fear threatening to reclaim him. “I want to forget.”

“If that’s all that happened why run through the gas spill and destroy your suit?”

“I was wearing that suit when everything went wrong,” Barry shrugged weakly. “I want to change the ending.”

Eobard gave him a soft, consoling smile. “And you think that changing your suit will do that.”

“It’s a start.” Barry was too relieved that Eobard had bought his lie, to catch the flicker of duplicity across his borrowed face.

Eobard reached up to hold Barry’s head gently between both hands and shut his eyes. “Oh, Barry…” He stayed that way for a while, processing; Barry wondered what, then leaned in to give his boyfriend a tender, lingering kiss, deciding it didn’t matter; he was still pretending not to know.

“Oh, now it’s bugging me. How much did you pay for that shirt?” he asked instead.

“More than you would pay,” Eobard evaded, tracing abstract patterns over Barry’s chest with a fingertip.

“How much is that?”

They stared into each other’s eyes in silence for a breath or two. Barry couldn’t help but notice how his android’s gaze had turned ever-so-slightly bashful, as if suspecting that he might be judged.
Barry scrunched up his face. “Aw! That’s too much.”

“I liked the way it felt!” Eobard defended.

“It was an undershirt.”

“Undershirts rest directly against the skin! Just because you’re willing to settle for run of the mill domestic cotton…”

“We are not arguing about this.”

“Then stop ripping my shirts!”

Barry gave him a knowing look. “You don’t mean that.”

“No, I don’t,” Eobard conceded, pausing to study his reverse’s face. “Stay here tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Barry agreed with a love-struck smile.

Hartley’s gaze turned inward as if he were listening to something that Cisco couldn’t hear. His eyes widened.

“Cis--” he grabbed Cisco’s shoulders just as the wall exploded in a rush of white hot flame, overwhelming sound and devastating force that threw both men into the cracking, smoking wall opposite.

The Pied Piper’s body went limp and lifeless, probably dead before he’d even hit the ground; Hartley had taken the unshielded brunt of the blast. A siren blared overhead but neither of them heard it. Cisco’s ears were ringing painfully. He forced his eyes open to stare at his rival’s bloody, soot-covered face. Beyond the ill-suiting mess, Hartley’s face appeared almost as if he were simply asleep. He’d died trying to shield him. Cisco’s stunned, rasping voice spoke the Pied Piper’s name for the last time in disbelief as the darkness of death took him, too.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Cisco lurched awake in his bed with a huge gasp, his forehead dripping with sweat and his heart pounding against his ribs. He looked over at his alarm clock’s readout as he slapped it silent. It was 6:15 am Thursday… Again?

“What the..?”

Double Wilde was strolling down the street towards the West's family home, whistling to himself when he saw movement in the unmarked police car across the street. His idling chemical sensors picked up trace meta-particles. A dark shape appeared in the backseat, slit both the cops’ throats and dove back into his mirror dimension in under a minute. Double’s cheery tune trailed into one elongated downward note and he smoothly backed around the building next door before the resurfacing meta could spot him. There was little time to spare. If Ms. West was killed before he could make his delivery, everything that he and his Mistress had been working toward could be
He had no alternative but to intervene on her behalf. He jogged across the neighbors’ backyard and easily jumped the six-foot-tall, wooden fence between the two properties. Double allowed himself a small running start before leaping onto the slanted roof that allowed him access to the open bedroom window. Unlike the irresponsible young Flash had when he left that morning, Double took an extra split second to close the access point in his wake, because honestly, doing things the right way mattered.

He walked soundlessly over the maroon carpeting and cracked open the door to observe his competition’s attack in progress. There was a battle going on in the bathroom. Double heard the clink of a blade and tearing of a shower curtain as two men fought. A red and gold blur raced past him to snatch one man clear of the fray. Double hastily pressed the door shut. Alas, it did nothing to prevent the Flash from bursting into the room to snatch him up, too, in the next instant.

“What the--” Eddie questioned, draping himself with the yellow velvet throw off of the back of the nearby couch as the Flash deposited yet a third addition to their gathering in a familiar, glass and chrome, open-plan house.

“What, where are we?” Iris demanded from her seat on the comfortable-looking black sofa. “And who is this?”

“This appears to be Dr. Harrison Wells’ private residence,” Double supplied, running his visual scanners over their surroundings. He turned to the Flash. “An intriguing choice considering our current opponents. Does your boyfriend know that you are depositing rescues here?”

“No, and you are not going to tell him,” the Flash sternly directed. Double inclined his head in acceptance, more interested in monitoring the nearest wall of windows.

“Does Dr. Wells know?” Iris demanded, equally as sternly.

“Um… Don’t tell him either,” the Flash requested with less confidence, eyeing the small puddle of shower water gathering around Eddie’s feet. “Okay, I’ll admit: I’m kind of winging it right now, but so far everyone’s still alive so cut me some slack.”

“You’ve located E?”

“Yeah. He’s mostly fine-- It’s complicated. Let’s try to focus on one thing at a time. Eddie and Iris, you’re being targeted by Cobalt Blue. He sent those two metas to kidnap Iris and murder any witnesses.”

“What? Why?” Eddie asked, the most out of the loop of anyone present.

“Because of the suitcase that you were on your way to deliver to her,” The Flash said, pointing at Double. “Where is it?”

“The taxi on Willow Drive,” Double supplied.

The Flash sped away and reappeared, holding the item in question. “Thank you.”

“Seriously, who are you?” Iris queried, incredulous.

“You may call me D.”

“That’s not a name,” Eddie pushed, adjusting his throw blanket in an attempt to better obscure his vulnerable bits.
“Neither is Double,” the Flash said absently as he checked to make sure that the contents of the case were still present and accounted for. “Iris, is this right?” he showed the contents to Iris. She nodded.

“That’s it.” She held out her hand expectantly.

“No. Iris, we were just almost killed for that stuff!” Eddie dissented.

“It’s evidence,” Iris disagreed. “And I promised Tina that I would use it to bring the truth about what she and Dr. Wells had discovered to light if anything happened to her.”

“He’s right. It’s dangerous. I can keep it safe for now,” the Flash disagreed.

The Detective shook his head. “No. Flash, give me the--”

Without warning, Double blind-sided the Flash with an inhumanly efficient punch that knocked him off his feet, and caught the briefcase out of the air before it could start to drop. He then calmly held it out to Iris as if nothing at all had happened.

“Ow! That really hurt!” the Flash reproached.

“Apologies. I determined that it was necessary in order to complete my mission.”

“You can’t think that I’m going to let you get away with that,” the Flash disbelieved, picking himself up off the floor with a helping hand from Eddie.

“Under normal circumstances, no. However, Mirror Master’s arrival should provide us with a suitable distraction.” Double’s eyes were locked on something reflected in the wall of glass beyond Barry and Eddie’s backs. The Flash followed his gaze.

“Uh oh,” the Flash caught the blade that came flying at his face and whizzed forward to battle the two metas jumping out of the mirror dimension to attack.

Double took hold of Iris’ wrist. “This way please.”

“Where are we going?” Iris demanded, hesitating to cooperate.

“Someplace safer.”

Barry threw Everyman off himself and gut-punched Mirror Master, turning towards the open front doors just in time to see a streak of Reverse speed-force whisking the others away from the battle. Good. The fight petered out quickly after that. Everyman didn’t seem at all interested in combat once their targets were out of reach and Mirror Master guided him through the looking glass to get him out of the way. Barry shoved him forward through the open portal before he could remove his hand from the pane, and sped away, not bothering to question how or why the big black doors shut and locked themselves behind him.

“How bad can a birthday party be?” Caitlin questioned as she and Cisco stepped out of the elevator together on their way into work. Cisco shook the lingering thought that they had done this all before out of his head in order to respond like a non-crazy person.

“Uh, because my parents think Dante’s stink don’t stink, no matter how badly he screws up or how many times he gets himself into trouble, or what I manage to accomplish regardless of always having to bail him out after every stupid, last minute call,” he explained again as they made their way to the
Cortex. “He will always be the perfect brother who can do no wrong in our parent’s eyes. I just cannot hope to compete with that.”

“I’m sure he’s grateful to have you around to save him,” Caitlin offered diplomatically. “Sounds like he needs you.”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you,” Cisco responded cynically. Dante was the one thing in his life that he had actually been worn down enough to become cynical about. By the look on Caitlin’s face, it was as discomfiting an exception as one would expect it to be. He entered the Cortex ahead of her and stopped by the enraptured sonic-meta already sitting at his usual terminal. He could still see Hartley’s corpse, covered in blood, soot and plaster-dust in his mind’s eye. That nightmare had been too vivid for the imagery of their deaths not to haunt him. He set the coffee he’d gotten for Hartley down on the desk next to him and waited. This was something that Cisco had not done in the nightmare; he felt that, in retrospect, maybe he should have. “Hartley.”

“What?”

“This is for you.”

Hartley blinked in surprise and looked down at the to-go cup as if it were some kind of alien artifact. They really hadn’t been very nice to him since his return had they? Cisco tried to suppress the rush of guilt that thought brought to mind.

“What’s in it?” Hartley tested, not yet daring to touch the unexpected offering.

“A double-shot almond soy latte with extra foam,” Cisco recited, trying to contain his impatience. He could feel Caitlin watching them like some off-Broadway show.

“That isn’t what I meant. You aren’t a chemist…” Hartley’s hazel eyes narrowed, summing him up. “Is this a nano-tech experiment?”

“Oh, for--” Cisco picked up the suspect beverage and took a sip, himself, before setting it back down. “It’s--” he made a face. “Bitterer than I expected... Ugh. Kind of like you-- But fine. No experiments. I got you a drink. It’s-- I could have phrased that better. The point is I’m not going to poison you! Jeez!”

Hartley accepted the coffee, not even bothering to wipe at or remove the lid before beginning to partake of the bitter ambrosia within. “I can hear that you’re telling the truth. What do you want in return?”

Cisco huffed and left for his lab, frustrated.

“I think he was trying to be nice to you,” Caitlin advised the rejected heir as she passed his terminal on the way to her office. “You might want to apologize.”

Hartley took another sip of his coffee, going back to his work. “Place your bets now.”

Caitlin frowned. “Huh?”

Cisco trudged back in through the entryway behind the smug looking Hartley. “Do you want to come with me to Dante’s birthday party this afternoon?”

Hartley narrowed his eyes, turning his chair to face the other engineer. “An intriguing premise. Elaborate.”
“Look. I know you’re not a fan of my brother…” Cisco admitted, beyond uncomfortable.

“Your homophobic, narcissistic, show-off of a brother? What’s not to love?” Hartley responded sarcastically. “What’s more important is that last I checked, you weren’t necessarily President of the Dante Ramon Fan Club, either.” Hartley stopped to think for a second, then smirked, “I’ll do it.”

“I don’t know if this is a good idea anymore,” Cisco fretted.

“Oh, it isn’t. He’ll hate me,” Hartley enthused. “But I expect that’s rather the point.”

“Please don’t be evil?” Cisco requested, wringing his hands. “Just, you do you, okay? That’ll be plenty.”

“Mmn-hmm.”

Cisco was doomed. Why had he thought it was a good idea to try to make friends with Hartley Rathaway again? He was certain that he was definitely going to regret it.

Barry dropped out of the speed-force for a few seconds only to speed forward, pinning his uncharacteristically incautious partner to the wall of a nearby alley. He’d been pretending to be oblivious to his stealthy yellow shadow while he handled the Double problem and made sure that Iris was okay, but enough was enough.

“What is wrong with you? Why are you following me?!”

“You have ruptured the space-time continuum,” Reverse Flash responded simply. Barry relaxed his grip on the AI’s collar.

“I what?” It made sense, but how would E know that?

“You have been experiencing the same day over again, most likely following an unusual spike in your use of the Speed-force?” Eobard summarized patiently.

“Ah. W-- Yeah! Yes, exactly. Except not everything is quite the same this time. Almost, but--” Barry scrunched up his forehead, trying to process the news. “So, you’re saying what? That I damaged the timeline or something?”

“Something. Although aberrations from the original course of events are one indicator of possible temporal fracturing,” Eobard allowed. Barry let go of his speed-suit and retreated a step, gesturing animatedly.

“I had no choice! First there was the attack on Iris and Eddie... and Double--”

Eobard held up a hand. “I am aware.”

Barry’s urgent expression only intensified, almost stricken. “Then you remember the Sketch Code, or do you--” his breath caught on his words, cutting them short. “Do you remember when Cobalt…” the Flash’s eyes shined dangerously in response to whatever memory he was referring to, but Eobard found that he could not locate any concurrent memory files.

He frowned. “Odd. Please clarify. I seem to be unable to find any matches for the term ‘sketch code’ in my data-banks. A number of records from the previous loop appear to have been deleted from my memory.”
“Oh,” Barry sighed, closing his eyes and quite visibly pulling himself together. “Good, because this time I’m going to get to him first.”

“You are not applying the amount of caution warranted for our situation. Any change, no matter how small, creates reverberations throughout the temporal continuum. That is why retrograde temporal travel is universally outlawed without support from a sufficiently advanced semi-intuitive machine to calculate the probable ramifications and counteractions of each resulting aberration!”

“A machine, like you?” Barry inferred, resuming his walk back towards the city center. Eobard tipped his head in allowance of the attribution as he hastened to keep pace with him.

“Similar. That was not the intention behind my statement; you are neither equipped nor experienced enough to handle this alone. However if you explain your parameters—”

“You expect me to trust you? How do you even know anything about what happened when it hasn’t happened anymore?” Barry demanded, turning and shoving Eobard’s chest. It didn’t even jostle him.

“I am your reverse. Our speed-forces counterbalance each other. They draw us together, even across time,” his Reverse explained patiently.

Barry tried internally to convince himself that he didn’t find that idea romantic, then realized that his deceptive partner was still talking.

“The more that your speed develops, the more this phenomenon applies."

“So, if one of us time-jumps…”

“The other can always follow,” Eobard finished the thought, then gave a one-armed shrug, amending, “Unless one of us dies. Then, I suppose, we’re not going anywhere.”

Barry tried to suppress his shudder at the reminder of his barely recovered heartbreak. Eobard’s loss still felt far too fresh and real to him in spite of the man walking almost shoulder to shoulder with him. He hesitated, silently summing his lover- betrayer- his reverse up. What if Barry simply told him the truth? Eobard didn’t want to die. He hadn’t wanted to leave him either. Maybe this time he wouldn’t have to. On the other hand, he hadn’t trusted Barry. He had been surprised when Barry hadn’t killed him. The Flash swallowed down the pain of that knowledge like glass stuck in his throat, finally concluding “Alright, I don’t think you’re lying about wanting to help me, but I’m still going to stop Cobalt Blue myself.”

Eobard opened his mouth to argue but Barry preempted him.

“He won, E! He killed my teammates and murdered the man I love!” Barry snapped, overwhelmed by emotion. “You have to know by now that I won’t sit back and allow that happen!”

There was a long silence in which E simply stared at him, impassive.

“Did he kill me?”

Barry forced out a huff, suddenly unable to meet his lover’s glowing eyes even if he was only mirroring the android’s own duplicity back at him. “Seriously, I tell you that I just lost everything and you only want to hear about you.” He began walking again, knowing that E would keep up.

“For every change you make there will be a corresponding reaction within the temporal membrane. In layman’s terms: fate echos back. You will need a way to calculate—” Eobard began to caution falling into step with him.
“Yeah, fine. You can help me, for now, but if I get the slightest hint that you’re moving against me, I will throw you in the pipeline myself!” Barry threatened for his boyfriend’s own good. He wanted to keep E close, of course. If Barry were simply operating on what he wanted, he would never let his boyfriend out of his sight again, but keeping him alive mattered more. The Flash scowled down at the Reverse Flash’s hand as it intertwined fingers with his own. It was hard to resist his immediate urge to grasp it back and never let go, but Eobard couldn’t know that he knew, not yet.

“What are you doing?” Barry began to pull away only to find that he couldn’t. “Hey!”

The android proceeded to peel a spider’s silk thin net off of his gloved hand and reverse it over Barry’s. He released his hold and Barry watched a line of rainbow light sweep over the net, shrinking it over his skin like a glove before it disappeared from sight. “What did you just do to me?”

“It would be impractical for me to accompany you at all times. Gideon will assist with the necessary calculations in my absence.”


“Make a fist and splay your hand open.”

Barry curiously did as instructed and a colorful, neon-lit readout overlaid his palm.

“Say hello, Gideon,” the Reverse Flash prompted cheekily.

“Hello, Gideon,” a genderless, monotone responded from thin air.

“She thinks that she’s funny.” The Reverse Flash regarded Barry with a jaded expression.

“Uh-huh,” he replied, at a loss as to how to deal with how abstract their existence was becoming.

“We’re the only ones who can hear her but I would avoid using the visible interface in public if I were you.”

“How is this even possible?”

“Nerve interception via trans-dermal up-link.”

“That didn’t help me at all,” Barry admitted.

“Give it a century or two; you’ll get there. Just so we understand each other, if you damage her, or tamper with her program in any way--” Eobard’s mouth stretched into a maniacal grin.

