The Beginning of Wisdom
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Summary

In which Leonard Snart is twins.

(the life and times and loves of Len and Leo Snart)

Notes

My entry for the 2018 Leonard Snart Big Bang - this is just the prologue; the rest is written and will be posted soon
They weren't both called Leonard, of course.

Their parents hadn't gone to the hospital all that much before they were born, their father trying to avoid incurring too much cost and willing to dismiss his wife's discomfort as the usual pains of pregnancy, and the one ultrasound she got concealed the truth of it, one figure curled around the other, hiding his presence as if to protect him from the outside world already. The bored ultrasound technician had heard the dual heartbeats, of course, but had simply ascribed it to a heart murmur – it being not unusual at all to have a birth defect when you were born in a house barely outside of Central City's toxic slums.

And so their parents had confidently agreed on Leonard as a name, each for their own reasons, discarding all other options, and when the boy was born in the hospital, they named him that.

Everyone was surprised when their mother cried out again, hit by another contraction, and the doctor (who'd barely bothered to spend the time checking on this patient, who could scarcely afford him) had spent a good minute assuring her it was just the afterbirth when he abruptly saw the second head starting to crown, and so their second boy was born.

"Twins," their father said blankly, staring at the two boys settled in their mother's arms. "Identical twins."

"What are we going to name him?" their mother asked, staring down at the second boy with not a little bit of worry. They hadn't thought of a second boy's name, and they'd never selected one for a girl, and she knew her husband wanted them to get out of the hospital as quickly as possible to save money. She didn't want to have one of their little tiffs, as she called the source of the bruises dotting her arms and torso, in the hospital in front of witnesses.

They ended up naming the second one Lionel.

Leonard and Lionel, fine names both, pleasantly alliterative, but the boys who bore them were as identical as peas in a pod, and in time their parents found that it was just easier to shout, "Leonard!", to which both boys responded, and that they could then sort out the details afterwards.

Their mother made a feeble effort, hobbled by the sickness that ate away at her memory, to remind them that they were separate boys with separate names, but once she died and they were left to the mercy of their father, who had returned from prison with an even blacker temper than before, it was easier for each of them to simply think of themselves as Leonard.

After all, it didn't matter which one of them had actually done whatever it was that set their father off this time; it mattered which one of them he found first.

And the name that got shouted was always Leonard.
"I hate seeing you get hurt," the younger Leonard, who had been formerly and formally known as Lionel, said, curling up with his brother on their bed. He already knew how to be careful of the bruises that littered the older Leonard's skin. "You don't always have to run up and take it, you know. He gets angry because of me sometimes, too."

"I do have to," the older Leonard replied, stubborn even as his eyes remained filled with tears of pain. He preferred the physical pain on his arms and legs and stomach to the way his heart ached to see even the slightest marring on his brother's skin. "You're softer than me. I don't want you to get hurt."

"But it hurts you worse when you get hit when you're already hurt," the younger Leonard protested. "I'm not hurt at all -"

"Let me do this," the older Leonard whispered, wrapping his aching arms around his younger brother and shifting over as if he could protect him from the world, knowing he couldn't. "Please."

The younger Leonard sighed. He didn't escape their father's wrath entirely, that was impossible, but he knew that he had it better than his brother, hiding away the way he did, and the guilt of it ate at him.

But what could they do? It was just the way it was, as far as they knew.

It wasn't long after that that Leonard started being taken on jobs, quick-fingered and small enough to wiggle into ducts that terrified them both, but after a while they discovered a wondrous thing: if they succeeded at the jobs they were assigned, such that their father obtained the items that he sought, then they reaped the benefits of their father's rarely bestowed affection.

That prize they shared in equally, as much as they could; they were starved for positive attention, desperate for it, but the first time they fought over who got to go on a job, fought each other, a situation previously all but unknown, they also realized the depths of their desperation.

The fight ended with them clinging to each other and crying and promising that they would never, ever prioritize their father's fleeting love over the firmer and more lasting bond they shared. Better that they both share in the benefits, the way they'd learned to share a dinner too small for their stomachs, than fight over it and risk losing the most precious thing they had.

It was not good, what they had, but it was what it was, and life went on.

Their father called for Leonard, and Leonard came to him, and Leonard worked with him, and sometimes – rarely – Leonard was loved by him.

More often, Leonard was hurt by him – and this last was more often borne by the elder of the two.

They grew so adept at only appearing one at a time that their father began to forget that he had ever had two instead of one.

They remained Leonard, one and the same, until they went to school.

School, with its indifference and its strict paperwork, listed them under the different names they had been born with, and expected them to listen to that difference – and yet, with their identical clothing, bought cheaply in packs from the local corner store, the teachers were equally incapable
of telling the difference between the two of them.

"Leonard – "

"Yes?" they both answered.

"No, I just - which one of you drew this picture?"

One of them raised a hand.

"And this one?"

The other followed suit.

"Boys, they're both signed Leonard."

"Yes," they replied.

"Boys, one of you is named Leonard and the other one is named Lionel. You need to tell me which. This game isn't funny anymore."

They looked at each other and went mute. And no matter what punishment or enticement was offered, mute they remained.

It wasn't until that teacher left, mid-year, and was replaced with another that someone even tried to understand them.

"Do you even remember which is which?" the new teacher asked, young and still hopeful but just as frazzled by the demands put upon her and the difficult children sitting before her, running her hands through her hair as she spoke. "It's okay if you don't. I won't tell your father."

They looked at each other, suspicious of any authority, familiar with a policeman's tricks of dividing and conquering, expecting to be betrayed despite promises.

Their father had been a policeman, once, and he knew every one of those tricks.

But the teacher persisted, with hopeful eyes and hopeful promises, and in the end, the younger one, the one who was less hurt but more guilty, spoke in return.

"It's not that we don't remember that we're different," he disagreed. "We know who we are. But we're both Leonard."

What he did not say, what he could not verbalize even though he felt it, was that, to them, Leonard was a real person name: he had a father who called out for him, who sometimes hurt him and even more rarely loved him.

Lionel, though?

Lionel was the name of a forgotten ghost.

A slip of paper rendered irrelevant for years, until the school system pulled its shadow out from the depths of the void and resurrected the empty shell called Lionel, and tried to force one of them into that hollow name.

Lionel, whose name was never called.
Lionel, who was forgotten.

Lionel, who had no memories under that name.

Neither of them wanted to be Lionel.

Neither of them would be Lionel.

They wouldn't.

"Well," the teacher said. "It's a little difficult on the rest of us, figuring out which one of you is which, when you look so similar and you're both called Leonard. Why don't we give you both nicknames? The first one to pick a nickname gets a sticker to wear, so that we know which one of you goes by what nickname. How's that sound?"

They weren't certain that they liked this approach – the benefits of being able to switch identities with no notice were crucial to them, lest the careful balancing act they had created at home fall apart – but school under this new teacher had not been so bad; they did not want to lose the benefits of that simply by being unnecessarily obstinate. And so, in the end, and after some discussion amongst themselves, they decided that being a Leonard with a nickname was still better than being Lionel.

And so the older one of them decided that he would be called Len, and the younger of them decided that he would be called Leo.

The teacher wrote down their names into her little book, marking "Len" down next to Leonard and "Leo" down next to Lionel because they sounded a little more like nicknames for those separate-but-similar names, and from then on she still had problems identifying which was which – the sticker approach only lasted as long as it took her to realize that they both obtained copies of the sticker and would palm them on and off at a moment's notice – but at least she could reassure herself that there was a difference between the two.

Future teachers had reason to respect her work: the two brothers worked together on their homework, and any sheet with a list of factual questions would be turned in with the same answers, but when it came to answers that were given in long-form writing, it slowly began to be clear that while they were both Leonard, a claim they defended fiercely and even violently, they were not the same person.

Len was standoffish, cautious and wary of strangers but reckless with his sharp-edged tongue, vicious with his mockery and insolent to the extreme.

He was friendly to no one but his brother, knowing that his heart secretly bled too easily for the pain of others – knowing, too, that that internal pain was something he could not bear, and so he sought to protect his heart by adopting an icy cold demeanor intended to stave off any connections but those he already had.

He had a wandering mind that enjoyed sampling new things but tired of them rapidly, and when he set his mind to something, he sparkled, but he was wary of committing himself, because once committed he would give himself in its entirety.

He despised what he perceived as incompetence; he would avoid committing to group projects, preferring to work on his own, but when he did commit he would invariably become a leader.

His essays meandered through bouts of utter brilliance on half a dozen subjects, with each subject covered methodically before flitting away to a new one.
Leo, in contrast, was convivial, free with the natural charm that his brother hoarded away; he hated confrontation, enjoyed making friends, preferred cooperation, but he could be as stubborn as a mule underneath his facile cheerfulness.

He liked everyone, smiled often, listened with great sympathy to their problems, offered advice and encouraged self-care, but beneath his kindness, he rarely actually cared about any of the people he met and rapidly forgot them.

He preferred to go in depth in a single subject, mastering it well beyond what was required, but he was alternatively too stingy or too generous with the fruits of his learning: sometimes hiding away the results of his research, sometimes forcing the subject on others without regard for their interest, but in a polite and friendly manner that left most people defenseless.

When placed in a group, he would invariably become its foundation, smoothing the way for everyone else to work well together, but would never take the lead himself.

His essays were earnest and assured, focused on providing the answer requested, yet there was a persistent feeling that he could do more if he only cared to try.

They were both brilliant.

Their teachers did not know what to do with them. Brilliance, in the schools of the slum, rarely led anywhere the way it might in a place with better opportunities.

Neither Leonard, as they still thought of themselves, was particularly concerned with what their teachers and schoolmates thought of them. They had other concerns.

Their home life had become – complicated.

It began when they had only been a year or two in school, when one day, without prior notice, their father brought home a girl.

"Your new mother," he announced gruffly, making it out as though he were doing Leonard a favor, but the Leonards were deeply concerned about this new development – though of course they would never have said as much to their father. They knew he did not like it when his decisions were questioned.

"Uh, hi, Leonard," the girl hovering by his side said to Leonard, blushing and uncertain – younger than their father by far. "I know this is very new to you, but, uh, I hope we'll be friends."

The ever-wary Len, who had selected himself as the Leonard to meet her first in order to assess the potential threat she posed, narrowed his eyes but forces his face into a smile. He said nothing until his father slapped him too hard on the back and left the two of them to 'get to know each other' while he popped over to the bar down the street for a drink

"Why?" he asked, once he was certain they were alone.

"Why should we be friends?" she asked.

"Why are you here," Len clarified. "In our house."

"I'm – I'm marrying your father," she said.

"Why?" Len asked again.
"Do you not like me?" she asked. "I won't – I'm not going to take him away from you or anything -"

Len waved a hand dismissively, cutting her off. "Why are you here?" he asked again. "You can do better."

Her hand drifted to her belly. "Your father loves me," she said, and Len saw that she believed it.

He frowned, his sympathies engaged on her behalf — she was not gentle, this girl, but she had something of softness in her, behind the harsh gaudiness of her clothing and the paint on her face.

She was a fool, yes, but Len knew better than most how tantalizing a prize his father's love could be.

He nodded, sharply, and retreated, letting Leo take his place.

The girl, who initially told them to call her Raven Jasmine but who would only turn her head when someone called out Marie, liked Leo a lot, and he liked her in the same superficial way he liked everyone, and that was better than letting her meet Len again.

Len protected Leo from getting hurt, from their father's fists and rage, and so it was the least Leo could do to protect Len's heart from being given, because once given it could not be taken back.

Leo knew well how fragile was the heart in his brother's chest, a heart that had not been scarred with years of guilt and shame in the way his own had been.

But that was not the only reason he protected it.

Leo, as one of the two people alive who had a share of that hidden heart, was also jealous of letting anyone else in.

He did not want anyone else to share in that precious love and attention that he enjoyed.

It was bad enough that the other person in there was their father, whom they both loved despite themselves; another one would be utterly intolerable. Why should he let someone else have a share of what ought to rightfully be only his?

But in the end, there was nothing for it – Marie was part of their household now, and she would have to be dealt with by them both.

They ultimately decided they liked her, or at least Len did and Leo followed, and Len started distracting their father from her when he was in a temper the way he did for Leo.

"Oh, little man, you didn't have to do that," she said sadly, patching him up later, after one of those instances. "I can handle it."

"But it's more dangerous for you," Len said. "In your state, I mean."

Marie was a prostitute, or had been, and the Leonards learned a great deal from listening in on her conversations with her friends when their father wasn't home. One thing that was made very clear was the meaning behind the swell of her stomach, the child inside, and how that child had to be protected lest a beating gone wrong kill it before it was ever born.