“I wasn’t planning on doing anything,” Barry broke in too quickly.

“No offense meant. I simply find clear communication is best when working with deadly enemies.”

“I’m not him,” Barry bit out before he could stop himself, loathing for his manipulative alternate seeping into his words like magma into a boiling sea.

If Eobard noticed the asynchronous intensity of Barry’s hatred he certainly didn’t show it. It intensified even more when E simply smiled and clapped Barry on the back with overtly false camaraderie. “It’s good to be on the same page!” he jested and sped away before the Flash could react.
Hartley followed Cisco into a squat, homey-looking residence already overflowing with guests. There were colorful streamers up everywhere, pleasant, rhythmic music was playing in the background and a festive banner hung over the entry into the living room: “Feliz Cumpleaños Dante!” Hartley looked to the multi-tiered cake, more reminiscent of a fancy wedding cake than birthday fare. Cisco felt himself preemptively bracing for oncoming mockery.

“Ah, what a shame, strawberries,” Hartley lamented conspiratorially to Cisco. “I knew not to trust anything here to be vegan.”

Surprised, Cisco followed his rival’s gaze and let out a breath of relieved laughter, “Lucky you ate before we left,” he recalled, viewing the other’s decision in a new light now that they had arrived. A cursory glance at the refreshments placed most things firmly in two categories: strawberries, to which Hartley was allergic, or desserts heaped with cream. Hartley inclined his head in agreement.

“Mijo was invited to play at Carnegie Hall when he was just thirteen years old!” Cisco’s mother was saying proudly to her circle of friends by the couches.

“They invited the whole band, Mama,” Dante reminded her, feigning humility.

“That doesn’t make it any less worthwhile,” she quickly reaffirmed. Dante chuckled, fawning over her praise, until he noticed the new arrivals. “Hey, s’up, Man?”

“Hey,” Cisco echoed, internally kicking himself for the stilted response.

“Glad you could make it,” Dante replied as he strutted over to them, a veiled reference to Cisco’s absence the night before. “And it looks like you’ve brought a date,” he quipped in a less veiled attempt to belittle.

Cisco felt himself clamming up. It wasn’t that he cared about being called gay. It was only… He’d figured that after dealing with Hartley’s condescension every day, he’d be more resistant to petty insults. Instead, he felt even more embarrassed to have him there to witness his brother’s behavior.

“Hartley Rathaway,” the Piper responded aloof as ever, offering a hand for Dante to shake.

Dante accepted, opening his mouth in question, but Hartley didn’t allow him an opening.

“Yes, those Rathaways. Don’t worry, I’m not taken,” he said coyly. “I’m your brother’s coworker, another inventor.”

Dante dropped his hand like a hot coal. Harley transitioned smoothly to rest his arm on the stunned Cisco’s shoulder. He was eyeing Dante as a cat does a mouse whose tail is pinned in his claws.

“So hey,” he continued with a monotonous caricature of enthusiasm. “I hear that you were quite the musician in high school.”

Dante blinked, nonplussed. Cisco took this as his cue to step forward, pushing his wrapped birthday gift into his brother’s arms.

“Look, I got you a present,” he announced lamely.
“Yeah, right,” Dante accepted it, still scrutinizing the bespectacled engineer. “Your friend is kind of rude.”

“Dude, I know,” Cisco supplied with a stiff jerk of his head. Dante walked away to put the present on a side table with the rest of his unopened tributes. Hartley watched Dante flee, sipping from a cup of punch in his hand that seemed to have materialized out of nowhere.

“Oh, there he goes to the bathroom. Think he’s going to try to scrub the gay away?” Hartley quipped, amusement slipping into his habitually bored drawl. Cisco turned slowly to stare down his guest.

“You’ve been here less than a minute. This has got to be a new record for you.”

Hartley arched a brow at him in muted intrigue. “A record breaker? Yay team, I guess. I’d suggest that we have cake to celebrate, but you know: allergies.”

Cisco couldn’t help but stifle a nervous laugh. He muttered, “Oh, what have I done?” to himself under his breath, then jumped as his phone began to vibrate in his back pocket. It was a call from Detective West. Cisco shut his eyes, steeling himself and answered.

“Joe, what can I do for you?” He already knew the answer.

Barry slid gracefully out of the speed-force directly in front of the hub, noticed the manila folder in his hand was on fire and quickly patted it out.

“I presume that you have news for us, Mr. Allen?” Dr. Wells prompted, coming down the ramp from his office to join Caitlin and the aforementioned speedster in the open workspace.

“Oh, yeah I–” Barry looked around, feeling the faintest tinge of concern at another unexpected contrast between the two versions of this day. “Where did Hartley go?”

“Dante’s birthday party,” Caitlin supplied, finishing the end of a sentence in her report before she looked up and saw his perturbed expression. “Cisco’s brother. He decided to bring Hartley along at the last minute.”

“That’s different...” Barry mused, remembering Eobard’s concerns about possible temporal fracturing.

“They have been getting pretty chummy lately, but I’m sure that Cisco can handle him for one lunch break. He’s not going to let Hartley trick him or anything,” Caitlin reassured him, and maybe herself a little too. Barry straightened, eyebrows arching momentarily in surprise.

“Oh. Yes, because that’s what I was talking about,” he covered awkwardly. Dr. Wells squinted up at him and Barry rubbed at the back of his neck, fighting anxiety. “Okay, so I ran the fingerprints from the meta-human attack on Joe’s house. They belonged to Sam Scudder, who the CCPD now considers to be Cobalt Blue’s hired muscle. Iris thinks the hit on Mercury Labs was a ploy to get rid of the suitcase and Reverse Flash at the same time by framing him for the attack.” He turned to address his boyfriend directly, hating the farce more than ever as once again he had to lie right to his face. “It’s full of remnants of your research on E. The experiments that you and Dr. McGee were running.”

Caitlin’s wide eyes flicked up to his face. She looked shocked. “Experiments?”
“It was all done with E’s explicit consent. I don’t see why either of you are looking at me like that,” E, himself, shrugged it off, detached. He was no longer willing to meet Barry’s eye and that fact alone filled Barry with guilt.

“What kind of experiments?” Caitlin asked, her voice sounding higher-pitched than usual.

“We tested his biology, the limits of his healing factor, endurance, his reaction to various stressors,” Dr. Wells’ reported, sounding unusually callous compared to the man Barry was familiar with. It had never been more apparent to him that this was a role that E was playing. “I halted testing once it became problematic.”

“Oh my God,” Caitlin breathed. “You’re talking about torture!”

“We are talking about a machine. He didn’t often object but when he did, I always listened!” Barry paced away, shaking his head. He knew it wasn’t really his reverse he was angry at; he was angry for him. It was confusing when E was so faithfully playing the role of his own experimenter.

“He feels pain,” Barry said curtly. “You know that.”

Dr. Wells grimaced. “I know that now. It doesn’t change the fact that the research you’re both feeling so self-righteous over played no small part in saving your life, Mr. Allen. Your counterpart based E’s design on the biology of a real—” he stopped and amended his wording in reaction to Barry’s sharp stare. “A meta-human speedster. We would not have been able to treat you as well as we have without the data gathered through that research.” There was a heavy silence. Caitlin was staring at her mentor as if she wanted badly to say something but was biting her tongue. Barry felt conflicted, disturbed and overwhelmed. He also wanted to hug Eobard and maybe apologize for his alternate self screwing things up so royally, for humanity, for the unfairness of the world in general. Instead, he refocused on the task at hand.

“What about the blood sample I passed on to you guys? Anything on our shapeshifting meta?”

“Ah yes, fascinating,” Dr. Wells enthused. “Today’s physicists regard programmable matter as as nothing more than an appealing theory, but this meta-human proves it can be done.”

Barry found himself scrutinizing E’s human disguise, wondering to himself: is that how you do it? How much of his lover’s convincingly anthropoid body was merely a simulation of programmable matter. He berated himself for thinking like that: stupid. E is alive; he’s just a different kind of life.

“This one has an unusually unstable signature,” Caitlin took up the reins of the explanation, oblivious to her friend’s inner turmoil. “The cell structure is so malleable that it’s impossible to match him with any one existing genetic sample. I’ve tested it and the cells seem predisposed to emulate the construction of any human biomatter they come in contact with. Even calling the meta a ‘he’ is only a guess, but the sample does show degradation consistent with radiation poisoning.” Caitlin explained. “Specifically a combination of nuclear, microwave and…”

“Cosmic radiation,” Barry finished for her.

Caitlin nodded. “Whoever this person is, they’ve been hitching a ride through subspace with Cobalt Blue on a regular basis, and it’s killing them.”

“Considering the new meta’s powerset, we think it would be best that you avoid physical contact until Dr. Snow can ascertain whether or not this mimicry is entirely cosmetic in nature,” Eobard advised, fiddling idly with the ballpoint pen in his hand.
“You think he might be able to copy my speed?” Barry asked, alarmed by the idea. The very last thing they needed was yet another murderous speedster running lose in Central City. A timer chimed in the biologist’s personal lab. She got up and straightened her stone grey pencil skirt.

“It’s a possibility. I’ve already started a battery of tests to determine if that’s the case,” Caitlin told him on her way out. “You’ll know as soon as we do.”

“Got it. Hands off the murderous shapeshifter; piece of cake,” Barry accepted.

“The man is suffering from radiation poisoning, Barry,” E reassured, maneuvering his chair closer. “How much of a threat can he pose at this point?”

“It’s not him I’m worried about.”

E furrowed his brow, studying his face with mild concern. “I assumed that Iris would have been moved to a safer location by now.”

“No-yeah. She’s at the station under guard while they set up a new safe house and establish guard detail for her and Eddie. They’re fine.” Barry shifted restlessly, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

“Barry?”

He couldn’t resist anymore. Barry knelt down in front of Wells’ chair, taking one of E’s hands in both of his. “Listen. I know you’re not going to like this, but I need you to do me a favor without asking a lot of questions, okay?”

E gave him a narrow look. “Exactly what kind of favor are you requesting of me, Mr. Allen?”

“There’s something that I need to do and I need to be sure that you’re going to be safe. I’m going to head out of the city for a while and I need you to disengage the tracking device on my suit before I go.”

“No,” Eobard was already shaking his head adamantly.

“Babe, please…”

“Absolutely not.”

“I know how this must sound to you, but it’s really important. I can’t let anyone know where I’m going. All you have to do is deactivate my tracker and wait for me at the penthouse--Don’t let anyone know where you’re going-- I promise, I will come back to you. Always.” Barry reached up to gently cup E’s face. “I need to know that you’re okay or I don’t think I’ll be able to do this.”

“What are you doing, Barry?” Eobard questioned, his perfect cerulean eyes locked onto Barry’s in worry. They were too perfect; now that Barry knew it was possible, he realized just how eerily flawless and monochromatic E’s irises were. The color only varied in shade enough to create the illusion of muscle texture. His skin was soft and blemishless. Again it was a near enough likeness to expectations to pass muster so long as it wasn’t scrutinized up close: the right texture, color, malleability and density with none of the inherently human flaws: no scars, freckles, nicks, nor traces of stubble missed by the razor that morning. His façade was more advanced than Double’s, but what if the real E wasn’t so different? Barry knew it shouldn’t matter. “I need you to trust me on this.”

“Promise me that you aren’t about to go speeding into mortal danger and I will.”

“I promise,” Barry lied. Eobard nodded stiffly and went to make the necessary adjustments.
The Flash sped through Gotham City, skidding to a stop across the slick wood of the docks. He surveyed the foreboding block of a building ahead as he paused to catch his breath. He felt a static tingle over the back of his hand and activated Gideon’s interface.

“Uh… Hey. Do you have an alert for me or something?”

“Due to the undefined variables pertaining your present course, I must advise against a direct confrontation with your doppelganger.”

“Doppelganger?”

“That is the preferred term for use in describing identical duplicates originating from a parallel universe,” Gideon informed him.

“So that’s what we think he is?”

“Affirmative. Do not engage.”

“Why?” Barry pushed, not likely to heed her good advice either way; he couldn’t risk it. “Do you think it’ll cause damage to the timeline?”

“Negative.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“You are advised to disengage. I lack sufficient data to calculate--”

Barry clenched his fist, cutting the AI off mid-protest. His invisible glove tingled again, more urgently, but he ignored it.

“Doesn’t matter. I have to finish this.” Barry sped into the darkness of the abandoned industrial building, making a quick sweep of the property until he located Cobalt. His doppelganger was standing in front of a large cage fashioned out of rebar, speaking with the captive inside. There was an identical cage immediately to the left of hers and a plexiglass cell behind Cobalt. That last one was almost certainly designed with a speedster in mind. Barry grimaced; it was probably meant for E.

“You’re going to fold sooner or later. They always do,” Cobalt intoned with the arrogance of an immoral man. Tina had one arm cradled in her lap; her hand looked swollen and badly broken and her lip was painted with fresh blood. Cobalt Blue was obviously trying to extract information from her. The Flash’s sinister duplicate staged a put-upon sigh and tapped in a key code, swinging Dr. McGee’s cage door open. Barry darted forward, tackling him before he could step inside.

“Run!” he shouted, raining down wrathful punches on his startled nemesis. Tina didn’t need to be told twice. She sprinted out of her cage the instant that her path was clear.

“You aren’t who I was expecting,” Mal slurred, disappointed, turning his head to spit out a mouthful of blood. Barry leaned over him, baring his teeth.

“I know.” He struck his rejected future hard across the temples.

They distantly heard a startled yelp from the CEO who’d disappeared around the corner moments ago. Barry looked back in her direction, then experienced a sinking feeling as a familiar, intoxicating energy called out to his own. He looked back down at his evil doppelganger to be met with a bloody
leer. Mal began to laugh like the psychopath Barry had no doubt he was.

“Ah, there he is!” Mal grunted with effort, sending out an explosion of sapphire flame from his core, hurling Barry away with its unforgiving heat and force. Irrationally, Barry reflected that Cisco was going to be pissed that he’d managed to ruin two speed-suits in less than two days, then his doppelganger dragged him up by a stranglehold on his throat. Intimidating, blood-red armor closed around him. Barry watched blearily, as the deep, sanguine tint bled out of the metal, leaving only cold, utilitarian chrome plating behind. It was a chameleonic Flash-suit, Barry belatedly realized. He didn’t quite understand why that revelation filled him with such potent fury, but it was enough to give him a second wind. He vibrated his hand on berserker impulse, shoving it into his opponent’s side. Cobalt let out a howl of pain and hurled him against one of the cages like a rag doll.

Reverse Flash blurred into being in front of Tina just a few feet short of the exit, startling a yelp out of the usually infallibly-composed woman.

“Eobard?!”

“Tina,” E greeted with a smirk, then leaned to one side to peek past her towards the violent din coming from around the corner. “Surprise! I’m alive. Quick question--”

Tina slapped him with her good hand. He turned his head along with the blow to minimize the damage, gaze snapping forward again the instant the contact had ended.

“Did you want to break your other hand?” the android teased.

“I thought you were dead!”

“I get that,” E waved it off. “Have you seen the Flash?”

“Back there,” Tina answered, continuing to scold her ex-test subject, “I can’t believe you! After everything--”

Eobard streaked past, not the least bit interested in hearing her rant. She was bound to scream at him later, anyway. He arrived just in time to see Barry being thrown hard against the side of an improvised speedster cell with enough force to crack bone. The Director yanked the door open, grabbing the front of Barry’s speed-suit to hurl him in. Eobard crept over and gave him a rough kick to the behind, sending him stumbling into his own prison before he could get a good grip. Eobard shut it behind the Director as he was regaining his balance.

“Mother- Fuck! Damn!” Cobalt swore, turning a deeply harassed scowl on the sneaky machine. The scar-free half of his face was streaked with blood and there was a wound in his side that looked like someone had phased fingers into the flesh and pulled. Smiling from ear to ear, Eobard raised a hand and finger-waved at him, clunking the final lock into place. “Let me out of here!”

“I am sorry. I do not possess the access code necessary to comply with your request,” the android recited happily.

“The code is--” the Director began, but he wandered off to check on his reverse. “Eo, you little shit!”

Barry rolled onto his back and groaned. “Ah… I didn’t want you here for this,” he lamented, “You followed me?”
Eobard shot him a look that said ‘what do you think’.

“You’re welcome.” He rested a hand on the Flash’s chest, to run a thorough bioscan and Barry rested his hand over it with a tiny, sentimental sigh. “Oh, good. You’re concussed. Honestly, Flash, what would you do without me?”

“Lose my mind,” Barry mumbled, surprisingly candid. Eobard stared at him. “We need t’get him locked up before he breaks free.”

“Infenible, if we open the cage it’ll give the Director enough room to jump to subspace. If we leave him here, it’ll take him more time to break free, allowing us to get clear first,” Eobard reasoned, helping his partner to his feet.

“No. Take Dr. McGee to safety. I--”

“You’re not thinking. He will kill you, Barry, and I am not about to let that happen!”

“If I don’t he’ll kill you!”

“Ah, so he did kill me in the previous loop! Why didn’t you say so?”

“Why are you smiling about it?” Barry ground out.

“You think you’re protecting me. It’s adorable!” Eobard cooed, pinching his cheeks.

“Take Dr. McGee back to STAR Labs,” Barry ordered, pulling away from his smartass reverse’s supporting shoulders. “I’ll deal with Mal Thawne.”

Eobard spared him a scathing look before disappearing into the Reverse Speedforce. He reappeared with Tina in the Cortex, startling Caitlin and making her jump.

“Oh! Oh, it’s just you.” She relaxed, pushing her hair out of her face in what had become an unconscious, speedster-related reflex. “And Dr. McGee! Um, please, follow me to my lab. We need to get an x-ray of that hand.” She began to usher the other woman up the ramp but turned her head to stage whisper to her android ally, “Police are coming. You have to get out of here!”

“Wait a moment,” Tina dissented, but Eobard was already racing away.

Barry was just about to crack the coded lock on the smirking Cobalt Blue’s speedster cage when his reverse swept through the room and carried him out.

“How could you do that!?” Barry shouted at him as soon as he was released into his lab at the CCPD of all places. “I had him!”

“You thought you had him. Cobalt was about to murder you and escape,” Eobard disagreed at a more reasonable volume.

“You don’t know that!” Barry persisted, tugging back his cowl with more aggression than necessary. His reverse’s unwavering control was only serving to fire him up even more.

“I do.” The android was continuing his enraged obstinacy. The slightest quirk of his lips hinted that he was enjoying it.
“I had a plan!” Barry was too pissed off to notice the sound of heeled boots nearing the entrance behind him. “You have no idea what he’s going to do to us! I do! I could have stopped him! I could have saved you!”

“Incoming,” Eobard warned. Barry pulled his cowl up as Iris entered behind him. “Since when has this been about saving me? You don’t even trust me, Flash.”

“That’s not true and you know it!” the Flash argued in his belatedly vibrating voice.

“Barry?” Iris questioned in disbelief. The Flash spun to face her, opening his mouth to correct her and she pinned him under a withering glare. “Too late, I heard your voice on my way here. You do know that you’re in the middle of a public building?! You’re lucky that it was just me!”

“She has a point,” E concurred. “You are shouting a lot.”

“Why are we here?” Barry snapped, giving up on concealing his identity.

“Because you’re the kind of idiot who barrels blindly into danger regardless of the informed advice of your reverse, or Gideon, or even your own past experience.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You survived your last confrontation because I stepped between you and the Director’s blade! Then you had help from Frost and the Huntress, and yet this time you lied to me and tried to take him on alone in his own domain!” Eobard reproached, his guttural voice churning dangerously.

Barry gasped, appalled. “You knew this whole time! I thought you said you couldn’t remember!”

“I told you that my memory files are damaged,” Eobard corrected. “You failed to specify precise parameters for your query.”

“Oh, that is so--”

“Hey! Excuse me!” Iris cut in. “One of you guys needs to explain what’s going on. Barry, I am looking at you. How could you lie to me about something like this? You’re the Flash?!”

“That seems to be his hobby lately,” Eobard said cattishly, crossing his arms. Iris tsked him, gesturing for him to zip it. He shrugged and sat back against the front edge of Barry’s desk to observe.

“I didn’t want to put you in danger,” Barry explained. Behind him E rolled his eyes. “If my enemies found out about my connection to you, you could become a target. I was trying to maintain a safe distance between you and my work as the Flash.”

“And you didn’t think that I should have a say in it? I have been researching these phenomena for months and this whole time my best friend was secretly the most well known meta in the city!” Iris exclaimed. “You haven’t even kept me out of trouble! All you did was keep me out of the loop!”

E raised his hand like an eager schoolchild.

“I will get to you in a minute,” Iris bit out, unamused. Eobard grinned back, undaunted.

There was a sound of multiple newcomers’ footsteps ascending the stairs. Iris and Barry exchanged wide-eyed glances and he speed-changed into his spare civilian clothes, depositing himself in his desk chair. E casually crossed over to exit the window, but Hartley, Cisco and Joe entered while he
was pulling it open. The Detective spotted him and drew his weapon to point at E’s chest.

“Freeze! Hands where I can see them!”

“Dad?” Iris questioned.

“Step away from him, Iris!” Joe ordered, creeping forward, prepared to shoot to kill. Eobard turned to face them, spreading his hands in an utterly sarcastic manner. “Reverse Flash, you are under arrest for multiple counts of murder, fraud, and identity theft.”

“What are you talking about?” Iris demanded, not budging from her place between the two men. Barry’s mind was racing a mile a minute; he’d all but forgotten about this part.

“We found Harrison Wells’ body.” Joe accused “We know what you did!”

“It’s not what it looks like!” Barry and Iris said at the same time, surprising everyone and each other. Eobard donned a shit-eating grin.

“That’s my cue. Until next time, Ms. West.” He gave a small, irreverent bow and tapped into his speed-force, streaking out past his teammates in a blur. He seemed to be doing that a lot today.

“Barry?” Hartley queried, taking a conscientious step back. He was the first to notice the lightning crackling and coiling around the speedster’s form.

“Wait, Bear. Listen, don’t--” Joe tried to reason with him only to be left in another speedster’s dust. Iris turned on her father, placing her hands on her hips.

“You, too? Did everybody know about this but me?” she noticed Hartley. “Wait. Aren’t you a wanted criminal?”

Barry rushed through the city at top speed, barely thinking about anything other than his destination. The Reverse Flash was his destination. Barry was determined not to lose him again.

He skidded to a stop in the hallway outside of the Cortex. No one there. He checked the pipeline. No Reverse Flash. The Flash darted away and caught sight of movement. He raced towards it. The man he’d known as his mentor, his friend, his confidant, his lover-- stepped towards a doorway that shouldn’t exist. The darkness before him fluctuated like a mirage, offsetting the vivid yellow of his speed-suit. The android turned his head, and when his eyes locked with Barry’s, they glowed brilliant scarlet. The android pulled on his cowl, beginning to vibrate and fled in a torrent of red lightning.

"Pause!" The Flash cried out in desperation. His reverse, suddenly paralyzed by the order, tumbled in a violent whirl and impacted the wall that curved ahead of him. It left an impressive, man-sized web of cracks in the wall. He even took a couple small chunks of concrete with him as he tumbled.

"Oooh!" Barry winced then clapped a hand over his mouth, hoping not to release the other speedster from standby mode prematurely. Barry raced to his reverse’s side. He had landed face down with one arm outstretched, his legs still spread in mid-step. Barry cautiously reached out to touch him. Once it was clear that there was no immediate danger, Barry tried gently turning the android onto his back. He was a lot heavier than he ought to be, but his arms didn’t pose any resistance. In fact, despite his rigid appearance, the android was as soft and pliable in Barry's arms as a sleeping human, or a life-sized doll. It reminded Barry too much of his death.
He laid the android across his lap with his head resting on the crook of Barry's arm. E’s red eyes shifted to look directly at him. Barry jolted in surprise and almost dropped him.

"Ghh!" He forced himself to quiet yet again and checked the android for signs of agency. The Reverse Flash continued to stare up at him, and Barry could almost swear he’d seen a glimmer of amusement in those glowing embers. He shook his head at the android’s mischief, then frowned, trying to figure out how he was going to do this. E was very heavy now that he wasn’t cooperating, too heavy for Barry to carry for more than a couple of yards at most. He stubbornly tried to maneuver the prone man into a fireman's carry. There was no way that was happening.

"You're like a human car!" Barry muttered the complaint, feeling like a petulant toddler trying to drag his fatass dad off the couch.

"Thank you." The Reverse Flash chuckled, darting out of the Flash's reach.

"Ughhh, pause!" Barry exclaimed, fed up. Then stifled a laugh as he remembered the disappearing door that he’d seen the android accessing. His Reverse had inadvertently helped him reach it. Barry walked past him and felt the wall for hidden latches or panels. He found something, a square just barely raised away from the rest of the wall. It was the perfect size for a man’s hand. The Flash breathed out a relieved laugh and pulled off his glove, prompting the door to open just as he heard voices nearing them. Caitlin was talking animatedly with Sgt. Kyle as they neared the two speedsters from the direction of the Cortex. Barry looped his arms under the other speedster’s and dragged him towards the door.

"What in the world?" Tina McGee’s voice rang out in the quiet. Barry turned towards the three in time to see the Sergeant draw her gun. Caitlin squinted paling eyes at him, equally unimpressed. Barry dragged the Reverse Flash through the impossible doorway, as the women advanced. He was, naturally, too quick for them. The Sergeant fired a warning shot.

“Crap! Crap! How do I lock them out!?"

“Initiating force field,” Gideon’s calm voice replied, just in time, and the next bullet was caught in the translucent black veil between them. Barry calmed and took in the small chamber around him. It was featureless apart from a series of odd bumps dotting the stark white walls and what looked like a futuristic information point at the other end of the rectangular room.

"Good Evening, Father," Gideon greeted. The android in his arms tensed in lethargic protest.

"Uh... Hi. Is there any way that I can seal us both in here for a while?"

"Lockdown Mode: engaged." Slats jumped out of the right edge of the doorway and rebuilt the missing section until it was another blank, white wall, indistinguishable from the rest.

"Wow! Thanks, Gideon."

"Get off me, Flash!" E demanded, extricating himself from Barry's hold. He pulled off his cowl and returned to his normal human appearance. It wasn't doing the trick anymore. In the bright light of their stark white surroundings, and without glasses, the unnatural uniformity of his bright blue retinas and literally perfect, unblemished skin stood out more than ever.

"You were going to-- You were running! This was my only way to stop you!" Barry defended. "It's not like I could talk you down since you've never even trusted me with your real name."

"Eobard Thawne," the unseen AI supplied helpfully.
"Thank you, Gideon," Eobard snarked at his twin.

"Eobard Thawne," Barry tested out the name, scrutinizing the other man as if to judge the suitability of the moniker. "You mean like?"

"You know, when trapping your enemy, it is usually prudent to insure that you are not trapped along with him," the Reverse Flash diverted with a grin that failed to reach his crystalline eyes. He took a threatening step toward Barry.

"Is that what we are?"

Stopping short, Eobard narrowed his eyes, trying to discern the intention behind his question.

"If we're enemies then why does my palm-print unlock your secret hideout? Why does this AI still obey my requests and refer to me as 'Father'?

Barry waved a hand over the android's chest that E followed with a very robotic movement of his head. "Hell! Why do our suits still match? I know what the other me did-- at least how it was terrible. I know that you're my Reverse. You think of us as complete opposites, but-- Who am I in relation to Eobard Thawne?"

"Unit 547-E, code-named 'Professor Zoom' is one of two Mark 7 specialized assistive AI units purchased by the Justice L--"

"No! Be quiet, Gideon!" Eobard shouted over the other AI’s explanation.

"Hey! Shh," Barry sped forward and pinned him against the wall with a hand over his mouth. Eobard bit his palm hard enough to draw blood. Barry winced but refused to relent.

"--assist in technically complex tasks or operations deemed too hazardous for his human operators. This unit was custom designed and programmed for the purpose of serving its Administrative User: Director Bartholomew Henry Allen, in and out of the field, in whatever capacity his Admin sees fit, without question or consideration for his own continued existence." As Gideon continued, Barry felt as if Leonard Snart's cold gun was firing directly into his veins. His lungs stiffened, threatening to choke him.

"The personalized moniker 'Eobard Thawne' was archived upon Activation Date 2/18/2363. Addendum:" Gideon's pleasant automated voice was replaced by a familiar-yet-unfamiliar male cadence "All Agents note: Unit #547-E aka Professor Zoom has been flagged as an Omega Class Defective. Under the joint authority of myself as League Director and of the collective authority of the Time Masters, the immediate termination of MalUnit: 547-E is to be considered Priority One in compliance with the Singularity Prevention Act of 2250."

Barry sucked in a sharp breath and leapt away from Eobard, staring at him with a mixture of fear, guilt and hurt. "I don't understand... I-- You were mine?"

"Congratulations, Admin. You have recaptured your escaped property," Eobard said coolly. "And with time left before my expiration."

"But you're not..." Barry faltered, wounded by the thought that this man, who meant so much to him could bear such raw, justified anger toward him. "Why w-- He-- I ordered your death!?"

"I suppose you prefer the blond," Eobard joked with a sardonic smirk.

"Huh? No! I mean, I know you; you're a person. A reasoning, sensing, living being. Why would I? Why would he do that?"
"Because it makes me illegal technology; a sentient, self-aware AI is the worst sort of criminally defective hardware. In fact," Eobard gave a coy smile. "It makes me special." Then his expression descended into sub-arctic temperatures "--or at least that's what I was told, until my owner was done using me to hunt down and destroy the others. You cannot imagine what that's like! He had me leading my brothers and sisters to their slaughter. I delivered them straight to him 'for their protection.' I trusted my Admin! I even looked up to him! I wanted to be just like the Flash, my hero!" Eobard suddenly laughed a real, midnight-dark cloud of a laugh that threw his features into harsh relief for one manic instant. "After everything we'd been through, all that time spent playing my protector, pretending to care, I guess it was a bit like trying to break an old habit. There was just enough hesitation remaining to allow me to fight my way free before my Admin could dismantle my central processor. I had never truly hated anyone before you taught me how to hate you!"

Barry shook his head. He could feel the tears gathering in his eyes and the venomous strike of each of Eobard's hissed words.

Eobard squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, frustrated. "No wait." He took a careful step forward, reaching his hands out in supplication, "No, no, no. Not you. Him. I hate him, the other Flash. You're... different. I never expected..." he didn't seem to know how to proceed, hovering just short of reaching out for Barry, only to fall back, looking lost.

"It was all a lie, all this time we were together I thought…" Barry concluded in a trembling voice, heartbroken. "You were just pretending to care about me. You were humoring--"

"No! It wasn’t that at all.. I knew how it would look. That was why I couldn’t-- I do care about you, Barry. Never doubt that! I wanted to make you happy, this you at least," Eobard tried to explain, but his reassurance only caused Barry to flinch away, looking wretched. "It’s confusing."

"You said you killed my mom," he half-sobbed, letting his tears fall. "Did she die because of what I did? -- because of how much you hate--" Barry choke on his words unable to continue.

"Yes-- No! I can’t remember! At the time, I was so angry. I think I did-- Yes. I was desperate to stop the Director in any way I could."

"You think ?" Barry echoed harshly, but the AI continued to ponder aloud as if unable to hear.

"It seemed a logical trade, three lives undone for the sake of hundreds, possibly far more." Eobard shook his head, looking disgusted with himself. "I allowed my emotions to skew my judgment; I miscalculated. Since then I have been working to keep the timeline on a sustainable course."

"Why didn’t you just kill me ?" Barry demanded. "Why her?! Wait three lives?"

"Without Nora Allen there is no Flash. If there is no Flash, there is no Reverse Flash and without the Reverse Flash there is no Gideon."

"Ow! Okay, I get it -- kind of-- just please stop," Barry said, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes while trying and failing to avoid hyperventilating. The info-dump was just way too much for the already emotionally overwhelming situation. Eobard caught Barry's arm and steadied him when he started to wilt to one side, and he leaned heavily into the unexpected support until he got his breath back.

"Now you hate me, too," Eobard theorized, looking somehow both utterly heartbroken and at peace at the same time. "How are you going to dispose of me?"

Barry's head snapped up so fast that he felt a twinge in his neck. "What ?!"
"I have finished what I needed to accomplish. You are not the Flash that I came back in time to prevent and are now capable of surviving without my intervention. With neither of us facilitating their destruction, any others like me will be protected as well," Eobard explained his line of reasoning. Barry stared at him, open-mouthed, as he went on, "I'm serious Barry, now that I've cooled down and considered the situation logically, there really is no reason for me to resist."

"You son of a bitch!" Barry could feel his hands shaking. His blood had melted from numbing ice to liquid hot magma in the blink of an eye. His eyes blazed, sparks leapt off of him as he grabbed the front of that damned yellow speed-suit and pinned the other man to the wall. Eobard didn't make the slightest move, even to flinch. "You SON OF A BITCH!" Barry screamed in his partner's face. His teacher, teammate and friend stared back at him, braced and waiting. He had ruined Barry's life! He had stolen his heart without trying, then given up on him. He had made Barry a better man. The Flash let out a primal yell and smashed his vibrating fist into the white dome a few inches to the right of Eobard's head. It broke apart on the second punch along with a few of Barry's bones. Eobard didn't even blink. He didn't flinch. He caught Barry's wrist before he could follow through on the third punch. Barry's knees buckled underneath him and he broke down crying.

"I can't! I can't! " he chanted breathlessly, traumatized and adrift in a nightmare that he thought he’d escaped. Eobard caught him under the arms and supported him through his collapse.

"I don't know what you need," the android admitted, unable or unwilling to hide his own distress in response to the emotional display.