"You're a good boy," Marie said, not disagreeing with him, but Len looked in her eyes and saw that same sick self-hating guilt that haunted Leo whenever he saw the hurts Len took for him, a guilt Len would happily trade physical pain to avoid. "Say, how do you cover up your black eye from
yesterday so well? I saw you answering the door to that minister this morning, and it weren't nowhere as bad as it is now."

She nodded at his face, gone green and purple in equal measure by now. It'd been a bad week for their father, filled with bitter disappointments – there was a chance he might need to spend some months in prison, and he was not looking forward to it.

Quietly, guiltily, Len was, and he hated himself for it.

(Leo held his tongue on the subject – he wasn’t sure what he felt.)

"I've got ways," Len said evasively.

"And I've got make up," she replied frankly. "And I'm really good with it, but even I can't do magic. You, apparently, can. If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to, though."

She said that, but she hid the hurt behind the words.

That's the moment when Leo decided he liked her too, because she felt things the way he did. And because he liked her, he stepped out from the staircase where he'd been listening. "It's not magic," he said.

The next few words Marie said were very detailed and very interesting, from a linguistic perspective, but it ended up with, "How've I been living here three months and I never knew you were twins?!

"We don't tell people about it," Len said, glaring at Leo. He would have liked some input on decisions like this. Leo ignored him. "Safer to have Dad remember just one of us."

"Sweet lord Jesus on a flying bicycle," she said. And then – "No, wait, you two are Jewish, right? Do you mind if I..?"

"We don't mind," Leo assured her. "What's that about a bicycle?"

Marie shook her head.

She kept the secret, though; called them Leonard and neither Len nor Leo, and when their dad ended up in prison after all – sentenced to be away for eight whole months – she took them both out and bought them ice cream.

And when little Lisa was born early, just a week later, well, that sealed it.

They loved Lisa.

Len held her in his arms and felt that same tug he felt for little Leo, and his heart was given to her entirely, yet even jealous Leo did not complain, because his heart was hers as well.

"My baby girl's a heart-stealer already; she got my little man right off the bat," Marie laughed, calling them that because she always called them as one now that she knew they liked it better that way. "You'll take care of her, right?"

"Of course," they said, though they didn't understand why she asked.

They understood later, of course, when their father returned to find himself with a baby daughter and a son (two sons) but no wife – nothing but a pile of papers reading divorce left on the kitchen table.
Their father was very angry, the worst sort of quiet and angry, and he went out for long periods every night, looking to see if he could find his wayward soon-to-be ex-wife. The Leonards worried that Marie's escape plan wouldn't be good enough to get her away alive.

They were sad at her going, of course, and a little angry – but they understood.

"If she'd only told me she meant to go, I would've helped her," Len mumbled into Leo's ear late at night. "Gotten her some money. Kept her secrets."

Leo's hand rested on Len's chest, right over where that too-soft heart lived, that too-soft heart that Leo swore to himself that he'd protect even at the cost of his own. He didn't love people the way Len did, deep and true and hurting. No, he was cold and uninviting, Len was, vicious and unlikeable to most people, but if you got under his skin, if you made your way to that soft heart of his...

Leo hated seeing Len's pain. Len let so few people in, and of the four people in there (Leo, Lisa, their dad, Marie – Leo kept a jealous count) a good half of them had disappointed him. Leo hated that.

Leo could handle a broken heart better, anyway. He liked people, generally, but he trusted them even less than Len did. He knew too well, in a way his brother didn't, that the worst hurts sometimes left no bruise at all.

Sometimes the worst hurt was when no one was looking at you.

"It's okay," he said. "Marie'll be fine. And so will we."

"I know that. But –"

"But nothing. It won't happen again."

And that was a promise he intended to keep.
Life went on.

Even if Marie was gone, she had left them Lisa, and for Lisa they would give up anything. Any comfort, any safety, anything.

Giving up school was certainly easy enough.

Len proposed that they swap out days of attendance, so that CPS didn't look too closely at them, and Leo agreed. It did not seem like a great sacrifice, especially since it would only be a short while: they could care for Lisa, yes, but only long enough to ensure that she was taken care of elsewhere.

Their father knew very well what drew the attention of the police; he would never let them stay home to guard her.

A friendly neighbor agreed to take her into the little daycare she ran from her home; the Leonards watched her like a hawk for weeks before conceding that the neighbor's friendliness was just that, and concealed no darkness.

(They still came for random inspections at least once a week. The babies and children there all loved them dearly, a reaction neither of them could explain, but which they repaid with kindness and laughter whenever they could.)

Their grades suffered that year, marked down for poor attendance, but their test results easily overcame that deficiency and they advanced to the next grade without any serious difficulty.

As always, they presented the best overall set of grades (Leo's, usually, but only by a little) to their father, and as far as Leo was concerned, that was all.

Len did not think the same.

A thought had come to him, an idea stealing in through the dark one night as he lay awake, comforting himself by watching his brother's chest rise and fall, and he could not rid himself of it.

He could not, because he could not share it with his brother.

"What do you want to do when you're older?" he asked one day after school, as they played with the babies at the daycare.

"Are you asking the babies?" Leo laughed, even as the older children all shouted out their answers, throwing out suggestions like "fireman" or "spaceman" or "dinosaur researcher".

"No," Len said, after they had finished praising each child's choice as excellent and brilliant and innovative and certainly within their capacity to achieve. "I meant you."

Leo blinked. "I hadn't really thought about it."

"Neither have I," Len said, his voice grim as he thought of all the reasons they had not given the future any mind; too tired, too scared, too concerned with surviving today to think about tomorrow. "You should."

Leo hummed noncommittally, but Len persisted.
After months of nagging, and trips to the library to research careers, and visits to career fairs at the high school where Leo complained that they were the only under-ten-years-olds present, Len finally got his answer.

"I don't know, okay?" Leo exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "I might be interested in psychology, or maybe fashion design, but I won't know for sure until I go to college and figure out what I'm good at. Isn't that what everyone else does?"

"Yes," Len said. "That's fine."

"You're being stranger than usual," Leo told him. "Won't you tell me what's on your mind?"

"I had an idea," Len said. "I'll tell you about it, but not now."

It was the first secret he ever kept from Leo.

After that, their divergence began to accelerate. Leo began to focus on his artistic skills, which Len did not care about, and on the higher world of literature, which Len was bored by, and the intricacies of biology, which Len understood but did not love. Len, instead, focused on math and the science of angles, physics, where the answers at the lower levels were simple and the questions at the higher levels were fascinating, but which Leo thought were a gigantic boring waste of time given the presence of calculators.

They both spent hours playing with Lisa, but Leo taught her shapes and the alphabet, while Len taught her sleight of hand and how to measure time.

Leo became more confident in himself.

Len, who had always been confident, became even more protective.

Their father called on them more and more for jobs, but now, instead of splitting them equally, Len took the lion's share.

"Are you sure?" Leo asked, frowning at his brother. He found that he valued his father's esteem less now that he was assured the affection of both his brother and little Lisa, and even a friend or two outside that circle: he was sociable and well-liked but not reliant on others, by his own preference, and having a support team was invaluable to him in staying that way.

"If you don't mind," Len said. He valued his father's praise as much as ever – even more so, now that he had more people to protect, as his father's goodwill was a necessity in protecting them. He did not tell Leo about the extra bruises he obtained when he took responsibility for Lisa's childish mistakes: he had learned by now what it was to be a burden on others, and also that once you keep one secret, it was easier to keep the next. "Your literature essays are a lot more tricky than my math proofs, after all."

"I suppose," Leo said, screwing up his nose. "But are you –"

"I'm sure," Len said firmly.

And so Len went on the jobs, and Leo stayed behind.

Len even liked some parts of the work he did with his father: he was deemed old enough to listen in on the planning, although his suggestions were appropriate only when phrased as innocent questions, and he was extremely proud of his skills, his light fingers and his quick mind, all aspects that helped him be a successful thief.
Those parts, he liked.

Other parts, he hated.

Other parts –

He came home to Leo one day, shaking, for once seeking comfort instead of offering protection.

"What happened?" Leo demanded.

Len shook his head. He had no words: no words that could convey the depth of hurt in his heart, the violation of his soul, that had come when his father had forced him to pull the trigger of a gun when it was pointed at another man – to deliberately end another life before its time.

Another life that lived and breathed and loved; a life that might have had brothers and sisters, too, a Leo and Lisa of their own now left bereft; a human life.

Leo could not understand, and Len never wanted him to.

He had never felt so alone.

Leo got the story out of Len eventually, despite Len's best efforts to repel him. Just as Len had gloomily foreseen, the knowledge caused Leo great pain, for he could do nothing to help assuage the agony in Len's mind. He could do nothing but offer his presence, alive and breathing, Lisa at their side doing the same.

That was still some comfort. Len took that comfort to heart, and it broke through the icy barriers he had erected to hide himself from what he had done.

And so Len wept: an act their father had forbidden as weak.

When their father called for his Leonard, hours later, drunk and laughing and joyous at a job successfully accomplished, Leo went to him in Len's place so that he would not see the tear tracks on Len's face.

And in Len's place, Leo was given a beer and a slap on the back in congratulation for 'becoming a man', which was all the recognition that their father saw fit to bestow upon the incident.

Leo drank the beer, and thought to himself for the first time that perhaps he hated his father.

After that, Leo insisted upon going on the jobs more often again, especially once they became more and more frequent, taking days out of school instead of merely nights and weekends.

Len agreed to relinquish some of the jobs to Leo, secretly relieved to have some time to rest from the thankless never-ending task of pleasing his father, but he insisted that Leo only take the ones where no firearm was involved.

They fought over that, a real fight like they hadn't had in years, but Len held his ground and stood firm. His hands were already bloody; Leo's were not, and he intended for it to stay that way.

Eventually Leo conceded, though he never stopped worrying over it.

Years passed.

Lisa grew up, and grew talented, and there was nothing her brothers would not give her: Leo his presence at her ice skating practices, cheering her on, and Len his growing skills at picking pockets
and cracking ATMs in order to pay for the increasingly expensive lessons.

Years passed, and there were more men who needed shooting.

Len's hands stopped shaking after each kill. Instead, they started twitching – not just after a death, but all the time: a nervous tic, a compulsion, a need to move, to act, to steal.

Leo read books from the library about it, books about anxiety and trauma and negative reinforcement and feedback loops, and came up with the word kleptomania, but for all the knowledge he gained on the subject, he could not stop it from being true.

Len was sick, now, in a way Leo wasn't, and that was something they had to deal with.

Leo thought that at least they would deal with it together.

Len did not agree, but it would be some time before Leo found that out, for Len had grown very good at keeping secrets where he thought he needed to.

But all secrets come out in the end.

After one year that had been particularly bad – job after job, night after sleepless night, their father intent on winning a promotion within the foul ranks of the Family to which he had sold himself and using his child (his children) ruthlessly to get there – Leo finally discovered the oldest of Len's secrets.

Of course he did.

It was inevitable: the truth of it was in their final report cards for the year, of which they only ever presented their father with one.

"You're failing out," Leo said numbly, staring at the numbers that marked his brother's test scores.

"My test grades are fine," Len said, not disagreeing. "But not enough to overcome the issues with my attendance."

Leo nodded, unable to tear his eyes away from the rows of zeros and no-shows, looking desperately for some sign of unreachable hope, some signal that this wasn't happening.

He saw one zero that makes his eyes go wide, and he jabbed at one of them with a frown. "That was my day," he said, the slightest shade of triumph in his voice: for if they had made one mistake, then surely they might have made others – perhaps even enough others enough to save Len even from such a miserable performance. "I went on that job that day – remember? I remember, because you had to borrow my textbook."

"Yeah," Len said. "I remember."

"But you're still listed as a no-show that day!"

"Yeah," Len said again. "Because I told them I was you."

Leo stared at his brother.

"Yeah," Len said a third time. "I lied and I said I was Leo on the days I went in and you didn't. I did your tests, I did your homework, I did your class participation –"

"But why?!" Leo demanded. "You – you're Leonard –"
"So are you," Len said firmly, his eyes glinting angrily. "Maybe I got that name first, being the oldest, or maybe I didn't; who even knows at this point? It doesn't matter. It's both our names now. But more than that, you're not just Leonard. You're the Leonard that's going to do good."

"What?"

"You're going to college," Len said, that long-ago decision spilling forth at last. "Just like you said you would: go to college and see what you're good at. You're gonna be good at so many things, and you're gonna pick one, and then you're gonna have a real job. A real life. Dad only wants one of us for his jobs, after all, and that's going to be me."