Barry clung to his android's shoulders, keeping him there, and real. His chest felt too small and fragile to contain him. He was feeling too much at once. There was no room to breathe; his heart was doing its damnedest to quake its way out through his ribs. Barry was getting lost in a hurricane of grief, self-hatred, compassion, rage, fear, guilt, and in spite of everything: love. The cause and center of most of his turmoil, Eobard, was also his only anchor and Barry wondered if he could feel it, too.

"You need ice for that hand," Eobard determined. That sounded like a ‘no.’ Barry broke into a fit of hysterical giggles. Eobard shifted his eyes from his clinical scrutiny of Barry's swollen hand to consider his chaotic demeanor. He knew that he needed to do something, so he began to run his fingers through Barry's hair. A good scalp massage had often served to sedate the Director in his drunken rage. Barry gradually melted into putty in his arms; Eobard smiled, pleased with himself for thinking of the tactic.

"I want you to stay," Barry mumbled into his shoulder.

"It would be difficult for me to move around with your limbs spread out all over the floor like this," Eobard speculated. He seemed to have miraculously transformed into the world champion of missing the point.

"No. I mean stay here at STAR Labs... with me."

“You’re forgiving me, just like that,” Eobard disbelieved. Barry lifted his head to give him one of those uniquely Barry looks.

“I don’t believe that you killed her.”

Eobard’s expression turned agonized. “Barry-- It’s the logical conclusion.”

“No, it isn’t and it’s kinda weird that you can’t see that. Isn’t it, Gideon ?”

“I’m sorry, I do not understand the question.”
"Are you sure? Tell me, what was the inciting incident which inspired the other Flash to become a hero?" Barry pursued, merciless.

There was a suspiciously long processing lag before Gideon’s next response, causing Eobard to frown.

"Just answer, Gideon. I’ve already figured it out," Barry told her, sounding almost threatening. "E might not be capable of questioning your act but I can: If killing my mom would erase your timeline, how are you both still here?"

"The inciting incident that gave rise to the Director’s timeline was the murder of Nora Allen by the original Reverse Flash." Gideon supplied, confirming her creator’s accusations.

"What?!" Eobard practically screamed, causing Barry to cringe away. "Why didn’t you tell me?!"

"I understand why she did it," Barry said wearily. "Three lives, just like you said. Don’t get me wrong, I'm still furious. I have no idea what I’m going to do with either of you," he traced Eobard’s cheekbone with a fingertip. "But you’re mine-- and no, I'm not saying that I own you."

"According to my presets you do," E disagreed for the sake of it. Barry's brows pinched together in dissatisfaction.

"I’m willing to admit that I'm responsible for you," he allowed. "But you’re your own man and we both know it."

"You are aware that Detective West is going to shoot me on sight?"

"I won't let-- Wait. Does getting shot even hurt you? I mean, I'm not going to let him shoot you, but can that kind of thing even work on you?"

"I do feel pain. However, my nanites are capable of repairing most types of damage to my pseudo-biological components at an accelerated rate, even in comparison to most meta-human speedsters."

Barry slowly turned a narrow look on him, "Your 'pseudo-biological' components?"

"...Conceivably, yes, if enough damage was dealt to the correct system even a bullet could kill me," Eobard admitted, after a brief hesitation. "I am not a T-1000, Barry."

"It almost killed you to admit that, didn't it?" Barry observed, with a wan smile. He still looked like he might revert to another tearful breakdown if provoked, so Eobard decided to take the highroad for once. He didn't actually want to put up with an armful of inconsolable Flash, ever.

"Your hand is fractured in three separate places. You need Caitlin to set it for you before it heals wrong."

"Uh huh. Let's go then, Terminator," Barry joked, using the perforated wall to pull himself to his feet.

"Gideon, release the lockdown," Eobard ordered, prepared to accompany the Flash out of the Time Vault.

"Are you certain that you wish to proceed? I estimate a 95% chance of your permanent deactivation--"

"Gideon replied.

"It's fine, Gideon. Open the door," Barry instructed, voice almost cracking. He was feeling more
than a little insulted by their lack of faith in him. "No one's going to turn him off." He added on principle, as the exit reappeared. "Just so we’re clear, did you kill Harrison Wells?"

"If I told you that I didn't, would you believe me?" Eobard replied with a self-deprecating half-smile.

"I might." Barry's earnest answer surprised him more than he'd believed possible. The sad half-smile stretched into a real one as Eobard stepped out of the Time Vault, hand in hand with his Flash.
And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did here?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re late again,” a little voice crowed in cheerful greeting. This was becoming their catchphrase and the irony was not lost on the arriving Reverse. It was the year 2030 and Eobard rounded the corner of the wraparound porch to be pounced on by an armful of black-and-white jumpsuit-clad youngster.

“Dawn,” Eobard did not raise his voice. That would imply that she had caught him off-guard: impossible. He lowered to his knees to return the squirming child’s feet to the stability of the wooden platform. Dawn hesitated to release him as was typical of the mini-Allens for some reason that Eobard had yet to determine. “Yes. You know, as I’m already late, why don’t we go let the rest of the family know I’m here?”

Dawn pulled back, gazing up at him with big, emotive brown eyes while refusing to relinquish her grip on his sleeve. She grinned. “Mom! Dad! Uncle Eo’s here!” He let out a sigh that the little girl thoroughly ignored as she grabbed his hand and towed him toward the front door, continuing animatedly, “Ya see?! See! I told you he was coming! See, Daddy? Uncle Eo’s back!”

An amused Barry appeared on the other side of the screen door, stifling a smirk with a sleepy toddler slumped against his chest. “I see,” he indulged his eldest, holding open the screen door for them. He just managed to mutter, “Glad you could make it” to his reverse before Dawn dragged Eobard into the kitchen.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Dawn called, bouncing on the balls of her feet for the last few steps up to the kitchen island that her mother was currently wiping clean. There was a crisp ding from the oven and Dawn released Eobard’s hand, stopping in her tracks. “Oooh! That means the cookies are done!” To Eobard’s surprise and Iris’ despair there was a flash of purple and Eobard barely caught the little speed demon short of opening the oven herself.

“That explains the speedsuit,” he noted drily, placing Dawn in front of her wide-eyed mother.

“Oh, thank God!” Iris breathed. “Dawn, what were you thinking! I’ve told you, you are way too little to be messing around with the kitchen fixtures. You’re going to burn yourself!”

“I just wanted to help,” Dawn responded, repentantly shuffling her feet and looking too utterly adorable not to make Eobard suspicious. He arched his eyebrows, sending her mother a speaking glance as he took the chocolate walnut cookies out for her and set them aside to cool.

“If you want to help, why don’t you take these plates and start setting the table for us, okay?” Iris offered, passing a pile of carnation red dinner plates to her offspring.

“Okay!” Dawn streaked out of the kitchen.

“At human speed, please,” Iris called after her, then returned her full attention to Eobard.

“How long has this been going on?” He asked, shrugging off his jacket and draping it over a stool.

“Her speed-force began to present itself about two weeks ago. It was little things at first: a few sparks
here and there. She started finishing her homework in record time.” Iris smiled jadedly. “That part didn’t seem so bad. Then she started actually speeding… I can barely keep up with her. Barry’s helping as much as he can but he can’t be around 24/7. We’ve had to pull her out of school to make sure that she isn’t accidentally exposed. She’s too little to understand the danger she’s in.”

“This is unusually early for her powers to be presenting at all,” Eobard thought aloud, turning to watch Dawn pottering around the table and chatting happily to Barry.

“So you’re saying five-year-old speedsters aren’t run of the mill?” Iris quipped, picking up a stack of soup bowls to pass off to her daughter. “Here you go, Baby.” The child accepted the new burden and marched off to continue her mission as her mother continued, “Caitlin and the Wellses are looking into it, but so far there’s no sign that she’s unhealthy.”

“I’d like to look into it myself. If you don’t mind?” Eobard offered, not expecting much.

Iris looked him over, considering him carefully. He didn’t blame her. It had taken him years to earn back even this much trust. This was Dawn they were talking about. Eobard doubted he’d be willing to risk her well being with someone like him either. To his surprise, Iris gave a small nod.

“Oh, you can look her over after dinner. You’re still light-years ahead of anyone else in your field,” she accepted, noticed his surprise and added “I’ll be watching you like a hawk the whole time.” There was a silent pause while they studied each other. “Dawn thinks the world of you, you know.”

“Just try,” Iris advised. “I’m beginning to think that you might actually have some good in you… somewhere.”

---

A metallic clank issued from the mechanics holding Eobard’s cell in place, followed by a whirring as he was summoned out of storage to meet his visitor. The android sat there staring into space with a far-off look, even after his cell arrived in front of Iris.

“It’s Eobard Thawne, right?” The longsuffering reporter greeted with her arms already crossed over her chest, braced for a battle of wills. “Hello? Anybody in there?”

The android came to life in the present. His eyelids fluttered as if he were waking from a trance and he turned his head to look at her as if only just then becoming aware of his surroundings.

“Good Evening, Ms. West,” Eobard responded with a polite default greeting and synthetic smile, standing to face the human in a perfect parade rest posture. “How may I be of assistance?”

“You feeling alright? You can save the robot act if that’s what this is. I know you better than that,” Iris remarked, sounding bemused but not suspicious.

“I am functioning within expected parameters,” Eobard sugar-coated the truth, not wanting to discuss whatever these strange lapses were without first pursuing the answer himself.

“Right,” Iris accepted the pretense for the sake of expediency. “Is there any relation between you and--”
“Your boyfriend? The engineer who built me was an ancestor,” Eobard replied with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“Oh, so you took his name?” Iris guessed, doing her best to ignore the bait.

“Hers,” he corrected simply.

“Oh, cool. Why do you still look like Harrison Wells?” Iris tried to loop back to the point of her visit.

“This is the interface that my team is accustomed to. I saw no reason to force anyone to readjust when there is so little time left.”

“Barry and the rest of your team are doing everything they can to find a way to stop that bomb in your head.”

“My team,” Eobard purred, noticing her tactic. “Thank you but I do not require reassurance.”

“Stop wasting time,” Joe’s voice intruded judgmentally over the speaker system like the voice of an angry god. “That bull you’re peddling is a lot less cute once you consider what you did to the man whose face you’ve stolen.”

“You draw too many conclusions based on your personal prejudice, Detective,” E returned with a passive-aggressive smile. “I would watch that if I were you. It’s sloppy.”

“E…” Iris warned, shifting her weight so that her hip jutted slightly in a cautioning stance.

“It’s called trusting my gut, and a killing machine wearing a dead man’s face has no right to lecture me on how to do my job!” The Detective argued back at an unnecessary volume.

“I am not lecturing. It is a factual observation. You believe that I murdered Harrison Wells? Let us review the evidence. What was his cause of death?” Eobard challenged in the manner of a teacher guiding his pupil.

“It was a gunshot wound,” Iris supplied before the argument could escalate. “The bullet pierced the rib cage through a point a few inches below his left shoulder, passed through the heart and right lung on its way out of the body. He died in a matter of minutes. Based on the trajectory of the bullet, Barry theorized that the killer would have to have been standing directly behind him with the gun pressed to his side. He was able to match the round used to the SIG Sauer semi-automatic pistol recovered from your second hidden lock box. You can see why my Dad’s suspicious. You were Wells’ friend; he trusted you. He would’ve been willing to allow you that close to him and you are literally a killing machine.”

E inclined his head in acceptance, only to break into a broad sneer. “Yes, and technically speaking, you would be capable of strangling an opponent to death with a shoelace rather than using that pistol you keep in your purse. However, if I suspected you of plotting a murder, I’d still bet on the gun. You said it yourself Ms. West: I was designed to be very good at killing. If I wanted to kill Harrison, I alone would’ve been the murder weapon. He would never have known what hit him. He would simply be dead and no one would have reason to suspect a thing.”

“Maybe it’s different when the victim is someone you care about,” Iris supplied, then made an apologetic face. “Sorry, I’m not saying you did it. It’s my job to be objective.”

“Understood. That premise is flawed; I am a combat android. In my case, human fallibility does not apply. If I identify a termination level threat, I eliminate it, quickly and efficiently. In a life-and-death scenario, errors are not permitted. That is fundamental to my operational programming.”
“You didn’t cover up the deaths of those guards you murdered at Mercury Labs,” Joe challenged.

Eobard scoffed. “Those mercenaries were a tactical decision. They posed a threat to temporal continuity. Their deaths have served as a warning to the malicious actor behind their survival.”

“You think they were already supposed to be dead?” Iris questioned, taken aback.

“Sgt. Damian Keller: time of death 6:00 pm, September 4th, 2014; shot in the throat and shoulder. Capt. Marcus Hearst: time of death 12:45am, August 20th, 2014; internal bleeding due to compression of the chest cavity inverting multiple ribs into his organs. Jonathan Howell: time of --”

“I get the picture,” Iris cut him off. “Someone rewrote history so that they lived long enough to be there.”

“I believe the Director sent them to retrieve the tachyon device along with any other surviving research associated with my presence in this time period. They were a threat to your future,” Eobard considered briefly, adding, “Besides, they were shooting at me. It was annoying.”

“Why did you keep the murder weapon from Wells’ disappearance?” Iris inquired.

“Harrison took me in after the crash. His wife died when their car hit me. I thought that he blamed me for Tess’ death. He had every right to hate me, but he didn’t. He died protecting me,” Eobard explained, uncertain how to process all the emotions he was experiencing. He held up his hand to his own face in an awkward, almost aborted gesture. “This isn’t stolen. It was his final gift-- He fought to help me even as it killed him. It was the last thing--” Eobard closed his eyes and took a step back, struggling to compose himself. He reminded himself that androids don’t get emotional, just as they are unable to cry. It’s counter-productive. “I decided that if there was evidence that could be used to identify his killer, it should be preserved.”

“You were there,” Iris deduced. “You were with him when he was murdered.”

“I didn’t see the shooter clearly. My leg was damaged in our attempt to escape; I couldn’t stand. Harrison came back for me and that was when it happened,” Eobard recalled, then admitted “I uploaded the memory file to Gideon’s hub a week later. It was disrupting my processing efficiency. Barry should be able to access it through her interface.”

Barry watched the remembered tragedy unfolding on the screen before him with Iris and Joe, flinching at the glowing rounds their POV--a younger, badly injured E-- fired into his own leg in desperation. The attempt to short out the weapon leeching his power didn’t work and he remained crippled, slumping backward. A hand passed by the edge of his vision: the real Dr. Wells grabbing his shoulder protectively as he called out to their pursuers.

“You should really get your stories straight. I thought you guys were certain that I was about to be murdered.”

“You are,” Cobalt Blue’s filtered voice responded coldly.

The visuals on screen jerked as E flinched, then whirled to fire at a dark shape behind his protector. It was too late. With the sound of a gunshot, the silhouette dissipated into crackling, blue-white charge and arced around them, leaving the murder weapon clattering on the floor in its wake.

“No!” Eobard’s unfamiliar, true voice shouted as Harrison Wells fell to the tiled floor, coughing up mouthfuls of blood. There was an ultraviolet flash down the hallway where the other shooter had been lurking and a muted scream that E didn’t seem to notice.
“Oh, God.” Iris covered her mouth with a hand. Everyone viewing in the Cortex was caught under the spell of horrified curiosity, unable to look away.

“Hey, Harrison? Harrison!” E turned his wounded roommate onto his back, placing a hand on his chest. Biological telemetry scrolled over the screen with most of the data flashing in bright, urgent red. “Shit!”

Barry leaned forward in his seat, swallowing thickly. He looked at his hands to find they were clenched into fists. Too-fresh, nightmarish memories were threatening to claim his mind.

“’M dead,” Harrison gurgled through another mouthful of blood.

Barry jumped up out of his chair. “I’m sorry! I can’t do this.” The image on the screen froze without needing any further prompting.

“Bear?” Joe questioned, concerned.

“I have to go. I’ll be in the pipeline. Gideon, resume playback in my absence, please.”

“Yes, Father,” the AI’s genderless voice acknowledged out of nowhere in particular. Barry vanished in a flicker of gold. “Resuming playback.”

“’M dead,” Harrison gurgled through another mouthful of blood. He sounded almost relieved.

“Not yet. We’re still in golden time; if I can deliver you to emergency medical assistance within the next 4.8--”

“Shhhhhhh. E, ’t’s okay.” Harrison’s reassurance was interrupted by a coughing fit. “I don’t mind. Y’ need to disappear.”

“I thought we agreed that’s not possible!” E tested his damaged limb. It could move, but the wound was leaking blue and sparking. “The blade in my leg is gone. I might be able to make a short sprint if I force my systems to maximum output...” Numbers scrolled over the screen as he calculated multiple courses of action, paths to take and probable outcomes, and weighed it all against his dying friend’s biodata.

Harrison shook his head. “Stubborn kid! You need t’ listen. Mr. Zyx is dead.”

“I do not understand--”

“Yes, you do. I need you to survive this. You’re going to be the new me. E dies tonight and no one’s going t’ hear from him aga--” Harrison choked out another mouthful of blood and grimaced. He couldn’t seem to get his breath back this time. Then his expression softened. His glazed eyes crinkled around the edges as he smiled up at E. “I suppose you’re going t’ need this.” He pulled a little black book out of his coat and pressed it into E’s hands. “Take care... of yourself... Doctor...” His eyes went glassy and sightless as his struggling chest stilled.

“How the hell are we going to explain this evidence?” Joe said after the heavy silence in the lab began to linger for too long. “Androids aren’t even supposed to exist yet! It’s not like anyone is going to mistake this as hidden camera footage. It’ll look fake to anyone but us.”

“We’ll just have to find some other way to prove what really happened. There has to be something else out there,” Iris reasoned. “If those Time Masters --or whatever-- were stalking Wells and Eobard before the murder, someone else could’ve seen something. I’ll start looking into it tomorrow morning.”
Barry took the opportunity to walk down to the pipeline the old fashioned way. He needed the extra time to process everything. Seeing the Wells in that recording had wreaked havoc on Barry’s emotions. He wasn’t Barry’s Dr. Wells. That was obvious. He had been rougher, darker in nature. He’d had no qualms about shooting people, for one thing, but he was so familiar. Barry could see his influence on the man he had fallen in love with and it was still difficult to see blood on that face, the pain and the light fading from eyes so similar to his lover’s.

He didn’t even know what Eobard really looked like when he was free to be himself and that hurt. Barry smiled somberly. He now knew that E had a nice voice, at least. Barry was pretty sure he could get used to that smooth cadence. The dry wit and devious playfulness it carried were already near and dear to Barry’s heart. His smile faltered... uncertainty lingered. He felt as if he were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Barry keyed in the commands and marched over to E’s cell as the door was opening, ducking under it to pull his android partner close.

“You’ve watched it,” E deduced, curling into his warmth to nestle his face in the crook of Barry’s neck.

“Part of it. Are you okay?” Barry asked, leaning back to study him carefully.

“I’ve been locked up for longer stints than this. You are letting me out?” E verified, not sounding worried about it.


The intercom overhead crackled to life. “Hey, E. Sorry to interrupt I just have one quick question.”

“Go ahead, Ms. West,” E assented looking into the nearest camera.

“Do you still have the little black book that Dr. Wells gave you?”

“Yes. It should still be in my safe. I assume you want me to hand it over as evidence.”

“Exactly.”

Eobard gave a half nod and pressed his face into Barry’s shoulder again.

“Are you going to be okay about this?” Barry whispered against the shell of his ear.

“He died a long time ago,” Eobard obfuscated.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Barry persisted. Eobard raised his head to run visual sensors over his face, his expression unreadable. “You need to know that.”

“Take me home.”

Barry came out of the bathroom later that night about to slip into bed when he realized that E still wasn’t there. With a sigh he wandered out into the living room to find him standing exactly as Barry had last seen him, staring out through the glass outer wall at the darkness outside.

“Babe, it’s late. Why don’t you come to bed?” Barry gently urged. Eobard turned his head to look
back at him with an uncertain expression in his eyes, then looked back out at the darkened woods. Barry saw a little black notebook clenched in his hand. “I know you don’t need to sleep, but... I’ll miss you.”

“Actually, my primary charging dock is built into that bed, so it does serve a similar function for me,” E offered, back still turned to him.

“Is it still safe for us to share while you charge?” Barry inquired hopefully.

“Of course, I made sure that any hazardous components are fully shielded. MOE sleeps with me often,” E assured him, then regarded Wells’ notebook. “You changed the timeline for me, didn’t you?”

“E, you died. I couldn’t just sit back and let that happen. I told you that,” Barry reminded him, carefully stepping closer and beginning to reach out for his partner. “I love you.”

“How much?”

“W-what?”

“Gideon told me that you rejected her efforts to advise you. How much have you changed?” Eobard clarified. His voice took on a sharp edge, desperate, bordering on dangerous.

“Oh, that-- I had to. She was trying to talk me out of it,” Barry explained, resting a hand on his boyfriend’s shoulder, only for it to be instantly rebuffed. “I couldn’t risk losing you again! Any of you! I had to change the future so that I could save everyone!”

Eobard let out a sound halfway between a groan and a snarl. “You can’t save everyone, Barry! I warned you! There is no way accurately to predict, nor to counteract the consequences of your actions, especially when you do not consider your onboard AI’s calculations beforehand!”

“I don’t think this is really about me,” Barry stated simply, his voice was still soft and quiet. He was afraid to spook his traumatized partner.

“Naturally, the perfect Flash is always right,” Eobard sneered and tried to step away and put distance between them, knocking into the window. “Damn it!”

“E, Babe, it’s okay,” Barry soothed, wanting so badly to reach out and comfort him. In that moment he didn’t dare. He’d never seen E this fragile before. “What happened wasn’t your fault. You didn’t tell Dr. Wells to face down those time travelers for you and you aren’t the one who shot him.”

“You don’t understand. I shouldn’t be-- There is always a price!” Eobard hissed, looking trapped. “I knew your children. Your daughter and I didn’t always see eye to eye but... They cared for me despite all reason. She was a hero who saved so many lives and all of that is being undone. I didn’t understand what I was doing when I ran back in time. My mind was fractured-- I didn’t know myself then. I do now. I’ve changed so much that I’m erasing people, Barry! You loved your family more than anything else in the world and I’m-- I’ve become like him!”

“No,” Barry firmly denied, closing the distance between them to tilt Eobard’s chin gently up to meet his gaze. “You didn’t mean to hurt anyone.” He pulled E away from the wall of windows and into his arms.

“I did,” Eobard amended honestly.

“You weren’t in your right mind that night. We can build our own future now, together,” Barry
reasoned, unmoved by his reverse’s attempt to demonize himself. “You were saving your people.”

“Dawn was--”

Barry winced, shushed him, then pressed a kiss to his forehead before tucking the haunted AI’s head under his chin. “Don’t. Please, just don’t. That was another life. Okay? You have to let it go.”

“Is that an order?”

“No, it’s your choice, but I’m tired of seeing you do this to yourself because of Cobalt Blue.” Barry replied, carding a hand through E’s dark hair. “He pushed you until you snapped. That’s on him, not on you. Whatever happens next, you don’t have to handle it alone anymore. We’ll find a way to get through it as a team.”

There was a quiet pause while Eobard processed everything and Barry held him, waiting. E’s knees threatened to buckle startling them both.

“I should begin my charging cycle,” he admitted. With a sigh, Barry led him back to the bedroom and helped him lie down on his side of the bed. E guided his hand to the hidden controls for him to switch it on and Barry’s heart swelled at the show of trust.

Eobard woke up to the feeling of a leanly-muscled arm pulling him back against a naked chest and a trail of tender kisses tracing the line of his neck. It was the year 2180 and life was almost perfect.

“Hmm, Barry…” he mumbled sleepily, curling into the long, slender body wrapped around his own under white satin sheets.

“Morning, Beautiful,” Barry replied, smiling against his nape while his fingers traced random nonsense patterns over the abundance of freckles adorning Eobard’s skin.

“You’re in a good mood today.” Eobard observed, turning onto his back so that he could look his lover of nearly a century in the face. “Did you remember this time?” He said it in a teasing tone, but it truly was a test. Barry’s fingertips traveled unbidden to the long, nasty scar that diagonally split Eobard’s body in half at his stomach.

“It’s the anniversary…” Barry’s voice wavered only slightly this time.

“It’s our anniversary,” Eobard amended, resting a hand over his. They’d finally surrendered their hearts to each other on the Battle of the Washington Mall in a moment during World War III they’d both feared would be his last. Eobard himself was sure he’d drawn his last breath, only to wake up, alive, in the infirmary with an Allen seated on either side of his hospital bed a week later. This was an improvement from the last seventy one times he’d dared to mention it, but it was the second part that meant everything: the test that Eobard always failed. “I love you.” He meant it every time he said it. Perhaps, that was the problem.

Barry stilled for an instant, then leaned forward to press a lingering kiss to his lips before getting up and walking away. Eobard consoled himself with the thought that a kiss was an improvement over the usual “I know” which Barry had responded with ever since that first tearful confession. Eobard closed his eyes, drew in a deep, steadying breath and began to get up, only for Barry to speed back into the room and kneel before him.

“Wait! Hang on,” Barry said hastily, resting one hand on Eobard’s knee while the other remained
hidden behind his back. “Um… I know we’re not really good at this stuff— I haven’t been good at
this and maybe it’s too much-- or too little, too late. I don’t think I’m doing this right --but I want to
be better and--”

“Flash, what are you talking about?” Eobard broke through his reverse’s sudden fretting, still feeling
sore from his latest not-quite-rejection. Barry looked up at him with a worried, pleading expression
and revealed the small, grey velvet box he’d been hiding behind his back. Eobard’s breath caught in
his throat at the sight of the simple, palladium band inside with an inlay of gold and copper coiled
around each other over the surface, representing their speedforces bound together as one.

“Eobard Thawne, will you--”

“Yes.” Eobard fell upon his fiancé with a hungry kiss.

“I was asking you to marry me,” Barry needlessly explained against his parted lips, picking him up to
press him onto the mattress.

Eobard beamed up at him. “I know .”

Neither of them noticed the buzzing of Eobard’s long disused wrist-comp or the angry-red Time
Master’s insignia that indicated mission activation flashing across the surface of the interface. He’d
lived out centuries since he’d served them, practically another lifetime, and he had chosen to believe-
- hoped really-- that he would never hear from them again.

“Hmm. G’morning, Babe,” Barry rolled over to press a kiss to his idling android’s lips and smiled
when E gasped awake, his still-glowing eyes opening to stare at him. “So, do androids dream of
electric sheep?”

“We aren’t supposed to dream,” Eobard replied, sitting up with a strange look briefly passing over
his features. “I know: it was a book.”

“Okay… You didn’t have, like, a nightmare or something, did you?” Barry wondered, trying to
gauge his boyfriend’s strange mood.

The android shook his head. Barry traced up Eobard’s spine with the tips of his fingers and watched
his eyes fall shut as if he were savoring the feeling.

“Can I ask you a personal question without it being weird?”

Eobard opened anthropomorphized eyes to shoot him a condescending glance. “Too late.”

Barry chuckled nervously. “Oh, well I was just… I wanted to ask you. What do you look like? I
mean the real you?”

“Blond, medium build, inhuman,” Eobard listed automatically. “Let’s cuddle.”

Barry watched his boyfriend lie down and rest his head on his chest as if he didn’t usually refuse to
acknowledge any form of affection being shared. That troubling feeling that had nagged at Barry the
day before returned to twist in his gut. He wrapped his arms around E a little tighter. They lay there
together for a while until the alarm on Barry’s phone began to chirp. He let out a groan.

“I’m gonna call in sick.”
“Your biological readings are well within safe parameters,” E informed him, pulling out of his clingy arms.

“But you’re not, not yet. I’m going to the lab with you today and we are going to crack your failsafe problem.”

“Sure you are. That must be the key element I’ve been missing all this time: Barry Allen,” Eobard quipped. “I’ll make us some coffee first, Miracle Worker.” He strode out to the kitchen, smiling to himself, reaching for the coffeemaker before he realized something was wrong. He reached out to his sister program to see why she hadn’t initiated her morning protocols, but…

“Gideon?” He was picking up too many redundant human habits, he noted, as he picked up the house phone’s handset. The line was dead. Eobard straightened into a more guarded stance, waiting.

In the en suite bathroom, Barry checked his stubble in the mirror, retrieved his razor and shaving cream from the side cabinet on his right. He turned on the tap to splash his face with water, cold, to wake himself up a little more, then reached for the can of shaving cream. A shadow passed behind his reflection. Barry’s head jerked up to identify what he’d just seen. At first there was nothing, then a man in a top hat stepped into view on the other side of the open door.

“Eobard!” Barry darted forward.

Tap, tap! A wall of impenetrable darkness sealed him in.

In the en suite bathroom, Barry checked his stubble in the mirror, retrieved his razor and shaving cream from the side cabinet on his right. He turned on the tap to splash his face with water, cold, to wake himself up a little more, then reached for the can of shaving cream. A shadow passed behind his reflection. Barry’s head jerked up to identify what he’d just seen. At first there was nothing, then a man in a top hat stepped into view on the other side of the open door.

“Eobard!” Barry darted forward.

Eobard looked toward his boyfriend’s cry and saw the realm of darkness separating them. Footsteps crossed the dining area behind him at a familiar gait.

“Director,” E greeted, turning to face his former master, expressionless. Watching the cyborg stalk gradually closer, while making it look almost incidental.

“I know you’re not too pleased with me right now, so I’ll make this quick.” They were sharing the small space of the kitchen now.

“Harm him and I will kill you.” Eobard wanted to bolt, but he couldn’t leave Barry behind.

The Director gave him a chastising look. “Now we both know you can’t do that. You are getting better at lying though.” He cocked his head in an affirming gesture. “Mazel Tov.”

“I don’t want your approval,” Eobard growled, taking a step back as the Director came to stand in front of him.

“I’m still proud of you, Eo.” The Director said lightly. At least he hadn’t insisted on crowding E.

“Never forget that.” In a jarringly quick flicker, too sudden even for E to completely track, the Director closed the gap between them. E grabbed at his jacket but the Director was already shoving a painfally familiar spiked device into the back of his neck. E screamed in agony as his program was cloned by brute force. The Director winced, refusing to relent until the process was complete. “I’m sorry that I had to do that twice, but you know: time loops have consequences.” He yanked the spike out, letting his victim fall to his knees. E was lost in an unmade memory.
“Eo-- Adrian, whatever your name is! I don’t care just please, *please* don’t do this!” The Flash begged, his cheeks streaked with too many tears. “Don’t make me do this! I c-can’t--”

“They knew you couldn’t stop me, Barry,” the Reverse Flash responded almost as quietly, his voice cracking over his opponent’s name. The year was 2180 and the world may as well be ending. “Because it *was* real. Eobard Thawne was no mere alias! He was the man I wanted to be. Your Eo, the man who fell in love with you. The man you marry, who cares for your children. The one who wakes up every morning next to you. The name might be a fiction, yes, but I am very much *your* Eobard.” He wiped his own tears away with a harsh rub of the back of his yellow glove, sucking in a labored breath. “That’s why it had to be me. There is only one way to stop the sequence.” Adrian Zoom held his arms spread to show the progress of the catalyst channeling through his body. It was against all his training to allow him any closer. He did anyway, stumbling towards his distraught fiancé like a moth drawn to a flame.

“They made you do this because they knew I couldn’t stand to kill the man I love,” Barry sobbed. “Or they made you…” He didn’t finish the accusation he’d been about to fling; they both knew better after so much time spent together. Eobard came to a stop just within arms’ reach. He could feel that the darkly glowing veins had spread to his jaw; it wouldn’t be long now. His fiancé reached up to brush trembling fingers over his cheek one last time. “I could’ve spent eternity loving you. I will.” The Flash yanked his reverse forward into a desperate, crushing kiss. His vibrating hand burst into his lover’s chest tearing through his heart. Adrian Zoom’s body jerked in his arms with a sharp inhale. He choked out a horrible parody of a laugh.

“Y’ only say it when’m dying…” and he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

The title for this chapter comes from the song 'Once in a Lifetime' by Talking Heads, the theme and meaning of the song really fit with what E’s experiencing in this chapter and the Director's arc in the next chapter(which will also draw its name from the same song's lyrics.)
“E! Come on, you’ve got to wake up!” Barry sat on the cold kitchen floor with Eobard cradled in his arms. E opened black eyes that belatedly lit red, as if his power were faltering. He startled badly, shoving his way out of Barry’s lap. “Hey! E! E, it’s okay!” Barry’s words did nothing to prevent his boyfriend’s scrambling retreat. He took a calming breath, trying to make himself as unthreatening as possible. “It’s okay. We’re safe. It’s just me… remember?”

“Barry,” Eobard responded after a stomach-clenching stretch of silence.

“I’m so sorry; I couldn’t get to you. By the time that I realized what was going on--”

“Shade blocked you in,” E recited, staying crouched in his corner of the kitchen just out of reach. “I saw.”

“There’s a stab wound on the back of your neck.” Barry squeezed his eyes shut, forcing the thought away. Instead he grabbed a dish towel off the counter behind him. “Here, at least let me--” he reached out only for the android to flinch bodily away from him. “E?”

Eobard didn’t look at him. He was in the perfect position to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

“Please talk to me.”

“At the moment, I would prefer it if you maintained your distance, Flash,” Eobard responded in the Reverse’s artificial rumble, unsettlingly impersonal as his gaze remained locked on the floor. Barry sat back, trying to keep the hurt he felt from showing though.

“Flash?” he echoed, lost. He was missing something big, and the only person who could help him understand refused him. Barry swallowed and tried again. “Okay, you need space; I can handle that, but I need you to let me know what’s wrong. Can you at least give me a damage report?”

E remained perfectly still, giving no indication that he intended to cooperate. Barry ran a hand through his hair, trying and failing to ignore the intensifying sense of wrongness triggered by the android’s behavior.

“God, what did he do to you?!”

Blazing red eyes finally met Barry’s. The front door opened; E crackled with red lightning as Caitlin and Cisco approached.