"But –!"

"I'm the one who's a kleptomaniac," Len said, his voice bitter – not at Leo, who he looked at only with love in his eyes, but at the necessity of this whole pretense. Bitter, not at his father whom he never blamed as much as he ought, but at the life he saw as inescapable. "I'm the one who's a murderer. You're going to make it straight, Leo, with no crime at all. You're going to be good."

"I don't want to make it straight!" Leo cried out. "Not without you!"

"I'll always be there," Len said, "when I can."

"That's not good enough! Why can't I be like you, huh? Why can't I –"

"I don't want you to be like me," Len said. "I want you to be better."

"You haven't given me a good reason to stick to the straight and narrow," Leo said, crossing his arms as he glared.

"You'd be able to adopt Lisa when you turn eighteen," Len said promptly. He'd had longer to prepare for this conversation than Leo. "But only if you have no record."

Leo faltered.

He'd always said and thought that there was nothing they would not do for Lisa.

But –

This?

"You don't have a record either," Leo said, but it's weak and he knew it. "Not yet, anyway."

"The police have always let me go when they catch me because I've been small and had good grades," Len said. "I'm still small, but with my grades like that? They'll ship me off to juvie next time they nab me."

Neither of them pretended that he wouldn't get nabbed. It was practically a feature of some of their father's plans, to leave Leonard behind to take the fall.

It might not happen on the first job Len ran, nor even the tenth, but it would happen eventually. And then Len would be taken away, painted with the brush of the bad kid.

The bad twin.

And once one was marked as good and the other as bad, they would be separated with all the force that society could bring to bear upon them.
"Why didn't you just split the days with me?" Leo whispered.

"Because we were out of school enough days to fail us both," Len told him, his voice gentle but sure and certain. He had not made the decision lightly, but make it he had, and he would defend his decision with all the force of his mind brought to bear upon it. "I did the math."

Math was always Len's talent, but Leo could do it, too. He couldn't dispute Len's conclusion.

"I don't want you to," Leo said.

"I don't want to, either," Len said, and that plaintive plea reached him where nothing else would have: his cold mask of calmness broke into tears that beaded up in his eyes, tears that he would never let anyone but Leo see. "I don't want to be like Dad, Leo. But it seems like one of us has got to be, and I'd rather it be me."

"Not like Dad," Leo, who hated their father now more than ever before, a searing hatred that burned at his heart until it was as cold as stone, said. "A thief, yes. Maybe even a murderer. But you will never be like Dad."

Len pulled Leo into his arms the way he always had, and Leo clung back to him like he always had, and they curled up in their single bed the way they always had.

Neither wanted to think of the day when those easy expressions of affection might not be so easy to come by.

There was no more switching, after that.

Len stayed home, caring for Lisa and catching up on his sleep, brushing up on his skills – his light fingers to take things, his quick eyes to spot traps, his ready mind to plan escapes. He ran small, simple jobs of his own. The jobs were intended to be practice runs, preparation and learning to develop his skills for the real events, but they also usually produced enough money to buy Leo and Lisa some small treats.

He did not get caught on these jobs of his own.

Leo, in turn, threw himself into his studies, forcing himself to become better at math rather than relying exclusively on his brother's talents, pushing himself to excel more and more in what he was already good at, and devoting himself to extracurriculars he had previously ignored: extracurriculars he might need to cite on an application to college. Len had sacrificed so much so that Leo could make it, and, to honor that sacrifice, make it Leo would. And he would make it no matter what obstacles, whether poverty or his birth in the slums, stood in his way.

And though they knew the day would soon come to divide them, they tried their best to stay together.

They were careful, risking more of their father's anger than usual to ensure that his plans worked well, that he would not be caught, that Len would not be caught, but in time the day came that all of their caution was for nothing.

And, as Len had predicted, this time the grim machinery of justice did not have mercy: the child with the good grades and the ex-police father could be pitied and forgiven, but the child who was rapidly growing into a delinquent, whose grades were bad, whose father had been kicked off the force?

He got none of that mercy.
Len was taken, first into police custody where he was too terrified to speak, and then, when they tired of that, before the juvenile court. There, the judge sentenced him to a stint in the local juvenile hall.

Local, here, meant all way over in Keystone, since the actual local one had been shut down as a result of some sort of allegations of misconduct and abuse.

Len thinks that he would have preferred the abuse, if it meant that he could stay closer to home.

After all, he was used to abuse, wasn’t he?

He wasn’t used to distance.

"It’s only a few hours away, taking the buses," Leo said that night, watching as Len packed away what little clothing he could spare. His knees were pulled up to his chest and his arms were wrapped around them, and he felt far colder than the room actually was. “We could visit, me and Lisa.”

“If you leave for that long, Dad will notice,” Len said. He’d already done the math, his faithful companion which never lied to him, and had already started to armor his heart against the loss of his other half for months on end.

If Leo wasn’t there to protect his heart, he’d have to do it himself.

He hopes he can.

"Dad won’t notice that I’m still there at all," Leo said. He’d done some thinking of his own on the subject. "I’m planning on staying with a friend from school instead. You know how he thinks there’s just one of us, mostly; I’m hoping he thinks you’re just gone, and doesn’t call for me."

"Lisa —"

"I’ll still take care of her. Not like Dad will bother to, or notice that she’s still getting fed on time. I’ll make it a big secret and tell her she can’t tell Dad I’m around. She’s a good kid; it’ll be fine."

"Okay."

“We’ll call you,” Leo said. “And we could come to visit you – maybe on a long weekend – if Dad’s away –”

“If that happens, then okay,” Len said, and smiled. He did not believe they would be able to come, but he appreciated the promise.

Leo did not smile. He knew how hard it would be for them to make it. "There will be phone calls."

"Every day," Len promised.

“You protect that stupid heart of yours.”

“I will."

“No new friends.”

“Leo…”

"And you have to promise not to die in there."
"I promise. It's only three months, Leonard."

"A lot can happen in three months, Leonard."

"Take care of Lisa," Len said, because he could not deny that truth. "And yourself."

He left the next day.

Leo stayed at home, curled up with Lisa with him instead of Len so that he could sleep, and wondered how Len would survive.

He wondered, too, if being away so long would teach Len how to live without them.

He wondered what Len would do with that knowledge.

As Leo thought this, Len arrived at juvie.
The moment Len saw the squat grey building, filled with angry teenagers and indifferent adults, he knew that this was not going to go well for him.

His fingers twitched.

He tried to stop what he knew was coming, reaching for the breathing techniques that Leo had found for him, the visualization, whatever he could, but it was unstoppable: his anxiety was ramping up, and with the anxiety came the sickness, and with the sickness came theft.

And with theft came anger and pain.

It was less than three hours later that one of the other boys noticed Len filching something out of his pocket – Len wasn’t even sure what it was, since the point was to take rather than to have – and turned on him.

The boy's face twisted up in rage (Len's father's rage writ in miniature but no less gruesome for it) and he moved to strike. Len backed off immediately, hands raised in apology, mouthing pointless words of disclaimer, but it did him no good.

By himself, the boy would have been no threat: Len knew well enough how to fight, and even to fight dirty enough to drive away most men twice his size.

But the boy was not alone.

Five of his friends, formed into a little gang by ruthlessness and a desire to partake of power they could not obtain alone, joined in, and against five of them – all older and stronger than Len, even if he hadn't been half-starved from sharing every meal meant for one boy between two – even Len’s finest twists and tricks could not stand.

They beat him down, forced him down with their fists and their kicks, and once they had him down they did not stop but continued, savagery unleashed, and Len covered his head with his arms as best as he could, wondering if Leo would ever forgive him if Len died within a day of leaving Leo's side.

He wondered, sick in his stomach, if Leo would be twisted by his death, the way Len had been by being forced to kill.

He did not wonder if help would come.

Help never came.

He saw one of the boys pull out a short stubby blade, a too-sharp razor.

He thought of Leo.

He thought of Lisa.

He thought –

He thought that this would be the end of him.

It wasn’t.
Another boy barreled into the fray, unexpected and unimaginable, roaring like a motorcycle without a muffler, his fists swinging wildly, and the other boys scattered before him. The new boy was tall and broad-shouldered and muscular, even as a teenager; there were burns littering his hands and forearms; and it was clear that the other boys were terrified of him.

Len looked up at him from where he was curled up on the ground.

The boy looked down at him.

Len waited for a price to be demanded.

Nothing was forthcoming.

The boy's face flattened into indifference, instead, and he began to turn to leave.

“This won’t mean that I’ll like you, you know,” Len said to him. He’d promised Leo he’d protect his heart (no new friends) so he couldn’t go on and lose it to the first person that wasn’t Leo who’d ever done something nice for him without wanting anything in exchange.

The boy who’d saved him snorted and walked away without a word.

Len might have even been able to keep to that promise, if he’d had some luck – except he never really did have any luck.

“You were originally supposed to be rooming with Anthony,” the teacher in charge of assigning him into a room told Len when she picked him up from the nurse’s office. He’d gotten some pills and plaster, and that was all; it didn’t really help much, but he appreciated it regardless. “That’s going to be an issue.”

“Why?”

“He was one of the ones you got into a fight with earlier.”

Len stared at her. That wasn’t an issue. That was a death sentence.

"Don't worry," the teacher assured Len. "We've moved your room so you won't be with him."

Len picked up his small bag and mutely followed the teacher to his new room. He was still sore and tender, limping a little, but no blood had been spilt and so it wasn't considered too serious a fight.

Perhaps that was why there was no mention of any other measures to be taken to keep this from happening again beyond the shifted rooms.

Len was seriously starting to worry that he wouldn't make it through the three months he was sentenced without breaking his promise to Leo about not dying in here.

"This room," the teacher said, stopping.

Len looked inside.

The boy who had saved him looked back.

Len abruptly realized that this was going to be a bigger problem than he had originally anticipated.

He resolved to hold out as long as he could.
He managed three days.

He’d never slept without Leo before, not really. They’d never had the money for trips or anything, and even if they had they wouldn’t have gone. The few times he’d been away from home overnight on a job he hadn’t slept out of sheer paranoia. Even when he’d taken a nap in the middle of the day, Leo usually came and curled up with him first to help get him under.

He didn’t know how to fall asleep without Leo.

So he didn’t.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, all evening long.

The next day he was exhausted: the only benefit being that he was also too exhausted to steal anything and start any new fights that he would most assuredly lose.

The day after that was worse.

The night on the third day, an hour or so after Len settled in for his nightly ceiling-watching routine, dull in its unending horror, his roommate – who had otherwise been avoiding him at lunch and dinner and in their classes – finally spoke.

“You look like you’re about to collapse.”

“Fuck you too,” Len replied muzzily. It had been his go-to response all day, regardless of what the other side said. He couldn’t really hear them all that well anyway.

“Why don’t you just go to sleep already?”

“Can’t,” Len admitted.

“Is there anything you can do about it?”

“Maybe. You won’t like it, though.”

“At this point, I’d rather you do whatever the hell you need to do to go to sleep than risk you attacking me in a sleep-deprived psychotic break,” Len’s roommate said dryly. “I know you’re new, but it – uh – it ain’t all that unusual for people to do stuff like that, in here. Just to relax enough to sleep, y’know. We’re all teenage boys here. I don’t mind.”

“You – don’t?”

“Nope. Go ahead. I won’t say nothing. I won’t judge and I won’t say nothing about it tomorrow, either. I promise.”

“Okay,” Len said, because at this point he didn’t really feel like he had much choice. He was either going to have to trust his roommate or he was going to die of exhaustion. “Thanks.”

“No probl – what are you doing?!”

Len had climbed down off of his top bunk and was in the process of climbing into his roommate’s bed. He paused and glared sleepily at his roommate, who was gaping at him.

“You said you wouldn’t say nothing,” Len said accusingly. Sadly, with his current state of exhaustion, accusing mostly came off as sulky.
“I ain’t helping you out with it or nothing,” his roommate said. His eyes were very large and mostly white around the edges, like he was scared or something. Len didn’t know why – he was much smaller and weaker than the other boy, not scary at all – but he was too tired to really think it through.

“You don’t gotta do nothing,” Len promised him, slinging a leg and an arm over before ducking his head and putting it on his roommate’s shoulder.

It was weird, doing this with someone who wasn’t Leo – and besides, Len usually preferred to be the one being curled up to, not the one doing the curling up – but it wasn’t exactly a bad sort of weird, and anyway it did the trick: he was out within seconds.

The next morning, he woke up warm and happy and nestled in his roommate’s arms.

He yawned and got up, which woke said roommate up.