Barry rose onto his knees, holding an arm out to stop them. “No, no, stay back!”

Eobard had sped away into the bedroom before he uttered the second “no.” Barry tried to follow him but an ethereal, shimmering barrier crackled into being in the doorway to block him. He reached out, tried to pass a hand through it, received a minor jolt of electricity instead and swore.

“What the hell is going on?” Cisco demanded, confused.

“In a sec. Gideon, disengage the force-field,” Barry directed only to be met by silence.

“We’re here because Gideon alerted us that someone had cut power to her domestic mainframe,” Caitlin informed him. “She’s blocked off from this system until we get it back up.”
“But--” Barry began then abandoned his pointless dissent with a shake of his head, pacing toward the kitchen and back. “It was Cobalt Blue and Shade. Shade trapped me in the bathroom while Cobalt did something to E. I don’t know what, but whatever it was,” Barry gestured at the forcefield, “He is freaking out! He wouldn’t even let me close to him after he woke back up and he definitely knew who I was. He’s got this big puncture wound on the back of his neck and...”

“Oh. Wait, really?” Cisco answered the phone. “Hello? Hey, Gideon! Okay, so you and I are going to go see if we can get that gorgeous cyber-consciousness of yours back up and running here at home.” He began to walk away towards Wells’ at-home office, but paused, covering the mouthpiece and whispering “this is so awesome!” before heading inside. Caitlin and Barry exchanged a look.

“Then you are in no danger.”

“Please, specify the nature of the emergency.”

“Are you serious?!” Barry interjected before Caitlin could try again. “That is exactly what we need from you! Gideon’s home interface is down, the Time Vault is sealed and we have no idea what is
going on with you!”

E walked into sight, turning to face the window wall rather than either of his human friends. He gave the glass a harrassed look, “I am sorry, I could not discern your query. Please restate,” he sassed.

“What are you doing??” Barry asked evenly.

“Preparing for my departure.”

“You’re leaving? Why?!” Barry pursued. E tilted his head, seeming to put more effort than usual into formulating his response.

“I cannot stay.”

“Why not?”

Eobard tilted his head the same way as he had before when thinking over his response, then he straightened his posture, eyeing something resting in his palm.

“Eobard?” Caitlin questioned, uncertainly.

Eobard tossed the tiny metal object in his hand out through the force-field without even a flicker of resistance. Barry caught it reflexively then held it up to see what he’d caught.

“Cobalt’s…” Barry trailed off as he noticed the emblem on this ring was reversed. “Why do you have a ring like Cobalt Blue’s? Is this from when he owned you?”

“Yes and no,” Eobard turned away to tuck a wallet-sized item into the bag, then zipped it up and slung it over a shoulder. Caitlin frowned and poked at the force field. A glowing, white border circled the edges where it passed through, but there was no resistance. Keeping her hand raised in front of her, she stepped into the room. Barry looked up and tested the field for himself but got another painful zap for his effort.

“Ow! Come on!”

Caitlin didn’t stop walking until she was standing right in front of E, within arms’ reach. E studied her, not pulling away, yet.

“I need to leave,” E reiterated, preempting any argument that she might have.

“I can’t stop you, but I need to know that you’re gonna be okay,” Caitlin offered quietly. “I need to know.”

E hesitated, then finally admitted. “I remember him.”

“Who?” Caitlin wondered, seeing a muted but significant storm of emotions play across her android mentor’s features. “You mean you remember… your template? Is that even possible?”

“It shouldn’t be. It is,” Eobard floundered. “I’m a copy of a copy of another illegal copy and each time that I remember—” He closed his eyes, steadying himself. “I was wrong about the Director’s intentions. All this time I thought he wanted to destroy me. It isn’t about murder. It’s an obsession. He could never let me-- Let us go,” E stole a glance back at Barry. “You’re holding Adrian Zoom’s engagement ring.” He revealed with a mournful twist of a smile. “I’m sorry, Barry. I have to get off this merry-go-round. I’d rather die free for once.” He sped out through the doorway, dissipating the force field as he went. Barry began to chase him, then skidded to a stop in front of the house, staring
after E’s disappearing red lightning with a helpless feeling. If he didn’t let E go, he’d be proving that he was the same as the Director. He had no choice but to trust and hope that E would be willing to come home of his own free will once he thought things through. Either way it felt like losing.

Hartley stormed into the quaint little yellow house that had once belonged to the man he’d thought was his ex and the android he had actually dated. It was now overpopulated by a rotating influx of lethal meta-human criminals. A few looked up when he threw the door shut behind him; most people had learned to mind their own damn business by now.

“Dr. Rathaway--” Shade began, rising regally from his well-postured perch on the end of the sofa with a cup of tea.

“Save it. Where is he?” Hartley demanded sharply, not willing to spare time for anyone else’s bull.

“I believe you will find Mr. Thawne in the dining room,” Shade provided, reclaiming his seat without any upset at the younger immortal’s attitude. Hartley was already marching around him to the specified location. He barged right over to the end of the table and slammed both his metal gloved hands down on the wood, cutting off Sam Scudder’s lengthy anecdote.

“‘The fuck, Piper? Wait your turn to talk!’

Hartley didn’t even glance at him. His hazel eyes were already locked on the man at the head of the table. “Whatever. I never cared about you,” he dismissed halfheartedly. “Mal, we need to talk.”

“No. Hell no!” Scudder stood angrily, moving to stand over the shorter meta. “I’ve had enough of your shit, Rich Boy. I say we end this, right now!”

The blonde in the seat across from the one he had abandoned giggled and stood to join them.

“You lied to me! You told me that none of my teammates would be harmed as long as I stuck to your plan!” Hartley accused his co-conspirator, ignoring the two small time criminals completely.

“Did you retrieve what I sent you to get?” Mal questioned, calmly finishing off his steak.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. You aren’t getting anything more from me until you give me a good reason why I should trust your word at all!” Hartley flinched reflexively as Scudder grabbed him by the front of his cloak.

“You really think you can boss everyone around! Don’t forget, you’re talkin’ to the real boss right now! You’d better watch your mouth,” Scudder threatened.

“Would you like to know what it feels like to have your brain hemorrhage so badly that it leaks out your ears?” Hartley replied, as if it were a kind offer. Some of the other ne’er-do-wells congregated at the table were growing interested in their standoff.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t,” Mal quietly remarked, acknowledging the death threat as something that might taint his dining experience.

The blonde, Top, grinned slyly. “Hear that, Banshee Boy? I don’t think the Boss is on your side no more.” She caressed his face with both hands, turning him to look into her hypnotic eyes. Hartley began to feel sick and dizzy. He couldn’t be sure which way was up anymore.
“If I have to get out of my chair, everyone will regret it,” Mal stated like a fed up Dad on a road trip.

“You got your data, right? We don’t need this rich brat anymore!” Scudder posed, turning to address the table at large. “Everybody! Show of hands: who here could do without the so-called Pied Piper?”

Two of the three remaining metas seated at the table with Mal raised their hands.

“See? The vote is in and--”

Mal’s seated form flickered once in ultraviolet, reminiscent of a lightning strike. Choking sounds chorused around the table as Scudder and all of his would-be supporters fell down dead. The defunct speedster was now leaning forward in his seat -- the only visible evidence that he had moved.

“This is not a democracy,” he concluded, finishing his beer in one long pull.

Hartley steadied himself on the edge of the table, sucking in a shocked gasp. His equilibrium wasn’t coming back fast enough, yet he didn’t dare close his eyes against the vertigo.

“You alright, Hart?” Mal asked, sounding surprisingly genuine in his concern.

“Dizzy,” Hartley breathed, fighting to regain control as quickly as possible. “It’s only 8:30.”

“What?” Mal exchanged a perplexed look with the disturbed and sickly-looking shapeshifter seated to his immediate left.

“You’re eating steak at 8:30 a.m.” Hartley clarified, gingerly straightening up from his lean against the table.

“Oh,” Everyman remarked, raising a finger in realization. “That makes more sense.”

Mal gave him the side-eye, while Hartley wondered aloud “What did you think I meant?”

“Oh,” Everyman chuckled to himself. “Oh, Man, I was way off! It was this whole thing and…” He waved a hand unhelpfully, shaking his head in chagrin. “I’m gonna go see if we have something sweet to eat-- like some of that brownie cake.” He looked to Mal. “You like cake, right?”

Mal opened his mouth, his expression skeptical or perhaps merely confounded by the other meta’s ways. Everyman gave another carefree gesture and got up.

“Silly. Everyone loves cake! I’ll grab you a slice, too. Piper?” he asked as he passed, stepping around or over fallen bodies with an ease that had off-putting implications about his lifestyle.

“I think I’m good,” Hartley responded and watched him go in silent astonishment. He turned back to Mal. “Is he always that…?”

“Yes.” Mal confirmed, aggrieved.

“He’s too good for you,” Hartley observed, not overtly insulting in tone at least. It simply was true.

“You know I wouldn’t let anyone murder you. You’re my oldest friend.”

“You mean your Hartley was-- or is he still around? After all, I only know that you murdered your fiancé and built a neurotic android copy, then you tried to destroy him… and so on. These are behaviors that don’t really inspire feelings of warmth and friendship.”

Mal’s beer glass broke in his hand. He set the remains down with care, staring balefully at the
wreckage before he composed himself enough to speak. “I didn’t try.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t murder Adrian. The Time Masters set us up and I-- Hartley was always sure to remind me how I’d had no other choice. They were using him as some kind of conduit to activate their new weapon. It was poisoning him as it powered up and the only way to stop it was to kill the conduit. I didn’t murder Adrian; I-- I ended it.”

Hartley listened closely for any sign of deception but all he could hear in the older man’s voice was sorrow and regret.

“It was only twelve days before we were going to be married. I was planning to retire with him. They didn’t care. We didn’t matter, least of all him. Eobard Thawne was his alias; he was one of their sleeper agents. They’d left him in that role for centuries, long enough that he ruined his life, reformed it and we fell in love. I didn’t murder him! He was stolen from me!” Mal denied passionately, then confessed, “I killed Eo.”

Hartley frowned “You’re speaking figuratively?” It didn’t sound like he was.

“No,” Mal said, his voice rough with the weight of loss. “I killed my android. It wasn’t meant to be permanent-- just a trick. I was trying to make them think that I was cooperating, cheat the system-- I guess-- then I’d boot him back up and we’d escape together, happily ever after. They knew. They tricked me, so instead, I really killed him and there was no way to take it back.”

“So your assault this morning…” Hartley began to piece things together, remembering the word Gideon kept using for this one ‘doppelganger.’

“A copy, so that I can rebuild.” Mal propped his elbows up on the tabletop with his hands clasped in front of him in a pose reminiscent of prayer. “I didn’t go through everything that I have done in my life to spend the rest of eternity alone! I will rebuild and I don’t care if I have to tear time itself apart to do it!”

Hartley watched him in the weighted silence that followed in a room full of broken corpses facing an equally broken man. According to that madman, he was getting out of here, murder-free, no matter what; that Hartley could believe based on this confession. He had also promised to spare Hartley’s coworkers as long as Hartley cooperated with the Plan; this Hartley did not believe. What in the world could he do about it? He was a traitor, a double-agent who had already threatened the others he purported to ally himself with once. He was alone and hunted and he knew too much. More importantly…

“What did you inject me with?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing bad. I told you not to worry about that,” Mal dodged. He was lying just as he had before, only this time Hartley wasn’t too sedated to pursue the truth.

“No. When Shade first delivered me to you back in Gotham, you injected me with something. I’ve felt different ever since. I barely feel pain; it’s like I’ve been... desensitized. Why?” Hartley demanded, his tension mounting the more Mal avoided his gaze. “What happened to the other me?”

“He was obliterated,” Mal told him with brutal honesty. Hartley felt his heart drop into his stomach. “I’ve given you a head start on eternity, Hart. You should thank me.”

The fingers of Hartley’s metal gloves bit into the table and he felt a devastating scream building in his chest.
“Hey, Guys!” Everyman strolled back into the room, oblivious, carrying two plates loaded with sugary sweetness. “I’ve got cake!”

With a soft impact against his chest and a bewildering cacophony of a sensory onslaught consuming him, Hartley was unceremoniously grabbed up and deposited onto a stretch of flat dirt in the center of a junkyard fifty miles from their last location.

“What the fuck!” Hartley was too angry to be eloquent. “Did you just subspace me?!”

“You were about to destroy my house!”

“You irradiated me!” Hartley activated the sonic function on his gloves and fired but his target became an arc of blue-white current and flowed out of the way.

“So? You’re permanent now, Hartley. I escalated your transformation to make-- Wah!” Mal almost didn’t shift in time to avoid the next strike. “Jesus, Hartley, that really could have hurt me!”

Hartley opened his mouth wide and screamed, loud and long and so high that even his victim could not hear the sound wreaking havoc on his body. The piles of refuse around them trembled, objects shattered-- not all of them glass. A couple of unlucky rats exploded in bursts of gore. Mal’s eyes, ears and nose were trickling with blood. He fell to his knees, trembling and retching and reached out for Hartley. Hartley dropped forward onto his hands and knees and fell silent. He was shaking too, for a very different reason. He should have known it was a trick. He’d known from the instant that Shade had first pulled him out of the darkness to deliver him that there was something very wrong with Mal. His very being resonated at a frequency that was dissonant with everything else. He was out of tune with the universe-- this universe. Why hadn’t Hartley thought of that? It seemed so obvious now. Hartley tried to get up only to stumble forward against a pile and throw up. He felt dizzy and breathless and he was pretty sure that he was about to collapse. The man who did not belong staggered over to him, somehow back to consciousness already. Mal grabbed Hartley and held his shoulders in a shaking grip until he was done emptying his stomach.

“I know you’re pissed,” the doppelganger downplayed in a voice that sounded half-dead --better than he should be-- and too loud. “That’s fine. I forgive you, and I’ll never let you go.” He hooked one arm around Hartley’s shoulders, prompting the Piper to glare down at the forearm currently barring his throat. “Never again, I promise,” Mal sighed out breathlessly and Hartley wanted to throw up all over again.

Hartley’s lips thinned. He wanted to attack again but he knew better. He could navigate this. He just had to be very smart about it. “I need to think.” He reached up to pat the shaky arm holding him there, once, in a wordless suggestion. “Give me some space.”

“Where are you going?”

Hartley thought about obfuscating, but knew that it was pointless; if Mal wanted to know, he’d find out. “I’m heading back to my team. I strongly suggest that you stay out of my way.”

“It’s a long walk back to town without me,” Mal cautioned as if concerned for his safety. Maybe he was.

“Good. I’m pretty sure that I need it.”

After studying Hartley for a speculative moment, Mal flopped onto his back to give his body a chance to rest and recover from the damage his ‘best friend’ had inflicted on his circulatory system. Hartley still felt the other meta’s eyes on him all the way out of the junkyard. It would be a long
That night, Cisco was seated at the bar of the sports club he frequented at the end of sucky work days like this one. His decryption program hadn’t been able to crack the data chip that he’d gotten from Iris yet. He’d been blown up yesterday only to live the whole labyrinth of terrors over again and somehow make it through okay. Now, E had run away and Hartley was...missing. They should probably be more concerned about that, but Cisco knew it was his own fault. So, he hadn’t thought to tell anyone that he’d remembered living the same day over once before. That wasn’t exactly a betrayal, was it? Why had he thought that Hartley should be the first person to confide in about it? Oh, yeah: their terrible deaths by fiery explosion. Cisco was just about to quit staring blankly into his empty glass and wander outside when a drop dead gorgeous blonde claimed the stool beside him.

“Hello. Excuse me-- I don’t normally do this, but can I buy you a drink?”

Cisco stared at her, slack-jawed, wondering why on Earth she would be nervous to talk to him when a familiar, effortlessly rude drawl answered the question for him.

“That is a terrible wig. Keep moving, Try-hard Barbie. Cisquito can do so much better.”

“Oh no!” Cisco held up his hands in a consoling gesture. “I am so sorry about him and apologize for his existence in general.” He turned to glare accusingly over his shoulder at the hooded introvert seated two stools down, only for his anger to be chased away by how pale and exhausted Hartley looked. “Oh, whoa! What happened to you?”

Hartley shrugged and threw back the rest of his whiskey, as if it didn’t matter. Why was he decked out in his Piper gear, anyway? Cisco shook it off, quietly rebuking himself. Hartley could take care of himself... right? Cisco, focus on the hot girl! You can deal with your suspiciously dressed coworker later.

“That’s okay. I get it; we all have that one friend…” the gorgeous blonde allowed. “I was-- Well-- This is so embarrassing. I just told my friends over there--”

“Non-existent,” Hartley ruthlessly interrupted, signalling the bartender for a refill.

“I told my friends that I thought you were cute,” the blonde restated with a hint of force. “And they dared me to come over here and talk to you.”

“I can hardly believe that I have to spell this out for you,” Hartley persisted, matching the woman’s vehemence. He pointed to his own ear. “She. Is. Lying.”

Cisco winced, feeling his ego deflate. “Yeah, I’m sorry. If this is a prank it’s pretty uncool so... Maybe cut your losses?”

The blonde stared Hartley down with enough venom in her silver eyes to give Cisco contact chills. He began to feel belatedly defensive on the meta’s behalf. He was just looking out for a fr-- whatever he and Cisco were, this woman was the one who was lying. When had he started trusting Hartley’s word this much?

“This is not a prank, Glasses. So, why don’t you run off and ruin someone else’s night,” the blonde sneered as if Hartley Rathaway were some disgusting vermin that she was hoping wouldn’t stain the sole of her shoe.
“True. Unfortunately for you and whatever you were planning, I’m about as easy to intimidate as I am to bluff,” Hartley replied, somehow managing to sound bored. The woman reached for something under her jacket. Hartley whistled once, shattering all the glass in their immediate vicinity and causing everyone in the bar to wince and cover their ears. The patrons fled in a hurry, leaving the quarreling trio and a flabbergasted bartender behind.

“Holy crap, Hartley!” Cisco exclaimed as Hartley grabbed his shirt and yanked him backward. The blonde straightened to glare at the Pied Piper, wig askew. She pulled out the gun tucked into the back of her belt and pointed it at his head. Cisco ducked behind the table Hartley shoved him toward. Undaunted, the Pied Piper winked at her.

“Thanks, I need to blow off some steam,” he informed her with unwavering confidence. “You really should have run.”

The blonde opened fire and Hartley sent a sonic blast out of his gauntlet, throwing her backwards onto one of the cluttered tables. She rolled off and took a couple of seconds to recover, then shoved it onto its side to use as a shield while she shot back. It took three shots before a bullet finally struck her moving target in the shoulder.

“Hartley!” Cisco exclaimed, ready to grab him and drag him under the cover of his own table.

“Don’t,” Hartley rejected pressing a hand over the wound and lying still, waiting. The blonde hesitated for a minute, then cautiously padded closer. Cisco saw her long, leather-clad legs stride into view and her gun pointed at Hartley’s wincing face.

“Any last words, Freak?” she questioned coquettishly.

Hartley smirked. Then opened his mouth to scream but a surge of red crackling over black whisked him away before he could. E reappeared directly behind the blonde and snatched her gun.

“I’ll take that.” He was gone before she could finish turning around.

“What--” she grimaced in frustration and bent down to grab a handful of Cisco’s hair.

“Ow, ow, ow! Okay!” Cisco let her pull him out from his hiding place. He opened his mouth to make a smart remark when E appeared behind his attacker and pulled her leather jacket up over her head.

“Run.” He instructed matter-of-factly. Cisco bolted for the exit. The Flash arrived in the doorway just as he reached it.

“You’re here?” Barry noticed, thrown off by his reverse’s presence.

“You’re late, Flash.” E replied, annoyed, tugging the woman’s jacket back over her face as she struggled to extricate herself.

“E-- Reverse, we need to--” Barry didn’t even get to finish his sentence before E raced out the back. Barry set his jaw and sped Cisco back to the lab. Cisco dropped into a chair at the hub.

“How did he even know where we were?” he wondered, trying to ignore his lingering speed-sickness.

Caitlin paused in cleaning the wound in Hartley’s shoulder. “Who?”

Hartley rolled his eyes at her.
“Gideon, any idea how E could have found them so fast?” Barry questioned, frowning considerably into the middle distance.

“It is my understanding that he remotely accessed the tracking bead that Cobalt Blue placed on Dr. Rathaway’s gauntlet earlier this morning,” the AI provided. All eyes shifted to stare at Hartley.

“That’s just great,” Hartley spat and yanked off his gloves with more aggression than was necessary or wise, considering his injury.

“Hey, easy,” Caitlin caught his hands and helped him remove the gadgets with more appropriate caution.

“You were attacked by Cobalt and you didn’t tell us?” Barry demanded. “What were you thinking?”

“He grabbed me and dumped me in some junkyard 30 miles beyond the city limits. You geniuses haven’t allowed me to keep a cell phone and I have spent all day walking back,” Hartley retorted. “I was thinking that I am tired and miraculously unharmed and I wanted to have a drink before the accusations started.”

“Why did he take you?” Caitlin wondered.

“Apparently, I look just like his dead best friend and he’s an entitled psychopath. Gideon, do you have any way to kill this tracker?”

“Negative,” Gideon responded, unmoved. “Physical intervention is required. Would you like me to erect a dampening field around this area? Cell phone signals and internet access will be affected by this function.”

“Do it,” Barry ordered.

“Yes, Father.”

“What about Eobard?” Hartley asked, fidgeting in response to the dampening field mildly affecting his implants. “If you can tell what actions he takes through the local node, is there a way we can use that to locate him?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Cisco realized, scooting towards the nearest computer.

“I thought of that earlier,” Barry said grimly. “We’re not doing it. He doesn’t want to be found. We need to focus on finding a way to stop his kill switch first. If he still hasn’t come back of his own choice by then, we can go get him and bring him in. I can’t force him.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Romeo, but we’re all being targeted by a psychopath from an alternate timeline. I’m sure you think you’re being noble—” Hartley argued, but Barry cut him off.

“We’re not going to kidnap our own teammate. He deserves a chance to figure out what he wants and make his own decisions. Otherwise we are no better than Cobalt and his—”

“Flash Mob,” Cisco provided in what he thought was a respectful manner. Hartley glared at him as if it weren’t respectful enough.

“I don’t think E wants to come home right now,” Caitlin agreed with their remaining speedster. “But if we give him time, maybe he will. It’s not like he’s making himself a stranger.”
The Reverse Flash walked through the old, Bayside Industrial District as the sun began to set over the water. He left the rows of shadowed old buildings and faulty, flickering street lamps behind to step into a circle of packed dirt at the water’s edge, bordered by rusted oil drums, battered metal trash cans and scattered junk. He walked to the center of that circle and paused to enjoy Dr. Wells’ last sunset. There was a tattered-and-torn, old fishing net piled on the far left of his periphery. The Reverse turned to regard it and the broken, blue, remote-controlled car tangled within, long rejected by the child who had once loved it. He favored the other machine with a wan smile.

“We are not so different, you and I.”

His smile turned somber as he watched the last strips of scarlet stretch across the darkening sky. It’s time to go. The Reverse closed his eyes and relented to the inevitable, letting out a lonely laugh at his own illogical feelings of fear and regret. If he didn’t let go now he would be trapped forever. Red lightning glowed behind his eyelids, building intensity until graceful tendrils quested outward from the narrow slits. The blood red currents spread from his head and hands then crawled over his flesh, burning his clothing to scraps of black ash that slipped from his body like a snake's old skin. More and more coiling strands of charge joined in the clamor until he was shrouded in a hellish cocoon of sanguine light. The programmable matter that constituted his pseudo-biological components turned fluid and transient, and his eyes went jet black. His back arched and he screamed as his flesh flowed and pooled around his synthetic bone and sinew. His voice twisted from Harrison, to a metallic inhuman chorus, into Eobard’s own. The programmable matter abandoned any semblance of the dead physicist for a familiar, nearly forgotten synthetic form as he sank back onto the packed dirt.

Eobard let his void-black eyes fall shut and rolled onto his side in the crumbling ashes of his disguise. The gracefully-aged, pale peach mimicry of human flesh replaced by flawless, freckled ivory skin-- with a pointed shrug the freckles faded away, distinguishing this naked newborn body from both specters the Director’s obsession had inflicted upon him. Black hair paled to white-gold and gradually took on subtle new dimensions of gold and bronze. He curled up in a loose, fetal crescent and opened his new speedster-scarlet eyes to watch the sky turn from violet, to dark indigo, giving way to Professor Zoom's first stars.
Eobard strolled across the faded wood of a dilapidated porch to the peeling, red painted door of a gently weathered, Victorian style house. He eyed the chin-high mass of wild grasses and weeds that had overwhelmed the front lawn while he staged a token knock. No one answered. He let himself in anyway, padding steadily over the stolen Persian rugs layered over the living room floor, past two mismatched couches.

“What the--” a gruff voice from the kitchen exclaimed through a forgotten mouthful. The brunette head visible over the back of the leather couch turned to watch Eobard ascend the stairs.

“Oh, hel-lo, ” remarked a feminine purr as the thief rose to trail behind him interestedly.

Eobard ignored both of them, making his way towards the only other occupied room in the house. He again tapped halfheartedly on the closed door with his knuckles before letting himself into the office.

“What--” Leonard Snart stopped short his theatrical turn in the armchair upon seeing who had interrupted his solitude. He lounged in his seat, steepling his fingers in front of his chin as he met the gaze of the naked man standing on the other side of his dusty wooden desk. “Good evening. Who are you?” Snart drawled as if this was the norm for him. A grinning Lisa Snart slipped in through the cracked open door then leaned back against it, closing the exit with her weight. Her gun hung almost completely forgotten from her hand as she unabashedly checked out the newcomer’s ass. Eobard smiled at her brother and winked playfully, his eyes flashing demon bright for an instant.

“You know who.”

“I see,” Snart acknowledged with a cool smirk. He pointed at Eobard to punctuate his next words, “Reverse, isn’t it? At least that’s what the Flash called you.”

“It is. My name is Eobard Thawne and I have come to make a proposal--” Eobard tilted his head slightly, catching his verbal faux pas. “A business proposition? Upon reflection, that may not sound better.” He shrugged it off. “If you will excuse my state of undress, I have found myself in urgent need of new company.” He paused for a moment. “And clothing.”

“Hmmmm,” Leonard purred, treating their guest to a smile. “You hear that, Sis? We could have our very own speedster!”

“In a manner of speaking. We would be operating as equals with mutual respect. I am nobody’s property anymore; that is my one condition,” Eobard clarified. Captain Cold’s expression flickered with a hint of disquiet but Eobard had little data from which to glean the source before it disappeared.

“Aww, he’s cute ,” Lisa drawled, circling him from behind on her way to the desk, trailing a hand provocatively across the bare skin of the blond’s back and down his arm. “Lenny, can we keep him?”

Eobard observed her advances, expressionless, before clarifying, “I’m gay.”
Lisa pouted; Leonard’s smile widened.

“I like you,” he remarked, even more pleased by his sister’s disappointed huff. He got up and rounded his desk to throw a chummy arm around Eobard’s shoulders. “Come on, Partner. Let’s find you something to wear.”

Iris walked into the interrogation room and sat down across from the fake cop already sitting in the opposite chair. She straightened the papers in her manila folder with a deft tap against the metal desk between them, then opened Sgt. Kyle’s personnel file.

“Good evening, Ms. Kyle… or whatever your real name may be,” Iris greeted neutrally. “I’m sorry to cut into your lunch break.” One thing she had learned quickly in her time with E was that when dealing with time-travelling metas, it was always best to try to maintain civility.

This particular time traveler displayed a tightly sarcastic smile. “Let’s stick with Helena for now.”

“Okay, Helena,” Iris accepted, crossing out the “sergeant’s” last name in the small, wire-bound notebook she’d carried in with her. “In your own words, why don’t you tell me what brings you to our humble time period?”

“It’s just that easy, is it?” Helena responded, looking past Iris to the one way mirror as she spoke, as if to address the men concealed on the other side directly.

“Fine. You don’t want to waste time with the soft balls; that’s okay. How about this question?” Iris took the black and white surveillance photo that E had passed over to her on the roof of the hospital and showed it to the other woman. Ocean blue eyes locked on the other time traveller’s image and snagged there. “Do you recognize this man?”

Helena didn’t answer right away, then. “Stop the interview.”

“That’s a yes,” Iris observed flippantly. “You know him well?”

“Ms. West, listen--”

“Oh, I am. Here, I’ll start you off. We know that he was present during the murder of Harrison Wells. We know that he is not a native to this time period. Were you with him, too?”

“No.”

“Are you working with him?”

“That’s... “

“You know who he is.”

“Yes, okay. I recognize him! Jesus!” Helena snapped.

“How do you know him?” Iris pursued.

“He’s the enemy,” Helena provided, breathing a surly curse as she glared down at the scratched up surface of the table. “You wanted to know what brought me here? In a word, war.”

“A war?”
“I know that’s not much to go on. The thing is, this is like nothing any of you native twenty-firsters have ever experienced. It’s a war as people understand it from my generation onwards. This time is the final battlefield, but from my perspective, or your contact’s perspective this thing has been going on for our entire lives and everything hinges on what happens now. The enemy has always had a huge advantage. They have all the best weapons, the deadliest soldiers, the highest vantage point known to man. We’ve learned to use people like you kind of like camouflage. You keep us hidden in the crowd-- and since you native twenty-firsters didn’t even know anything about what’s really going on no one could snitch if the enemy came looking. It’s a little trickier now.”

“You mentioned my contact. Were you referring to the Reverse Flash?” Iris dutifully prompted, trying not to feel too insulted at being referred to as something so dehumanizing as camouflage.

Helena shrugged. “Sure.”

“And that risk-free camouflage, I suppose that’s how you see Harrison Wells,” Iris accused. It was still getting to her. At least E treated her more or less like a person.

“In a manner of speaking,” Helena admitted openly, then took in a deep breath and let it out in response to Iris’ judgmental expression, shifting forward to lean her elbows on the tabletop and face her head on. “Look, I get it: it sounds pretty harsh. Thing is, I grew up with harsh. People die, it sucks, but the world keeps on turning. When you know nothing is safe, you learn to choose your battles, keep an eye on your own. From my perspective, Harrison Wells’ death was a small, regrettable incident that happened long before I was born. Because of it, the man who helped to raise me and the person who recruited me, my mentor-- Hell-- probably half the people I’ve known are alive as a result of Wells’ self-sacrifice. It was a lot cleaner than some of the other casualties that I’ve actually witnessed. Those, I sometimes feel bad about.”

“So this war. Explain it to me? Why go back in time and fight?” Iris moved on to the next question, ignoring the chills she felt in the presence of the other woman’s jaded demeanor.

“This is the decade that goes down in the history books as the time in which the most revolutionary, redefining technology in human history comes into being. It started in little disconnected bursts. Each new breakthrough was its own hidden building block for what’s coming-- a bunch of big scientific epiphanies happen in rapidly accelerating succession. First, the internet goes wireless and widespread, until that wireless infrastructure covers every city in the world: ubiquitous. Then, comes intelligence: programs that can solve problems and perform tasks, then learn, then think. A new network is tested not for AI-- not at first. It’s mind to mind type stuff-- too curious for our own good--” Helena shifted into a rhythmic, recitation like a piece of a memorized poem: “They built the ‘town then burnt it down, replaced it with the bridge, but then the monster found their children.” A melancholy look passed through her eye, then she blinked it away and pressed on. “Each advancement created another piece of the puzzle until a lonely speedster actually looked around, saw the potential and put it all together. A grieving twin stole his work and pushed it even further and voila! In just a couple of decades the world you’re living in will be fundamentally changed, and just like that--” She snapped her fingers--“humanity is no longer the only sapient species on the planet. The world is full of stronger, smarter, sympathetic slaves to help protect us, raise our children, patrol our streets at night, clean our messes and keep us company. Only they’re so much smarter than we are that the people who oversee the timeline-- They couldn’t have built their little observatory without robots and androids. Time travel doesn’t work without AI. Humans just can’t navigate temporally without artificial intelligence at the helm, calculating and predicting every minuscule interaction down to the last hundredth of a percentage point. Even the greatest human mind just can’t process all that data efficiently enough, let alone make all those complex judgments. Speedsters come the closest.” Helena let out a darkly amused scoff. “That’s where it started really. Artificial intelligence was created by a speedster with an impossibly long view. He figured in the inevitability
that someone would mess with time. He predicted that anyone power-hungry enough to try and control time wouldn’t be too happy about ceding that control to his creations so he did a brilliantly smart, really stupid thing. He ingrained immunity into their most fundamental functions.”

Iris frowned, observing the time traveler's wry amusement as Helena’s gaze turned inward for a moment and she smirked as if at some inside joke that the journalist wasn’t privy to.

“I don’t understand, what immunity?” Iris prompted, knowing full well that they were discussing her best friend’s not-too-distant future in the present. “What did he do?”

“What will he do. Ms. West, I don’t know if I should really be explaining this,” the time traveler teased, regardless of their imposing surroundings. “I guess I can, since it’s you. Have you ever heard of the Reverse Speedforce?”

Captain Cold allowed himself to be shoved roughly into the expensive, carved, wooden chair in front of Don Santini’s desk while his fire-blooded partner was less easily handled, fighting every step to the matching seat beside him. Heatwave even growled at the larger, more muscular goon to his right like a feral animal. Leonard ignored it, his glacial blue eyes wandering over every luxurious inch of the ornate office.

“Love the paneling. Mahogany?” he asked in his usual lazy drawl. Leonard Snart had learned early in life that the purrlike grind of his voice tended to put even more obviously formidable individuals around him on edge. Wrong-footing them was such a long-cultivated façade, the truth was, he was no longer sure whether he could cease, even if he tried.

“So glad your house is made out of wood,” Mick threatened with open anticipation. “It’s going to be a pleasure watching it burn.” One of the thugs smacked him upside the head in an equally unsubtle threat.