“Thanks,” Len said again. He knew they’d agreed not to talk about it in the morning, but he felt lots better, so he figured it was worth saying at least once.

His roommate blinked at him. “…you don’t sleep alone at home,” he said.

It sounded a bit like a question.

“No,” Len said. “I’ve got a brother.”

“Okay,” his roommate said, suddenly relaxing. “Okay. Right. That wasn’t what I thought you were going to do, you know.”

“You didn’t?” Len asked, surprised. “What did you think I’d do?”

Nothing else had even occurred to him.

His roommate arched his eyebrows at him and made a very familiar up-and-down gesture.

It took Len less than a second to identify it, and then another put the pieces together.

He turned bright red and started spluttering.

Well, yes, he could see how someone would – to try to fall asleep – okay, maybe - and then with the bed-sharing thing…

Oh, lord.

His roommate started laughing.

“My name’s Mick,” he said when he got control of himself again. “Mick Rory. I’ll keep an eye on you from now on.”

“You don’t gotta do that,” Len protested, because Mick really didn’t. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re funny,” Mick said, his grin going crooked and almost sad. “And because I used to have to share my bed with my brother, too.”

Len wouldn’t understand the reason for the expression on Mick’s face for a while yet, but it didn’t matter: Mick had saved him, and curled up with him, and didn’t mock him for it, and he had a brother, too.
Len found himself smiling back at Mick.

His chest hurt, but in a good sort of way.

(Leo was going to kill him.)

Leo was, in fact, going to kill him.

Len finally managed to get a call to the right number by the end of the week – he hadn’t let Leo tell him which friend he would be staying with out of fear that their father would remember that he had two Leonards instead of one and might try to beat the information out of Len on their way to the juvie – and Leo figured it out within ten minutes.

“You found someone,” he said coldly, glaring at the phone. He knew he shouldn’t have allowed Len out by himself: less than a week, and already two crises, one physical and the other emotional. One averted, the other ongoing.

“My roommate, Mick,” Len admitted. Some secrets could not be kept, and should not be kept, and certainly not from his brother. He wanted Leo to like Mick. “I like him.”

“Of course you do,” Leo said with a groan. He was going to hate this ‘Mick’ person, he just knew it. In fact, he hated him already. How dare he take advantage of Len’s loneliness? “You like people far too easily.”

“I don’t like anyone!” Len exclaimed, indignant. “You’re the one who’s friendly!”

“Friendly, sure,” Leo said. He didn’t need to say anything more to make it clear: for all of Leo’s smiles and friendliness, he was far more likely to hold other people at arm’s length than Len, to treat them as friends without ever truly caring about them. Even though Len was the one who disdained people, the one who enforced his father’s rule regarding people who tried to leave a job before it was done, his heart bled for them even as he did.

Len conceded the point.

Leo waited in silence.

“You’ll like him,” Len said at last.

Leo snorted.

“I want you to like him,” Len amended.

“What does he do?” Leo asked.

“I don’t like him because he can do things,” Len said, rolling his eyes. “I just – like him. That’s how you’re supposed to make friends, isn’t that what you’re always saying? No reason, just because?”

“Friends, yes,” Leo said patiently. Len had never understood this particular nuance: perhaps he was right in suggesting that Leo should consider being a psychologist. “But you don’t have friends. Not you. You have me and you have Lisa.”

And Dad and the long-gone Marie, though that went unsaid. They had begun fighting about their father, before Len had been sent away; Len thinking that Leo seemed far too angry regarding their father, Leo enraged that Len could not bring himself to hate the man who hurt them both.
Len scowled into the phone. If Leo thought that reminding Len of how rarely his affections were granted would be enough to convince him to drop this, then he was severely mistaken. “And now I have Mick, too.”

Leo scowled into the phone, a perfect mirror to Len far away. It was worse than he’d thought; this ‘Mick’ person had burrowed past Len’s defenses and made his way into Len’s heart, the soft parts deep inside, and there would be no removing him now except perhaps by ensuring his absence.

And even then, Len would always miss him, just as he still missed the long-gone Marie.

Still, better to miss them and think of them fondly then to let them break Len’s heart or use it to abuse him.

“Stay wary,” Leo warned. “He’ll only hurt you, in the end.”

Len licked his lips. He wanted Leo to understand, but he didn’t know if he could: the strange way Mick made him feel. The way his belly grew warm, and his heart grew light, and even his hands grew calm because he didn’t have to worry about anything when Mick was by his side. “He wants to protect me,” he finally said.

He realized as soon as he said it that it was a mistake.

Leo’s eyes narrowed and he glared at the phone. “I protect you.”

“In here –” Len started, but it was too late.

“Do you want me to find a way to get in there?” Leo asked. His voice was friendly and calm and nice. He was unimaginably pissed off.

“No,” Len said. “I didn’t mean – you know I didn’t mean –”

Leo softened, but only a little. “I know,” he agreed. His brother would never pick anyone over him.

“I can’t do this alone,” Len said, as close as he could come to saying ‘I miss you’ without admitting emotion. Their father despised emotion even more than he despised admitting weakness; Len could state the facts and describe the effects of his failure, but he could not convey what he truly meant. Not anymore. Not without being eaten alive from the inside by his own terror, crawling up from his belly to choke the words away.

Another reason for Leo to hate their father.

“If you want,” Len said after a long few moments of silence. He did not want to make the offer he knew he had to make: to give up Mick, so soon after he had found him. To give up not just what he offered, safety and protection and company, but to give up the man himself: gruff and violent, but also kind and lonely. He did not want to make this offer; he felt as though his heart were being ripped in half at the thought of it. But this was Leo. This was the other half of himself. He could not lose the bond between them; nothing was worth the bond between them. They’d agreed. “If it’s important to you, I can –”

“No,” Leo said, interrupting as quickly as he could. He’d heard that pain in Len’s voice before, usually when he could only protect either Leo or Lisa and not both. Len clearly missed home more than he had let on, or else juvie was worse than he was admitting, and the thought of life without Mick’s protection was terrifying him. Leo hated that terror and pain more than he hated the pains of his own jealousy; if it meant he had to share Len for a little while longer, so be it. “No. You keep your Mick, if it helps you.”
There were three months to go, Leo thought to himself. Mick would get in deep, yes, but Len still offered to give him up after mere moments. Surely there would be time to extract him before he did any permanent damage to Len. Leo would never permit that to happen, if he could.

Len breathed a sigh of relief. He would not have to give up Mick, and he had three months to find a way to make Mick acceptable to Leo; that was not nothing.

Three months passed, a blur of phone calls and daily routines. There was good and there was bad, more fights and more loneliness and not enough calls, but also the experience for the first time of eating a full meal meant for one boy alone, meals that they both cheerfully scarfed it all down, no matter how unappetizing, to the amazement of those around them.

And then it ended.

Len returned home. His first meeting was with his father: it went well, insofar as it ever did, meaning that he neither needed to kill anyone nor did he require medical assistance after, his father assuming that his time in juvie would have helped to make Len more obedient to his wishes.

His second meeting was with Lisa, who ran out to embrace him.

His third meeting was with his brother.

They were in each other’s arms at once.

“I missed you,” Leo said, saying what Len could not.

“I – ditto,” Len said.

There was peace between them until dinnertime, when Len was sketching out some story to Lisa about his time at ‘camp’, as they had agreed to refer to it, and Leo said, very pleasantly, “Do you know, that’s the fifth time you’ve mentioned Mick?”

Len fell silent.

“That’s because he’s Lenny’s friend,” Lisa objected, looking between them with a frown. “A real friend, not like your buddies from school. And that means he’s your friend, too, right?”

Leo looked at Len. Len looked at Leo.

“It doesn’t matter,” Leo said after a moment. “He’s very far away, now.”

“Yes,” Len said, his hands curling in his lap. “See, Lise, he’s got three more months left of ‘camp’ before he gets out.”

“Oh,” she said, but she was looking between them suspiciously, aware that there was something more to it than that. “Okay?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Len said, and Leo nodded. Lisa hated it, the rare times they argued, and whenever possible they kept from doing it before her.

Once she was in bed, however…

“You know when he’s coming out,” Leo said flatly.

Len turns to him. “More than that,” he said, his head held high and shoulders squared. “I intend to be there to pick him up.”
“Pick him up and take him – where? He can’t come here.”

“Of course not here. He’ll get an apartment in the city; he’s got some savings. And he’ll get a job –”

“An illegal one, I’m sure,” Leo sneered.

“I hadn’t realized that’d become such a problem,” Len snapped, his face gone pale. “Since that’s my plan, too.”

Leo realized his misstep. “You know I didn’t mean –”

“He’s going to work with me,” Len said in a sudden rush, the words flowing out of his mouth faster than he could stop them. “He’s going to watch my back and be my partner.”

Leo went still.

Len stared at him.

“I thought I was your partner,” Leo said. His back was straight now, too; his hands clenched into fists. This Mick had infiltrated far deeper than he’d feared. “I thought that was me. Is three months enough to change that?”

“You’re going to go straight, Leonard,” Len said. “I’m going to keep crooked. We’re gonna walk separate paths. Is it so wrong for me not to want to walk mine alone?”

“You’re never going to be alone,” Leo said fiercely. He should have realized: his brother was always one for flexible plans that could be changed, a contrast to Leo’s desire for an orderly progression that would remain unchanged. So strange, then, that Len liked math, with its neat lines and solid rules, and Leo the more subjective sciences, but perhaps it was only them liking something that reminded them of each other. “Never, Leonard. We’re always going to be two.”

“Two, yes, but not two together. You’ll have Lisa on your road,” Len said, reaching out and taking Leo’s hand. “And I’ll have Mick. I ain’t asking you to like him right off the bat. Just – give him a chance.”

Leo stared at his brother.

“I want this,” Len said, feeling guilty. He always asked for so much from Leo: his friendship, his love, his tolerance. His brother, who knew what a thief he was, who let him take the missions with their father, who agreed to take the steps towards a totally different type of life, a life he didn’t even know if he wanted, and all of that for him. His brother, who was him. “I want this, this chance. Let me show you that he’s worth it.”

Leo nodded helplessly. His foolish brother, his brother who always sought to protect Leo from everything he could, almost never asked for anything for himself – this, and Leo’s goodness, were the only requests Leo could recall that were not in fact attempts to take the pain of others upon himself.

He could no more deny this request than to deny Len himself.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll give him a chance, Leonard.”

“Thank you, Leonard.”
“But if I don’t approve –”

“I know,” Len said. “If you hate him...” He fell silent and bowed his head.

If it came to that, he would make the choice he had to.

He would give Mick up.

“Good,” Leo said with satisfaction. At least he was still first in Len’s heart. At least he was still best.

At least he would have one last chance to save Len from his own stupid heart.
Mick Rory, when Leo met him, was loud and boisterous and gruff and violent.

(He called Len ‘boss’ and teased him until he smiled.)

He drank too much beer and ate like a pig and lit fires all around, leaving the mess for Len to clean up later.

(He was kind to Lisa, and listened to her with respect, and worried about Len’s dietary habits.)

He spent the money he’d earned with risky stunts too fast and too much, and when he and Len disagreed, they would fight, each one raising a hand against the other.

(He cared for Len afterwards, and he never raised a hand to Len when Len wasn’t fighting back, made Len feel like his equal and never judged him for his illness.)

He flirted badly with women, with crude words and cruder symbols.

(He looked at Len like he made the world spin.)

Leo wanted to hate him.

Leo wanted so much to hate him.

(Len looked at Mick like he’d never looked at anyone before, not even Leo: surprise and gratitude and fondness all in one, and maybe something more.)

Leo didn’t hate him.

This man, by his sheer presence, accomplished what Leo had thought to be impossible.

He made Len happy.

Leo realized he would have to resign himself to Mick being a presence in his life.

He wasn't happy about it, not really - he far preferred the previous state of affairs with just him and Len and Lisa - but he could appreciate the benefits of it: a happy Len made for a happy Lisa and pleased him as well, and it was nice to be able to leave Lisa at Mick's apartment, safe from their father, whenever Len and Leo wanted to talk by themselves.

Also, Mick's apartment always had excess food in it. Always. It was a ridiculous waste, far more than any man (even one with an appetite like Mick's) could eat, and both Len and Leo trying together could barely eat enough of the remainder so that it didn't rot in Mick's fridge. Len complained about Mick's spendthrift grocery store addiction constantly, a wry smile on his face and a friendly punch of his fist, but Mick just shrugged and kept buying too much as if he couldn't control himself.

(Leo noticed he wasn't losing the weight he had gained during Len's absence, weight attributable to eating full meals instead of halves, and wondered if Mick was doing it on purpose.)

It wasn't ideal, no, but it wasn't that bad.

They would be able to find an equilibrium, Leo thought. One where Len liked Mick and Leo didn't
“Hey, Number Two!” Mick called to Leo as he passed. He could always tell them apart, when even Lisa sometimes couldn’t; it worried Leo. He and his brother had relied so long upon the ability to switch places at a moment’s notice that Leo did not want to give up that advantage. “I’ve got a question for you.”

Leo turned to him with raised eyebrows. “Len isn’t here, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Len had left in their father’s car for a job and would not be back for hours yet, if he returned at all that day. The job had been an unexpected one: they had seen their father’s car coming in the distance and hidden Mick inside Lisa’s room so that their father could not see him.

They knew better than to let their father see him.

“No,” Mick said. “It ain’t about that; I know he’s gone off. Just, the guy he went away with – can I kill him?”

Leo frowned and studied Mick closely. “Do you know who that man is?” he asked.

“No,” Mick said, and his face more serious than Leo had become accustomed to, these past few weeks. “But I want to kill him for putting that look on Len’s face.”

“That’s our father,” Leo said.

Mick considered that for a few moments. “Okay,” he said, after a while of thought. “Does that mean you don’t want me to kill him, or that you’re going to help?”

Leo could feel his lips quirking up despite himself, but he quashed the flickers of humor quickly. “You’re not the first one to think of that,” he said. “But Len would never forgive us. Do you realize that?”

“That man put his hands on your brother,” Mick said in return. “And on your sister, and on you. If I ever have a chance, I’m going to burn him to the ground.”

“Why do you care about me?” Leo asked. “Len, of course, and Lisa’s adorable, so I understand, but I don’t like you, and this won’t be the way to convince me otherwise.”

“I know you don’t like me,” Mick said with a shrug. “Most people don’t, and I’d long given up on convincing anyone about anything. I’d given it up, that is, until your brother walked into my life and refused to leave.”

There was a sort of confusion in Mick’s eyes as he spoke.

He hadn’t been infiltrating at all, Leo realized. He’d been as surprised by it as much as anyone else.

He’d seen something worth loving in Len and couldn’t resist it.

Leo couldn’t help but respect that.

After all, he better than most knew how wonderful his brother was, even if almost no one else seemed to see it.

(Mick saw it.)
“But you know he wouldn’t forgive you for it,” Leo pressed. “Isn’t this for him? Why would you do something for him if he wouldn’t forgive you after?”

“*Everything* I do is for him,” Mick said. “If he told me not to, I wouldn’t. But he hasn’t told me not to, yet. And if he didn’t forgive me...”

He trailed off, then caught Leo by the shoulders in a motion that startled Leo.

“Would it make his life better?” he demanded. “Would it make Len’s life better, even if he didn’t forgive me for it?”

Leo looked into Mick’s eyes. “You’d be willing to give him up? You’d be willing to never be forgiven?”

“If it made him happy,” Mick said, and his eyes were frantic. “But I don’t know him like you do. Never will. So if I can’t ask him, I’ve gotta ask you.”

Leo considered. “No,” he finally said, albeit reluctantly. The offer was tempting, but he wouldn’t allow personal feelings to influence his decision. The question was not ‘would Leo like this to happen’, or even ‘would Len be better off personally’, but rather ‘would Len’s life be better’ - and that was a different question entirely. “No, it wouldn’t. Not until we’re eighteen and can get custody of Lisa. It wouldn’t make his life better to do it now.”

Mick’s shoulders slumped with the same weight that Leo had borne on his own so long.

“Okay,” he said, releasing Leo and going to sit down on the couch. “Then I won’t do it.”

As if it were as simple as that.

Leo supposed that for Mick, it was.

Okay, *fine*.

Leo liked him.

He sat down next to Mick. “How do you know the difference between Leonard and I?” he asked. He had wanted to know for a while, but he’d never wanted to concede enough respect to Mick to ask. “You always do. No one else does.”

Mick shrugged. “My sisters – Mandy and Ellie – they were twins, too. You learn to look for the little things, and that works until they figure out how to mimic those, too, and then you look for something else. It’s fun to keep track of, really, and there’s just enough difference between you and Len that I can spot it if I try.”

Leo nodded, then frowned. “They *were* twins?”

“They’re dead now,” Mick said, his voice suddenly gone dull and heavy and unbearably sad. He pulled out the lighter he liked to stare at and avoided Leo’s gaze. “Didn’t Len tell you? I burned my whole family. They’re all dead now.”

Leo could feel his eyebrows shooting up. He knew what intentional murder did to a man, learned the lines it left on a man’s face by seeing them grow on Len’s, and Mick had none of those signs, and none of the psychopathy that would be required not to feel the guilt of it.

He looked – guilty, yes. And terribly sad.
But he didn’t look like a murderer.

“He probably didn’t tell you because he wants you to like me,” Mick said, staring into the flickering flame of his lighter with a gaze that had none of his usual enjoyment of fire and all too much of a desire to avoid seeing the expression on Leo’s face. “Len, I mean. I told him about it when I was still trying to make him go away, but he didn’t care. He said that he wasn’t going to blame me for it, even if I did. That’s probably why he didn't tell you, though he probably should’ve, at least before he let you trust me with Lisa.”

The pieces clicked together in Leo’s mind.

“You didn’t call for help,” Leo said. “The fire started by accident, and you were caught in it, and you didn’t call for help because you were caught in watching it; that’s why you blame yourself.”

Mick tore his eyes away from his flame. “How’d you do that?” he asked, surprised. “The boss figured it out, too, just like that.”

Leo nodded to himself. That fit much better, and made the picture of Mick Rory come together at last: because Mick Rory was loyal, painfully loyal, and he’d lost everything he’d ever been loyal to, home and hearth and family, and he’d been adrift until he had found Len and Len had found him.

He would care for Len forever, even at the cost of his own pain.

He would do for Len what Len had always done for Leo.

“I’ve decided that I like you,” Leo announced, standing up and putting a hand on Mick’s shoulders for a brief moment. “Welcome to the family.”

He left, Mick gaping after him.

Len returned home with a black eye and a wrist that kept hurting even after he’d fixed it back into place, but once he saw the way they were sitting at the dinner table, Leo’s shoulders relaxed and a smile on his face even as he looked at Mick, who was telling Lisa another of his tall tales, he couldn’t stop smiling for the rest of the night.

“You like him,” he murmured in Leo’s ear as they curled up together in their bed that was rapidly becoming too small for two as they grew. “You like him.”

“Not as much as you do,” Leo murmured back, his lips curved up into a smile.

“Give it time,” Len said confidently. Now that Leo saw what was good in Mick, he would understand.

“Oh, no,” Leo said. “I don’t think I’m ever going to like him as much as you do.” And he laughed.

But he was wrong about that, too.

It started slowly.

An aesthetic appreciation, nothing more.

After all, there was a lot to appreciate. Mick’s tendency to work out shirtless in his small apartment (or in Leonard’s house, when available) guaranteed it.

But it wasn’t just that.
Mick was kind and he was good and he was there to put himself between the Leonards and the world, and Lisa, too.

And there was more than just that.

Leo first noticed it less than a month later, when Len was planning out one of the jobs that he would do without his father, with only Mick at his side. Len was pacing, talking through his plan aloud, drawing their path in the air with his hands, seeing his pathway as if it were laid out in front of him. That way, Mick and Leo could interject any suggestions they wanted, suggest any fixes or point out any flaws.

“– and then we need to sling the take through the grinder –”

“The…what?” Leo asked from where he was sitting on the couch, frowning. He didn't know what that meant.

Len waved a hand at him, his brain too deep in his blueprints to respond.

Mick looped an arm over Leo’s shoulder, Leo starting in surprise. “It’s slang,” he explained, smiling, his face open and relaxed. He’d been out back burning some garbage in a tire, earlier; his body was loose and at ease and ever so warm as a result. “Don’t worry, Number Two, I’ve got you covered.”

“Why am I Number Two?” Leo grumbled. “Because you met him first?”

“Nah,” Mick said. “The Prisoner. Number Two’s the clever one.”

“What am I, then?” Len asked absent-mindedly. “Chopped liver?”

“You’re the boss, boss,” Mick said, still smiling. “You plan ‘em and I execute ‘em. But Number 2 here? He’s leading armies.”

“There weren’t any armies in the Prisoner,” Leo objected.

“Sure there were,” Mick said. “All those background actors, yeah?”

“It was a different actor every time!”

“Exactly!” Mick said, beaming like he’d made sense.

Leo scowled at him, confused.

“Lay it out,” Len said indulgently from where he was looking at the table. “You know we mere Leonards can’t follow you through all the twists of your thinking.”

“Leo’s got a thousand and one faces,” Mick explained. His arm was warm over Leo’s shoulder. “One for every person he meets, whatever works best for ‘em. A different actor each time, even though he’s playing the same role.”

Len snorted, but Leo wasn’t so sure. It sounded –

Well, it sounded rather a lot like him.

“Don’t worry,” Mick told him. “We know who you are.”

And that made it all seem all right.
Mick never let Leo fall behind, not once, despite his increasing distance from the world that Mick and Len increasingly inhabited. He explained the terms they used and he updated Leo on the changes in their plans and he identified all the players that they might encounter, showing Leo all the contingency plans and back-ups Len built into his plans but thought were too obvious to mention. He even explained the parts of the plan that Leo already knew, just because it helped Leo to be reminded that Len really did know what he was doing.

And when Len disappeared, deep inside on his jobs, Mick continued to answer his phone religiously, and he always told Leo everything he wanted to know.

When Len buried himself in work, Mick smiled at Leo over Len’s head in commiseration.

He even helped Leo in the kitchen the way Len never did. In fact, he took over the kitchen, never once forgetting that Len liked spinach but Leo preferred broccoli, or that Lisa insisted that everything have three times as much salt as either Leonard.

Sometimes he’d bring home gifts: sometimes for Len, sometimes for Leo, and always for Lisa.

When questioned as to why, he frowned at them and told them that he’d just seen something that reminded him of them, that’s all, and why were Snarts so persnickety anyway?

Mick kept an eye out at the local movie theater and could always be counted on to lure Len away from his work for the latest sci-fi film, whether masterpiece or stinker, or to take Lisa to her latest kids’ movie or, later, romance and horror, but he also showed up at Leo’s desk with tickets for the old classic films that Leo loved on a regular basis, even though no one else really liked them the way Leo did.

And, of course, whenever one of Mick’s beloved ninja films came out, they were all forced to go.

(They were universally terrible, but Mick's joy was positively infectious.)

Mick also watched musicals, of all things, and insisted that everyone watch them with him, and then got them all tickets to see one live. Leo was pretty sure that Mick even bought the tickets legitimately.

Mick wistfully looked at board games whenever they took Lisa to the toy store, his secret longing so clear that Leo and Len glanced at each other with a mixture of determination and resignation and brought some home.

And when they played those games, board games and card games and all the like, he picked Leo as often as Len to be on his team.

“Ain’t you supposed to be my partner, Mick?” Len whined one day, throwing down his cards in disgust as Leo cackled and raked in the betting money as Mick reshuffled the UNO deck. “Why you doing this to me?”

Mick only laughed, but Leo was curious now, too.

“Why do you pick me for your team?” he asked Mick after Len stomped away to do the dishes with Lisa, as was his due punishment as the loser. “Instead of picking Len every time? I know you know the difference between us.”

Mick frowned at Leo. “Why would I?”

“He’s your partner, ain’t he?”
“Yeah,” Mick said, scratching his head. “But you’re both Leonard, ain’t you? So why wouldn’t I pick you both?”

Leo’s throat suddenly went very tight.

“Yes,” he said, forcing the words out through that feeling that seemed to spread all the way through his chest, making it warm and a little melty in a way he’d never felt for anyone but Len and Lisa before, and not even Lisa in quite this way. This was different. Very different. “But – he’s your criminal partner. Len is, I mean.”

“Well, sure,” Mick said. He was still frowning, still confused, as if what they were discussing was the matter of greatest simplicity for him. “I can’t be your criminal partner because you’re not a criminal. Len is. Simple as that.”

And then he smiled at Leo. “Don’t worry, Number Two,” he said. “I’ve still got your back for everything else.”

And Leo looked at Mick, really looked at him, the man that fit into their lives the way no one but Lisa ever had – not Marie, not any of the kids at school, no one – and he saw him for what felt like the first time.

It was more than a little horrifying for Leo to discover that when he closed his eyes and thought of the person he would like to share his life with, in that nebulous future that Len had sacrificed so much of himself for, the shape of that person was also Mick.