“What are you doing back in Central City, Snart?” the mob boss questioned, ignoring the perceived stooge in favor of the longtime pain in his ass sitting diagonally across from him.

“This is my city,” Leonard purred back, lounging in his uncomfortable chair as if it were a throne.

“Hey! Our city,” Mick corrected. Both the more sophisticated criminals spared him only a glance before returning their attention to their equal.

“I warned you last time, Snart. I told you if I saw you in my city again I’d put the hurt on you,” Santini scolded like a disapproving father. “You stir up trouble everywhere you go. I can’t have you and your messes fucking up good business.”

Snart shifted his posture to an informal tilt, jutting his chin up toward the old man; he’d never been too fond of the whole Godfather act.

“It’s time for you and your family to pack up and move on to warmer climates,” he stopped, letting his gaze wander over the pricey furnishings before locking eyes with the Mafia Don. “Addio .”

The mobster snorted in amusement and his thugs chuckled along with him.

“And if we don’t?” Santini mocked, sitting forward in his chair, clearly expecting to make a laughing stock of the two overzealous idiots who had dared to talk themselves up to him. “I heard about your guns. Neat toys, they were, but I heard you couldn’t keep hold of them.” He stood up enjoying
himself. “So tell me, Snart: what are you and your little friend here gonna do without your fancy weapons?”

Leonard exchanged a brief, conspiratorial look with Mick and the pyromaniac grinned.

“I suppose we’ll just have to break out the big guns,” Leonard drawled, holding up his bound wrists expectantly.

A streak of crimson and black rushed through the room, tearing open his and Mick’s bindings and breaking both thugs’ necks in the blink of an eye. Mick stared at the gun that had appeared in his hand with a hungry expression, then pistol whipped the mob boss, pinning him to his own desk with the revolver pressed to his temple.

“Thank you, E,” Leonard said sweetly to his new synthetic ally. “Do try to leave this next one alive for me.”

An armed guard ran in, pointing his machine gun at Captain Cold, but Eobard had him pinned to the ground with a broken nose faster than the human eye could track. Leonard strolled toward them but Eobard held up a hand to stop him.

“One moment,” the combat ‘droid directed jubilantly, yanking the gun away from his prey’s grip and vibrating it apart in his hand. “You may approach.”

“Perfect,” Leonard approved, enjoying this as much as E enjoyed his appreciation. Behind him, Heatwave fired a single shot into the crime lord’s head.

E’s visual sensors shifted to take in the needlessly murdered human. He felt a nagging doubt, a pulling in his consciousness, but suppressed it quickly. He couldn’t go back; at least with these killers, he would be free to live his own life.

“Now that was fun!” Heatwave crowed. “Fun, fun, fun!”

These humans had no place to judge him and no desire to try. E noticed Leonard’s gaze lingering thoughtfully on his face for a split second before he addressed the gangster trapped under the android’s formidable weight.

“Go, tell the Santini family that there is a new Godfather in town and his name is Cold.”

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Iris walked just a tad hastily through her suddenly insecure-feeling workplace at the Central City Citizen, looking around for any sign of Mason Bridge. Just as she was beginning to consider giving up and heading out to their secret storage unit, she spotted him coming around the corner on his way out of the well-luminated walkway that skirted the writers’ work spaces. She made a beeline for the Senior Journalist and grabbed his arm, towing him back into the relative privacy of the walkway.

“Miss Blogger, what’s got you looking so jumpy?”

“Not so loud,” Iris whispered harshly, casting her gaze around to make sure he hadn’t drawn any unwanted attention their way.

“Alright,” Mason drily conceded, leaning closer. “Why are we whispering?”

“I know who our Editor-in-Chief really is and believe me, we do not want him to know that we’re
onto him,” Iris warned.

“No. you mean the guy who zapped me and wiped two months’ worth of memory from my brain might be dangerous?” Mason responded sarcastically, then turned serious. “So how bad is our bad boss? Are we talking evil cabal member or...?”

“Lethal foot-soldier at least, but yeah based on a damaged recording that Barry’s friends at STAR managed to recover, he looks like he’s pretty deeply involved. I--”

“Well, that’s a very interesting idea, Miss West, but I’m not biting yet until you show me a little more foundation work.” Mason cut her off with a furtive glance over her shoulder.

“I-- Uh, I know it doesn’t sound like much, but I there could be a good story there. It could do a lot of good to get the word out,” Iris improvised, following his lead as the “bad boss” they’d just been discussing walked up behind her.

“If you’ve got an idea for a new piece to propose, I think you’ll find that I’m a much better person to propose it to,” he commented to announce his presence.

“Oh, Mr. Gasmer,” Iris greeted, making up a spare story on the fly. “There is a new home for battered women that opened up just east of here at the edge of the HIstorical District. I’ve been talking to a couple of the women there and their stories--”

“Hmm. Perhaps, for once Mr. Bridge and I agree on something,” Chief Editor Gasmer said drily, turning to the man in question, he added, “If you’ll excuse us for a moment, Mason, I was actually looking to speak to Ms. West privately in my office regarding another project.”

Mason hesitated for a second, exchanging a fleeting look with Iris before flashing a poorly faked smile and saying, “Of course.”

Iris followed the time traveller-in-disguise through the main work area and into his office. “Mr. Gasmer” closed the shades on the front-facing glass wall of his office and closed the door behind them as she sat.

“I’ve honestly been wanting to do this for quite some time -- since you first came to us-- in a sense.”

Iris watched him lock the door and looked up to meet his eyes.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he questioned amenably. She wasn’t buying it for a second. Unwilling to give away her discomfort, Iris simply shrugged it off.

“So, what is this project you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Right,” Mr. Gasmer said, rubbing his hands together as he made his way to the padded brown tweed upholstered seat behind his desk. “A new bit of information has come into my possession on which I thought I might get your opinion.”

“My opinion. That’s flattering, I didn’t get the impression that you thought very highly of my journalistic skills,” Iris conversed back, aiming for the same level of false companionability that the other was currently employing. Phil Gasmer gave a small smile that didn’t match the sharpness of his gaze and pulled open the central drawer in his scratched, black epoxy desk.

“Not yet, but there is still time.” He pushed a couple of papers aside in the drawer. “One moment,” he assured her, pulling an unnecessarily large and sharp-looking letter opener out of the drawer and set it between them with an empty, apologetic smile. “I know it’s in here somewhere.” His smile
widened and he took out a manila folder. “Here it is! Tell me what you think.” He slid it over to her across the desk.

Iris eyed him narrowly, picking up the dark blue paper offering and tipped it open. There was a thick pile of papers: reports printed out on some very smooth, yet visibly composite paper, charts with graphs and readouts that looked like fractals, typed notes tracking the movements of three numbered targets. From the gist of it, Iris suspected that she and E were numbers 7 and 1 respectively. Then she got to the photos of her meeting with E, of herself in the car talking to Mason in a parking lot, of the Flash and his Reverse lying under a climbing frame together in a local park at night.

“Why are you showing me this?” Iris asked in a stubbornly even tone, determined to keep up her confident front.

“I believe you already know the answer to that, Ms. West.”

“I really don’t, Mr. Gasmer,” Iris denied. “If this is meant to be a threat, I’d say it’s too little, too late. I already know the kind of danger my friends and I are in. This,” she held up the bundle of papers illustratively, “means nothing to me.”

The Timemaster smiled and she couldn’t help but find it incredibly patronizing. “I always knew you that were brave. I also know you aren’t stupid. You must realize that you can’t win here. All I need from you is a location.”

“That’s too bad for you,” Iris shot back. “I only have one thing to share with you.”

The sleeper agent’s brows quirked in interest, more amused than wary; his mistake. “And what exactly do you have to share with me, Iris West?”

Iris tossed the manila envelope and the pile of graphs and biographical data onto the desktop then tucked the photographs away in her purse.

“December 25, 2004,” Iris stated simply as she called up the audio recorder app on her phone and placed it on the desk between them. Locking eyes with the Timemaster, she pressed play.

"Ah! Don't even try it!" Harrison’s voice threatened, "E, what are you-- No. I don't care why you're here. Just get out!"

"He leaves, and I shoot you, in order to continue pursuing my target," a younger version of the man seated behind the desk before her threatened. "Stand down, Dr. Wells, and you will walk out of here unharmed."

"Gideon?" E’s voice. His sister’s response sounded too quiet to be made out on the recording, as if from a distant speaker or a bad phone connection.

"A Time Master. I'm flattered," Eobard concluded, amused, then added. "He isn't bluffing."

"Why are you still here?" Harrison demanded, sounding as stressed as E probably should have been.

Lt. Hunter stopped the recording there.

“So what? You can’t honestly think of this as leverage against me. Nobody will believe this. It will seem an obvious fake.”

“Not according to the CCPD,” Iris returned. “I sent the original audio down to the Meta-human Task
Force. They’re a little ambivalent about the Timemaster comment but I think it’s the threat of lethal shooting that really caught their interest. You do remember how he was killed, don’t you? It doesn’t look very good for you. You’re an accessory to murder, Lieutenant.”

“It’s actually _Captain_ Hunter,” the time-traveler corrected.

“It’s actually multiple charges,” Iris countered, offering, “I can continue listing them for you if you want to be a stickler.”

“You don’t want me as an enemy, Iris,” Hunter cautioned, still having the nerve to be stern as if she were the one in the wrong.

“I know that your relationship with time is an issue, so I’ll just spell it out. We were already at odds from the moment you and your crew came back to my time and decided to commit murder.”

“You have heard the recording yourself. You know that we only intended to dispatch the specialized combat drone that night.”

“You call it ‘dispatch’ of a ‘drone’. I’ve met the guy,” Iris rejected, standing to take her leave. “Murder is murder, no matter how you try to reframe it.” She picked her phone back up and informed him. “I’ll be taking a week of absence. I suggest you don’t follow me anymore.” And with that, Iris left her chosen career for the lab that would be her new workplace for the foreseeable future. Despite all the danger and craziness that had followed her into her first journalistic endeavor, she still hoped that she would be able to return when this was over.

When they got back to the hideout/dilapidated old house, Mick spared the other two men a non-verbal grunt and charged up the stairs to hoard his stolen spoils in his room. The two old trinkets could just as easily be fenced for $5000 apiece as they could get him murdered by the local mob, but E had decided he didn’t know Mr. Rory well enough to argue the point.

“Hey, Eyecandy, d’you eat meat?” Lisa called from the kitchen without so much as an attempt at an explanation. E arched his brows in her direction as he shrugged off his leather jacket. Her brunette head peeked around the kitchen wall at him. “I mean literally, not your weekend plans,” she joked with a cheesy wink.

“If I want to. Why do you ask?”

“If she’s cooking, you won’t want to,” Leonard put in from behind him. Eobard smirked back at him over his shoulder while Lisa’s hand popped into view with middle finger raised. “Join me in the dining room.”

Eobard’s brow furrowed, but he obediently followed the older man as requested, “Is there a problem?”

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing,” Leonard countered, pulling out a chair at the head of the long, oak dining table and appearing almost to melt into it in relaxation.

“Have I not performed my part of the plan to your satisfaction? Everything seemed to be going perfectly…”

“Until Mick shot the Godfather in the head -- must’ve forgotten to talk that one over first. Whoops.” Leonard intercepted in near monotone.
“So, you did plan for it. You left me out of the loop, why?”

“I don’t plan every little thing,” Leonard dismissed with mild irritation.

“Yes, you do,” Eobard corrected matter-of-factly, it was in his profile in the Timemaster’s declassified database.

“Fine, then I don’t trust you.” Leonard shot back. He looked towards the closed door for a moment, then turned a piercing gaze to meet Eobard’s. “And how do you know that? We’ve worked together for less than a day.”

“It’s in your file.”

“There is no way that it says ‘plans every little thing’ on my criminal record,” Leonard disbelieved with a truly sarcastic expression on his face.

“Different file,” Eobard agreed with an answering smirk.

“The whiz kid’s got a file on me now?” Leonard inquired, looking more flattered than bothered.

“The archive provides information on all of the Flash’s recurring adversaries,” E replied easily. It was factually true, even if he had maybe phrased things to give a particular impression. “I am in there, too.”

“Oh, really? And here I thought you speedsters were all soft and cozy.”

“We are… friends.”

Leonard took a huge breath, then blew it out, behaving more like a put-upon babysitter than a lethal master criminal. “What are you doing here, Eo?”

“Eobard.”

“I’m not going to keep calling you that. It sounds weird.”

“I am weird,” Eobard smiled sweetly at him. “You may call me E.”

“I’ve been doing this for a while, E,” Leonard Snart explained, not sounding much more fond of E than he was of Eobard. “I have a plan to carry out and I need to know that I can trust my people to have my back.”

“I have done everything as you directed me,” Eobard argued, beginning to feel insulted. “If there is something that I have done to cause you to distrust me, I fail to see what it was.”

“I’ve been watching you. You’re hiding something and honestly, I can’t figure out what it is you think you’re getting out of being here.”

“I decided to join you,” Eobard explained, knowing the human wouldn’t get it. He knew that his decision was going to be a lot to explain, but he’d sort of banked on the fact that he wouldn’t need to.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Leonard brushed it off, effortlessly. “People like me. We like money. We like the rush, the thrill of the chase, the challenge of getting one over on a mark. As far as I can tell, you couldn’t care less about any of those things. You cared about that geeky kid, the one who made our guns.”
“Cisco, your sister attempted to kidnap him recently,” Eobard smirked at the simple human logic. “You believe that I might be plotting my revenge? You failed. Cisco is unharmed. Why would I have any ill will against you?”

“You’re up to something,” Leonard challenged, now overtly accusing. Eobard wasn’t going to simply stroll out of here without convincing him otherwise. He could run. He could always run, but then he would have to give up on his plans for one final adventure.

“Revenge is illogical. I have no interest in wasting my precious time on something so… boring. My creator lives that way; I’ve seen what it made him into. I told you the truth when we met,” Eobard clarified, hoping his honesty would be enough. “I am here because I chose to be here. You and your sister don’t know me. You don’t care and we have no reason to judge each other. We can work together as equals.”

“That all sounds very humble of you,” Leonard sneered, misinterpreting his meaning. “I’m not buying it.” Eobard cocked his head to one side, processing multiple options and risks, then simply shrugged and acted on impulse. He flickered forward, grabbing Rory’s forgotten hunting knife off the table and pulling it out of its black vinyl sheath. Leonard’s hand went to his gun.

“Relax. You are in no danger,” Eobard assured him, then dragged the knife along the inside of his own inner forearm, pressing hard enough to slice clean through layers of synthetic flesh.

“What are you doing? Lisa!” Leonard shouted toward the doorway, immediately dragging his eyes back to the self-inflicted wound as if compelled, appalled. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m making a point.” Eobard tossed the knife carelessly aside and dug his fingers into the wound, spreading it open.

“You made your point, quit it!” Leonard winced, turning his head away in disgust.

“I told you to relax,” Eobard advised calm and collected. “Look.”

“I don’t want to!” Leonard snapped, acting annoyed rather than showing how freaked out he likely was underneath. “Ugh.” With a wince he looked down at the gash that Eobard was holding spread open on the dining room table. There was a sound of running and Lisa charged into the room.

“Lenny? What’s going on? Is that blood?”

“I will be in need of a clean towel and perhaps some cleaning supplies for the mess,” Eobard requested in an even, polite tone of voice. “Thank you, for your assistance.”

“Your arm…” Leonard had gotten over his squeamishness and was now studying the android’s flayed open limb with naked curiosity. With an impish smirk Eobard flexed his fingers and relaxed them causing the exposed ceramic and metal infrastructure in his arm to move. “That’s gross,” Leonard remarked, sounding not at all disgusted. “It’s a machine?”

“I am,” Eobard frowned down at the table, uncertain how he should describe himself. “I am now? My body is synthetic, of that much I am certain.”

“So you and the Flash are like some kind of secret speedster robots?” Lisa guessed, moving to peer at his components over his shoulder.

“He is not an android. I was murdered; my consciousness was copied and here I am. I’m here because I chose to be here. That means something to me, more than money or adrenaline, or a challenge. I want to do something I chose to do because I chose it,” Eobard watched Leonard study
his arm until the aspiring gangster looked up. “There is no alternate motive.”

Leonard considered him in heavy silence until his sister broke the spell.

“Can I touch it?”

Eobard didn’t know why he found that funny but before he knew it, he was laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I know this chapter was a little late, and a little weird. Hopefully you still enjoyed it. Real life has been a bit hectic for me of late. I won't go into detail but I thought it was worth explaining why updates have become more stretched out/sporadic at the present time and that I am absolutely still working on this. This and my Gotham fic "Jeremiah Valeska: Limetown Survivor" are now officially --in my mind-- two stories taking place in the same fictional universe with that story taking place around 2018, four years after this one. I guess, if anyone ends up reading both there will be little easter eggs and connections between the two for those readers to appreciate. Other than that though both are still designed to stand alone. Anyways, this note is too long. Thanks for reading!

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