“I like him,” Leo told Len that night when they curled up in bed, horrified at himself. “I really like him.”

“He does that,” Len said, nodding. “It’s inevitable, really.”

“I can’t like him!” Leo exclaimed.

“Why not?”

“For one thing, he’s yours. And for another, he’s here to walk your path with you, not me with mine.”

“He’ll be on my path, yes,” Len said. “But if you think I’m going to leave you alone just because you’re walking a different path, then you’ve got another thing coming, and the same is true for him. Why don’t you ask him, and see what he says?”

Leo struggled with it for another year before he finally gave in. He was seventeen; he’d been accepted to the college of his choosing with a full financial aid scholarship; he was less than a year away from being able to pry Lisa out of the hands of his father, whether by their father’s willing agreement or by Mick’s flames, whichever was necessary.

Now was the time to take a risk.

He asked.

Mick frowned at him. “I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t I love you, too, in addition to Len? Of course I do; you know that.”

“Not like that,” Leo said. “Like – being in love.”
“Yes,” Mick said. “Like that.”

“With me?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re in love with Len, aren’t you?” Leo asked.

“I wasn’t in love with nobody at first,” Mick said. “It took me a good long while to get there, but then I’ve always been a slow learner. And you made it complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“Yeah,” Mick said. “It’s real complicated, being in love with Leonard Snart.”

Leo opened his mouth to protest, and then paused.


And Leo smiled.

And behind them, Len smiled, too.
Their father signed away Lisa in their eighteenth year in exchange for Len helping with a job involving more money than any of them had ever even heard of. He signed the paperwork with a smirk, certain in his knowledge that his son would never claim his prize if the job went wrong, and with every intention of reneging on the agreement with force and threats should the job go well.

Leo, who held the pen when his father signed, looked straight into his father's eyes and carefully left the name the individual doing the adoption blank, claiming that he would fill it in later.

Len, who went on the job, knew the consequences of what would happen if the job went well.

And for Lisa, for Leo, what was one more sacrifice?

The job went wrong.

Len made sure of it.

The police caught them all, every one of them, and Len went to prison right alongside his father.

He did not go alone: Len had gathered the crew for this mission, selecting those he knew did not deserve the freedom of the streets of Central, and also Mick, who he pretended to have selected at random.

Len would have preferred to spare Mick those lost years in prison, but Mick and Leo joined forces to overrule him: his freely given testimony regarding the nature of the crime and the other more serious crimes of the others in the crew, and his explanation of why Len wouldn’t testify against the father he feared and loved, was traded for a significant reduction in both his and Len’s sentences.

"Worth it," Mick told Len.

Len nodded, glad only that Lewis was sentenced to another prison in a different part of the state, and went to try to get them assigned to the same cell. Prison would be hard, he knew - his separation from Leo for years instead of months even harder - but Mick would help him through the worst of it, and he was sure they could get out early through good behavior and significant bribes.

Leo presented the papers to the courts the very next day, his face stiff with rage.

(The name on the papers was Lionel.)

“This all seems above board,” the administrator reviewing the paperwork said jauntily. “And your plan to take care of your sister using your financial aid package seems sound. I don't see why this wouldn't be in the best interest of the minor, especially given that your father's gone to prison, and your brother, too.”

He smiled. “Guess Lionel Snart’s the good Snart twin, huh?”

Leo said nothing.

(He submitted the paperwork to officially change his first name to Leonard a year to the day later, when everyone had forgotten his brother’s name, buried as it was within the depths of Iron.
Heights. A few months of strictly curtailed diets for himself and Lisa, plus a requested advance on his student loans, helped make the few side payments that ensured that the request was granted.

Leo studied psychology in school, noodling around with some fashion classes in his spare time — largely to improve his ability to mend or even make clothing for Lisa, who was now on an even more limited budget than before since she still wanted to take those painfully expensive skating lessons, which were now no longer covered by Len and Mick’s regular contributions — and he took Lisa to visit Len and Mick every week.

Lisa and Mick talked for an hour each time, even when they had nothing to say, just so the Leonards could sit in silence the whole hour through in the next booth over, each one’s hand on the glass in a vain attempt to touch each other.

No one ever asked any questions.

No one ever noticed.

(No one ever did, in Iron Heights.)

It turned out that Len and Mick didn’t really have much good behavior in their favor — too many fights over Len’s pretty face that Mick ended with his fists and willingness to fight dirtier than ever, backed up by Len’s own willingness to stab people with anything that fell into his hands — but Leo drained his savings and his credit to pay the right people and so they still got out early.

(Their father didn’t.)

Of course, early was still relative: they were in that place for a little over three years — three years of missed birthdays, three years of not seeing Lisa skate, three years of Len worrying endlessly about Leo even in the relatively safe environment of Central City Community College, three years of Leo’s bed lying empty and far, far too large for one man alone.

“Our turn to watch Lisa, now,” Len said, his head on Leo’s shoulder.

“She’s older, you know,” Leo replied. He was clutching onto Len and leaving bruises, and he didn’t much care. Len was back. He’d missed him so much. He’d missed Mick, too, but Len — if he never let go of Len again, it would be too soon. He knew Len felt the same, though his cautious, protective brother would never let his emotions out so far as to leave a single mark. “She needs less watching.”

“You should go do something fun, something just for you,” Mick said firmly. He was building something on the living room table in front of the couch that they were on, using the skills he’d refined in his time doing prison industry at Len’s prodding; he’d learned that he enjoyed mechanic work for the sake of it, rather than just as a means to make money or to salvage something in an emergency. He was shirtless again, as much for his own comfort as for their viewing pleasure. “We’ll fund it.”

They ended up committing a rash of crimes less than a month after they got out, just the two of them, Len and Mick both, and each one went off flawlessly, refilling Leo’s bank account, paying off his debts, building up Lisa’s college fund and even paying for yet more of those fancy skating lessons of hers, which had only gotten more expensive as time went on and the lessons became tougher and even more professional in nature. One of the more expensive coaches talked about the Olympics, or at least Nationals, so they paid without question and joy in their hearts.

It wasn’t like it was a problem.
After all, Len was, as he’d always thought, really very good at this.

Especially now that he was free of their father.

Besides, he enjoyed the work, and he needed it, and there was no reason why not to do it, as long as he took care not to get caught.

(He wouldn't let himself get caught. He was never going to go to prison like that again if he had anything to say about it.)

Leo supposed there was no harm in having a little fun, and as soon as he finished college, a year later, he decided to reward himself by doing something utterly outrageous and signed up to spend a summer making clothing in New York for some silly television show competition he'd never heard of.

(Len and Mick and Lisa came, too: Lisa for a skating camp, and Len and Mick, with smiles, to check out some of New York's most interesting sights, like its museums or its Diamond District.)

It went pretty well, for the most part – Leo didn't have any issues working under pressure, the way some of the others did, and anyway he was doing this mostly for the free trip to New York, not to take himself seriously. He made that clear in the interviews, smiling and friendly and with the occasional snarky comment about someone else's design that the producers assured him would make him quite popular with the viewers, like he cared in the slightest. The insults of the other designers rolled off his back with barely a notice - after all, he was used to far worse - and he just settled down and worked with a placid determination that the other (usually far more manic) contestants (they insisted on being called 'designers', whatever) openly envied.

He made the same clothing that he’d made at home for Lisa, or for Len, or for Mick, only wilder, happier, more relieved, more free. Golds, and blues, and reds, and greens. Vivid patterns, subtle detailing, and the occasional splash of something crazy.

He couldn't resist.

Still, Leo had to admit that his favorite challenge was the one where they flew Lisa out to meet him as a surprise (she had to go back to Central for the weekend to pretend to be "surprised") and assigned him to create something avant garde based on her career path.

"Well, I'm going to be a mechanical engineer and an ice skater," Lisa said wryly. "Maybe go with the latter, yeah?"

"With touches of the former," Leo agreed. "I can do something structural."

He did her up a dress, white and gold, low cut almost to the point of absurdity, with golden ribbons everywhere, shot through with wire so that they would flow up into the air rather than hang limply by her side, and added a swirling high cut for the skirt that shimmered with illusory depth every time she moved. He even had a little spare time, so he picked a pair of strappy boots and constructed some blades for her to spin around in the way only an ice skater could.

"My god, it's beautiful," Heidi Klum gushed. "I wish I were an ice skater – the neckline is very va-va-voom!"

"I think the ribbons make it a bit costume-y," Nina Garcia said. "But as usual, your construction is perfect and that hemline is wonderful – feminine and flirty, really shows off those skater legs."

"I'm almost afraid to say anything negative," Michael Kors laughed. "I feel like your sister would
come down here and cut a throat if I did."

Lisa laughed in return, a sweet and innocent laugh that Leo was perfectly aware meant that she was, in fact, considering it.

Luckily the remaining comments were generally quite positive.

He didn’t win the competition, which he’d never expected to, but he did very nearly make it to the final round, getting eliminated right before the finale.

Still, it’d been fun: he’d gotten a nice pile of money to make a pile of different outfits, done up any way he liked, and it’d been so much fun to watch all those models stalk around in them. They even invited him back to New York a few months later to watch the final stage of the competition.

Afterwards, a woman he didn't know came up to Leo and asked him what he planned to do now.

“I’m going back to Central, I guess,” he said with a grin. He’d rather enjoyed this whole crazy summer. He was even regretting having to go back to his real life.

“Yes, but what are you going to do there?” she pressed.

“Start job-hunting, I guess?” he replied with a shrug. “I got my B.A. in Psychology mailed to me while I was doing this competition –” There hadn’t been any point in attending graduation: Len and Mick wouldn’t have been able to come without alarming the class-conscious natives, and Lisa had been horrified about the idea of waiting for hours and hours to watch a bunch of people she didn’t know walk across a stage. “ – and I guess that’s probably good enough to get something entry-level. Dunno. Maybe as a social worker?”

“Do you want to be a social worker?” the woman asked. “Because having seen what you're capable of, I’d be happy to give you a job myself, as long as you keep designing those clothes.”

Leo laughed.

She didn’t.

“A job’s a job,” Mick opined, when Leo told him and Len about her offer. “You can always look for a shrink gig afterwards this thing doesn’t work out; it ain't like that degree goes bad if you don't use it.”

“Which doesn’t mean it won’t work out,” Len said. He didn’t know the first thing about fashion, or clothing, or anything like that, even if he knew how to best work the clothing Leo made for him. “You never know; it might go well. I mean, I don't know what 'going well' constitutes in this context -”

"You don't know anything about legal employment," Leo pointed out, quite reasonably.

"- but either way it’s not a bad salary she’s offering, right?" Len continued, virtuously ignoring Leo's comment. "Better than entry-level social work pays. With that money, you can pay for Lisa’s lessons above-board, while we pay for room and board and permits under the table; now that she’s shooting for Nationals in a few years, we’ll want to keep her as clean as possible."

Leo agreed with that logic, found that he had no reason to object to spending a little longer playing around before he went back to the real world, and got to work.

He ended up liking the job a great deal more than he’d expected.
The job, in turn, ended up liking him, too, because he was sent to present his designs in New York the next year, and suddenly all the papers were writing about him, and his salary abruptly increased. And increased again.

And again.

“But it’s just clothing,” Len said, utterly bemused, sitting in Leo’s brand new office. Lounging, really, stretched out on the desk like he could claim it for his own by sheer presence. Leo had no idea when his brother turned into half a cat, but it certainly wasn’t under his watch. Really, now that he thought about it, Len’d always been this way. Wait, was he, too? Leo examined his own lounging posture for a moment, then decided not to think about it. “Some of this shit’s just stuff you sketched out while me and Mick were having our little planning sessions at your place.”

“Yes, well,” Leo said. “Apparently criminal wear is very ‘street’ nowadays.”

“What does that even mean?” Mick asked from where he was running his hands back and forth over a roll of satin with an expression of sheer sensory bliss. Leo made a mental note to get him some more swatches.

“I have no idea,” Leo admitted. “I’m just very good at bullshitting.”

“Family trait,” Len said with a smirk.

The door creaked, the sign of someone about to walk in, and Leo ducked behind his desk in immediate instinct.

“Mr. Snart, we need you downstairs,” Leo’s secretary said, her voice urgent, and tugged Len off the table and whisked him out the door before either Leo or Mick could react.

Leo popped his head back over the table.

“I thought the plan was for the boss to hide if anyone came looking,” Mick said. “Not you.”

“It was,” Leo said dryly. “Could you go make sure he’s not ruining my business?”

As it happened, Len might not have had Leo’s education, or sewing skills, or even taste, but he had a dead-eyed stare he’d perfected in prison and a previously undiscovered talent for contract negotiations. The production heads, who’d swooped in with their lawyers to catch Leo by surprise, hadn’t been expecting that; he overwhelmed them to the point that they were walking out looking like they’d been sucker-punched and he walked out with full creative control over the next fashion line that the house that’d hired him (well, hired Leo) would be producing.

Len also, after the negotiations were completed, made the mistake of lounging over the chair he was in while waiting for the last revisions to the contract to be completed for signing, causing the celebrity photographer working across the room to shout “Don’t move!” and run over to take some photographs, because apparently it was ‘perfect’ or something and he wanted to get the models to replicate that effortlessly cool ‘mood’.

Leo had to send Len to work in his stead for the next three days until that particular photoshoot was finished, and it ultimately ended up being Len’s picture in the fashion magazine to represent the up-and-coming face of fashion, a fact which Leo found to be utterly hilarious.

(He also ended up getting a remarkable amount of actual sewing work done in the back room during this time, with Mick standing guard at the door to make sure no one bothered Leo by accident while they thought ‘he’ was sitting around getting his photos taken. Everyone was very
impressed and assumed he’d been working nights to compensate; Leo even got a bonus out of it.

At the same time, whenever he wasn’t spending time being mistaken from Leo, Len was developing his own type of reputation.

The criminal underworld grew to respect him, with his fierceness and his ruthlessness and his refusal to work with any of the Families, but, most importantly, his success.

The CCPD learned his name quickly enough and learned, too, to hate him, but even they conceded that he was good. His brilliant schemes with their multiple angles and approaches, with the perfect planning that never left behind any trace, became his signature.

The cops in Central stopped even bothering to bring him in for questioning unless they had solid evidence, and even then they usually found it to be a waste of time.

(The CCPD were sometimes contacted by the police of other places: New York, London, Milan, Paris, Berlin, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Rome, Madrid, Copenhagen, and even Shanghai. They could not help them. Worse, the occasional detective who tried to arrest Leonard Snart, the increasingly famous fashion designer, at the local fashion week show would invariably discover that the man had an iron-tight alibi and a whole cadre of lawyers ready to sue for wrongful arrest, so that angle of the investigations got dropped very quickly after a while.)

Mick got his own reputation, too.

To the police departments of the world, mostly the CCPD, it involved mad rages and fire (whenever possible), though also surprisingly few dead, especially when compared to the trail of bodies that followed Len.

Of course, to the high-end fashion world, Mick’s reputation was a little – different.

“Your partner is – unique,” one of the other designers informed Leo, who smirked.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘coarse’,” he drawled. “Or maybe ‘crude’.”

“Energizing,” the designer purred. “Very much a breath of fresh air.”

Leo watched the man’s eyes skim down the lines of Mick’s back to the deceptively simple but very carefully tailored pants he was wearing.

He took a sip of his champagne. “I did that,” he announced, nodding at Mick.

The other designer choked.

“The pants, I mean,” Leo said with a smirk. “I assume that’s what you were talking about.”

And then he smiled.

(Len’s not the only one with a good dead-eyed intimidation look.)

Even Lisa was getting herself out there: she placed in the top three at Junior Nationals, and in the top ten at Nationals.

She even competed in the Olympic trials and made the shortlist, though ultimately to their disappointment she wasn’t selected to go.

Either way, though, it made for a great story to write in her application for college, where she
hoped to become a mechanical engineer.

(Leo took her to tour colleges and revised her personal statement. Len doubled his efforts to increase her college fund and stole her some fancy jewelry to have as a back-up emergency fund. Mick brought her ice cream and commiserated about how ridiculous the Leonards were being.)

"You realize that she's gonna have to dip her toes in the criminal pool sometime," Mick told the Leonards after she went to sleep in a huff one night. "What with us being a criminal family and all."

"Leo's straight," Len protested. He was curled in his now-traditional place at Mick’s right side.

"Leo is not a criminal," Leo agreed mildly from over at Mick’s left. "But I object to the use of the word 'straight' as inaccurate."

"Leo," Mick said, rolling his eyes at the ceiling from his position in the center; it’s a good thing, he thought as he often did, that he enjoyed being overly hot, "regularly harbors and provides alibis for a pair of very high-end thieves, which is – what's it called again?"

"Accessory after the fact," Len said. "Possibly accomplice or co-conspirator, depending on what they can prove he did or did not know and when he did or did not know it. And that's assuming they ever figure out that we're twins."

A very significant sum had been paid to one of the clerks in the Hall of Records to ensure that that fact had been permanently obscured, an investment which has been returned several times over already.

Leo sniffed, not wanting to concede the fact of his own not-so-secret criminality. "Why does that mean she's going to have to do some crime? It's entirely possible for someone from a family of criminals not to be criminals."

"Possible, yeah," Mick said. "But maybe not when she admires you both so very much. She'll want to at least try it out."

The Leonards considered this, and simultaneously made faces not unlike a cat being petted the wrong way.

Mick, who had grown accustomed to them, smirked at the acknowledgment of his victory.

"Don’t worry, she agrees: college comes first," he said graciously. "I can get her a part-time job with some of my trucker buddies in the meantime, if she gets the proper license."

"She'll get one," Leo agreed gloomily. He was well aware of the criminal bent of many of Mick's 'buddies', and of the usefulness of being able to drive a truck in moving stolen goods from one place to another, and he was also aware of the fact that Lisa, too, was aware of that fact. She would leap at the chance to join the family business. "How are you so much better at figuring Lisa out, anyway? I'm the family shrink."

Technically, he was a successful fashion designer with a BA in Psychology who used some of his fame and fortune to found a foundation devoted to helping lower-class kids in Central with their mental health issues for cheap or free, but Len and Mick (quite proudly) called him the family shrink anyway.

"She's family," Mick said. "Family that ain't you is sometimes harder to figure out."

The Leonards frowned. They understood each other just fine, except when they were fighting.
But Lisa –

Okay, fair. Lisa was often a total mystery.

At least Mick remained pretty straightforward.

Life continued.

Leo’s reputation among the rarefied heights of the fashion world grew, although he declined invitations that were designed to make him a household name. He did it because he didn’t want too much scrutiny, but his reticence and apparent exclusiveness made him all the more attractive to those knew fashion.

Len’s reputation among both criminals and police grew, with the police becoming increasingly resigned to his thefts and the underclass of his beloved Central City increasingly welcoming to him as he took care to spend the wealth he collected among them.

But not every job could go well.
Usually, Len had contingency plans upon plans in place.

First, if he got a bad feeling, to enable his retreat from any job still uncaught, and if those plans failed, to ensure he avoided prison: bribed guards, misplaced paperwork, escapes that could not be publicized or recorded lest they reveal the gigantic holes in security that there were no easy or cheap ways to fix. He was almost never caught, his instincts finely tuned and capable of detecting when a job was about to go wrong long before it actually did, and his extremely rare stays in prison, when they did occur, were abnormally short, as judges whose wives and mistresses' necks shimmered with stolen diamonds ordered his release on good behavior after mere weeks, or, even more rarely, months.

He kept his promise never to leave his family for so long again, and he was very, very good at what he did.

To say, therefore, that Leo was not expecting a call in the middle of the night, his brother saying in a shaky voice that something had gone terribly wrong, would be to make a generous understatement.

Something had gone wrong -

Mick had been burned.

Leo could drive better than Len could, and although he obeyed his brother's directive to avoid being seen coming in their direction (he did let himself be caught speeding in the opposite direction, the ticket he would incur from the red light camera a small price to pay for the alibi it produced), he was at the hospital Len had named on the phone far faster than could reasonably be expected.

Desperation did that to people.

Leo left the car behind and sprinted in through the doors, terrified of what he would see.

Len was sitting in a hospital chair in the waiting room of the expensive but very discrete private clinic he paid a yearly subscription to be able to access whenever there was a need, in contrast to the equally discrete but far more legitimate one that Leo frequented on the even rarer occasions that he had his own medical issues.

Len's wrist had begun to purple from an untreated sprain, his shirt was red and brown from the blood seeping out of some untreated cuts, and one of the nurses continually ducked down to look at his vacant eyes to check for signs of concussion. He had, the nurse informed Leo (after her shock at seeing a second one of him had passed), refused all medical assistance in favor of that chair and his endless vigil.

Leo nodded his understanding, and went to his brother.

"They're still operating on Mick," Len reported dully when he saw Leo, each world coming slow and laden down with terrible guilt. Len, the protector, who always took the pain of others – this was a terrible blow to him, shaking him down to his core. His job, his responsibility, and no one would ever be able to convince him otherwise. "Severe burns over half of his body, maybe up to two thirds. Arms, back..."
He went mute again, his eyes growing distant as he returned to that terrible flame-ridden hell from which he had not yet escaped, and even Leo could not pull him back to himself for long moments.

"They don't know yet if he'll recover," Len continued, after several minutes of Leo shaking his shoulders had roused him again. He did not appear to realize that he had paused. "Recover at all, I mean. They don't know. He might - they said - they don't know. They said they'd know more once the surgeries were done. But they're not done yet. He's been in there - so long. It's been so long. But they're not done, so they don't know."

Leo nodded. "I understand," he said, even if he didn't know anything of what job they had been planning this time or how it went so terribly wrong. He'd been distracted, with his work and his fashion and his life on the straight and narrow path he walked; a distraction he now deeply regretted. He hadn't paid attention to their plans, thinking that it would go as smoothly as it ever did, and waved them away when they left with barely more than the usual farewell. How was he to know that this time would be different? How was he to know that that might have been the last time - no, he can't think that way. If he thinks that way, he won't be able to be strong, and Len needs him to be strong right now. Len, his protector, with his broken heart that Leo must now step up to defend. "Go with the nurse; let her take care of you. I'll wait here."

Leonard Snart would not leave his seat until he learned what Mick Rory's fate would be.

Which one was actually sitting there was, of course, irrelevant.

This was simple, this was straightforward, this was how it was and how it would be.

And yet, Len did not stir.


Leo waited until Len nodded, signifying – not understanding, no, but at least that he was listening.

"Go with the nurse," Len repeated. "You need treatment. I will wait here."

"Go..?"

"Yes."

"You'll wait here?" Len asked. His eyes were still white all around the edges, his pupils mismatched sizes in a way Leo didn't trust at all.

"Yes," Leo said again. "But you have to go with the nurse."

"Go," Len repeated blankly, a broken record, a glitched and vacant screen where there was once someone Leo loved beyond life itself. "Yes. I'll go. You wait."

Leo nodded firmly, and at last, at last, Len permitted the hovering nurse to take him by the arm and lead him away.

Leo sat where Len had been sitting.

Then, and only then, did he allow himself the luxury of panic and despair.

Mick burned, the fate they'd both feared and expected – but he still lived, at least for now. That was not nothing.

Poor Len broken, his brilliant eyes vacant and hollow – oh, Leo had always known that Mick
would wreak some terrible damage on his brother, from the very first he knew Len's soft hidden heart would shatter somehow and that it would be Mick Rory's fault.

He just hadn't expected it to happen this way.

He hadn't expected, too, what Mick would mean to him when it happened.

He'd thought –

Oh, he'd been a fool.

Everyone always thought about them the wrong way, thinking of Len as the cold-hearted, Leo as the warm and kind, when in truth it was Len, vicious and ruthless Len, who had a soft and tender center, who would sacrifice everything for his loved ones, who felt every blow and every wrong they received as if it had been done to him.

Leo was the one who could process his emotions, rationalize them, who smiled at everyone and was friends with everyone but loved no one –

No one but Len and Lisa and Mick.

Somehow, despite all reassurances to the contrary, Leo had always secretly thought of Mick as more Len's than his, Len's criminal partner and best friend, not his for all that Mick loved them both, for all that he loved Mick in return, for all that he held onto Mick with all the possessiveness he had in his heart. Even with all that evidence, all that proof that Mick was as much his as he was Len's, Leo thought, stupidly, that that meant that he would be able to withstand anything that came, that he could bear up against any pain should Mick choose to go, that he could still be Len's defender and focus on Len's heart instead of worrying about his own.

That he could have the joy of Mick's presence without suffering the weakness and the pain of love.

But no.

It turned out that their mother's soft heart was not just Len's inheritance, but Leo's, too, and it bled blood just as red in his chest as it did in Len's.

It hurt.

It hurt so much.

At least this meant that Leo wasn't as much like their father as he'd sometimes feared he was.

"Mick," he whispered, a prayer and a call both, his hands pressed against his chest as if to press closed the gaping invisible wound that had opened there. Please don't leave us, he thought – not just for Len, but for himself, too.

"Len," he added, bending his thoughts towards his broken, vulnerable brother, his brother who he could not help through this pain and grief because he was caught in it himself. He feared what this would do to Len, this terrible blow, this destroying strike; he did not know how to help his brother recover when he himself was still so much in pain. They had grown comfortable, building Mick into the very foundation of their lives: they did not know how to deal with this.

"Please," he said, last but not least, a plea thrown to the universe, to their mother's God in which neither he nor his brother really believed, to luck itself.
And then he said nothing more until the nurse came out and told him that Mick would live.
Leo closed his eyes. His heart hurt, a sudden strike of warmth against the ice that had formed there.
Mick would live.
Mick would live.
"Good," he said through lips that had gone numb. "Good. And my brother?"
Has he been told, he meant.
The nurse did not understand it that way.
Len, it seemed, had run away.
He was not well.
He had a concussion – smoke inhalation – oxygen not flowing right through his body – suffering from a terrible shock – he might not know where or when he was.
He had gone for treatment, but the nurse had left him, only for a moment, and when she returned he was gone.
Gone.
Len was gone.
Leo pressed his hand even firmer on his heart, bruising his chest as he did, as if he could hold in the pain by sheer force. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth, long and deep.
Len was gone.
"I will stay," he had told his brother, the other half of his soul, and his brother had believed him, and left him to it, and had gone away.
Why would he do something so foolish? Why, when he himself was already in so much pain?
Len only ever hurt himself to protect others.
That much Leo knew, and believed, and understood. But - why now? What changed? Why not get treatment, as he had said he would?
Why leave?
"Oh, I mentioned this to your brother earlier, but since he's gone, I guess it's up to you to talk to the police when they get here; I got word from the precinct that they're on their way to take a report," the nurse added thoughtlessly a moment later. "I was hoping your brother could handle that part, being as he knew more about the accident, but, well, under the circumstances, do you think you can give them the full details instead?"
Leo looked up at her.
"Yes, of course, happily," he said, refraining from hitting her. It wasn’t nice to shoot the messenger, even if the messenger has done damage far beyond what she realized. "Say, you're going off duty soon, aren't you?"
"What? Oh – yes – I'm the night shift nurse, you know, and I guess it is nearly morning -"

Leo put on his best charming smile. "You look tired," he said. "Nurse hours, huh? Especially at night. Bet you always work the hardest out of everyone here. Here, why don’t you just head out now? I’ll be happy to hand over the files to the other nurses in your place when they come for their shifts."

It wasn't that easy, of course, but Leo was very good at convincing people to listen to him, and she was, after all, so very tired. It had been a busy night, after all, between Mick and Len and all the rest.

She was convinced.

He took the files, and he saw her off, and he hit himself in the face a few times, desperation and despair lending strength to his blows, before delivering the files to the next nurse so she could mistake the written diagnosis of concussion for a mistake made by someone at the end of their shift.

Only Leonard Snart and Mick Rory were there when the police arrived – the clean ones, the safe ones, the versions of themselves that had no record (or had served their time, in Mick’s case) and who the police could touch and interview without fear – and according to the record handled by the new nurse on shift, they were the only ones who were ever there.

Only them, and no one else.

Only one Mick Rory and only one Leonard Snart: because if Len had remained, shaken and trembling and hurt, Leo would have remained with him, and the police would have understood what they had done all these years, that trick of bureaucracy and a similar face and name. They would arrested them both, blackening Leo's reputation and ruining his business.

Len would never permit that.

And so he ran, hurting as he was, because he always protected Leo before he cared for himself.

Leo called Lisa as soon as he could to explain the situation.

After all, he had promised that he would not leave, and he would not break his word. Yet Len was hurt and trying to protect his loved ones, which was the most dangerous state for Len to be in, his most reckless state, his most foolish. Something had to be done, someone had to care for him, and because Leo had given his word, it could not be him.

Normally, Leo would never alarm Lisa with such issues: his precious sister, his baby sister, who must be protected from all of life’s hurts, but here he felt he had no choice but to ask for her help. And she was alarmed and horrified and worried, promising to come at once to help find Len, to take him somewhere to receive medical care - another clinic, another place, somewhere, anywhere.

She would find him.

Leo couldn’t betray his promise to Len by leaving, but no more could he sit and risk Len coming to harm by his inaction.

This was his solution.

"Mr. Snart?" one of the doctors asked.
"Yes?" Leo replied, snapping the line shut.

"We will need to discuss treatment options, when you have a moment," she said. Her eyes were averted, her tone the slightest bit guilty, and it took a few seconds but at last Leo understood.

"You mean what options we can afford," he said.

Her head dipped, just the slightest bit.

Leo shook his head, feeling tired. He hated hospitals. "Don't worry about it," he said. "We can pay whatever is needed. I want him to have the best care."

"We still have to discuss it," the doctor said firmly, though she looked relieved. She probably hadn’t thought he had the money, what with how tired and run-down he looked.

Leo gritted his teeth and went forth to do battle.

Len, too, was doing battle, if only against the demons of his mind.

He trusted his brother to care for Mick, and to know what needed to be done once the police arrived, and all that was left was to care for himself, but that was proving more difficult than he had expected.

For one thing, he had intended to go to a doctor, a back-alley sawbones that could advise him on the severity of his injuries, but instead he blinked and found himself in Mick's favorite safehouse.

He did not remember coming here.

He was on his knees, his arms wrapped around Mick's favorite coat.

He did not remember doing that, either.

He knew he needed to go.

He stayed where he was.

Lisa found him, at some point – how she arrived so quickly, scarcely a blink of the eye, when he knew she was away in school a good sixteen hour drive away, he did not know.

"– losing time," Lisa was hissing onto her phone. "He's not responding to me properly –"

She was speaking with Leo, of course.

Leo –

"Mick?" Len croaked, the fear seizing all his joints. "Is Mick..?"

He didn't want to know if Mick was dead.

"He's not doing great," Lisa told him. "But he's stable now. They say he'll live."

Len smiled at her, proud of her poise and her self-control, and closed his eyes at last.

"No!" she shouted. "Don't pass out – you have a concussion – Lenny, you can't –"

Len did not like the distress in her voice.
He forced himself to open his eyes, though it was hard.

"Come with me," Lisa ordered, his golden queen, his darling treasure, his and Leo’s and Mick’s. Best thing they ever stole. "Stand up, Lenny."

He tried.

He failed.

This time, although he tried as hard as he could, he could not obey Lisa’s demands to stay awake.

Leo only left Mick's side after the fifth assurance that Mick's condition would not change if he went home for an evening.

He did not go home.

He went to the other hospital, the bad one, where a large stack of cash and Lisa's golden earrings had obtained anonymity.

"How is he?" he asked Lisa, who had sat vigil beside Len the way he had beside Mick.

"He should've gone to get treatment sooner," she replied, her eyes closing. "Hours and hours with an untreated concussion, losing time, going in and out of consciousness...not good. Not good at all, but they say he'll live. How's Mick?"

"Same condition as before."

"Good," she said. "Len's been asking about him. Every time we wake up, it's the same routine: he forgets what I last told him, and panics about it again each time, thinking that Mick's dead."

"He'll remember when I tell him," Leo told her, a comforting lie that she believed without question. "You should sleep – you drove a long way to get here."

"Trucker license," she reminded him, wiping at her eyes. "I know how to deal with long trips."

"Yes," Leo said patiently. "And the way you deal with them is to sleep when you reach your destination."

"But –"

"Will Len's condition change soon?"

"No."

"Then go. I'll stay."

"You need sleep, too."

"I need my brother more," Leo said. Something in his voice made Lisa look at him: her more visibly emotive yet more secretive brother. She saw what he felt; it was clear as daylight on his face, to the eyes of one who knew.

To the eyes of one who loved him, even as he was.

Lisa went.
She stayed in Central with them as long as she could, a handful of days, but none of them wanted to seriously disrupt her education, not even for this, and so she went back to her university in Gotham with an anxious hug and a wave of her hand, extracting promises of regular updates.

Len was out of the hospital within ten days, the longest the doctors could keep him without the police finding out, but the effects of the severe concussion he had lingered onwards: his eyes blurred, his memory skipped and jumped, and he was always tired.

So very tired.

He spent a lot of time curled up in a chair at Mick's side, pretending to be Leo.

Leo watched over them both like a hawk at first, but his obligations dragged him away, too, forcing him back to his own city: there were collections that must be finished, dresses that needed his personal attention, individuals to hire or fire or pay, the hundred thousand demands of running his own fashion house.

Work - he loved it for what it was, but hated it for taking him away from his family. But in his business there was no person with whom he could share the burden.

Leo walked his straight and narrow road alone.

"You look worn down," one of the models told him, putting a hand on his shoulder, a warmth that surprised Leo. He hadn't been touched in weeks; he had not realized he missed it until this moment. "You okay?"

Leo blinked and rubbed his eyes, trying to force himself back awake.

"I'm fine," he said, trying for a smile that would simultaneously be charming and also convince the model to go away. "Thanks for asking."

The model snorted and sat down instead. "You're not fine," he declared. "That much is clear. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Leo hesitated. The work he was doing now was not difficult, merely tedious. "It's not design work," he warned. "Mostly filling out forms – payroll – that sort of thing."

"That's fine," the model said firmly. "I'm off-shift already – the photographer took all the pictures he wanted of me and is focusing on the others now, so I've got time and nothing to do. Let me help you."

Leo was very tired, too.

He wanted to call the hospital room in Central to see what was going on: how was Mick's physical therapy proceeding? were there any complications? what about mobility? how did he feel?

Had Len spoken to him yet, or did he still blame himself? Did he still watch from the door like a lifeless wraith?

Was he still pretending to be Leo because he hated being Len too much to bear it?

When would he at last come home, to Leo’s arms and what little pointless comfort he could offer? What comfort he himself so desperately wanted to give, but had no chance to?

"Okay," Leo said, banishing the thoughts away. His family could wait; his work, alas, could not.
"Sure. You can help. What's your name?"


Leo remembered that name, vaguely: he'd headlined a collection Leo did that involved some sort of a glowing effect. It'd been for a magazine challenge; it'd been fun. Ray had done well there.

"Okay," he said again, and smiled back. A more honest smile this time, one of the few he did not so easily grant. "Thanks."
It wasn't that Leo intended on anything happening with Ray, of course.

He had far more important things to worry about: Len, Mick, even Lisa, worrying away at her university. That's where his priority had to be.

But Ray was –

Nice.


Ray was there.

That latter part was the more important, Leo thought. He had never before felt alone like this – he had always had Len, and even in the rare and few times when Len went away, he had had Lisa, and later Mick. He didn't now, and he felt it. This new emptiness, the gaping vacuumness of not-knowing, of having to keep up their alibi even when his soul cried out to visit Mick more, to talk to Len more, to gather them all together under his wing and make sure they were safe, was slowly driving him mad.

Leo wasn't used to needing anyone but them, but he was also used to having them, and maybe that gap was where Ray Terrill, pretty good model and half-decent administrative assistant, slipped in.

Ray was also dreadfully attractive if you liked that sort of thing, which of course Leo – as the designer who had input into the selection of the models who wore his clothing – did. Unusual features, frankly ridiculous ears, but damn if Leo didn't think they were cute when he first saw them and he still thought they were cute now.

Maybe that was why he moved from just letting Ray help out with paperwork to letting Ray take him out after work for drinks every once in a while to help him forget his sorrows, if only for a little.

He probably shouldn't have.

He definitely shouldn't have – Mick in the hospital, and Len there to care for him when he could and around the house only sometimes the rest of the time because he was working like a man chased by a fury, like there was any amount of money that would somehow make things better, and Leo was of course horribly worried for them both.

But neither of them was here.

Ray...was.

Leo's bond with Len came first, of course. They'd agreed on that, long ago. And after Len there was Lisa, and then Mick, and that was all they needed, and that was the way it had always been.

That was why Leo said no – gently, but still no - the first time Ray made a fumbling sort of pass, awkward and blushing and stammering, filled with disclaimers, but Ray accepted it with grace and continued to spend time with Leo regardless.

Leo wasn't an idiot – Ray may have been graceful about it, but he'd clearly not entirely given up
hope quite yet, interpreting Leo's 'no' as the 'it's not a good time now' that it might very well have been, and if Leo were thinking with his head like he was supposed to, he'd have sat Ray down and made it clear that it was never happening until the message sank in.

And yet, somehow, for some reason...he didn't.

No. That was a lie.

Leo was always the more self-aware of the twins: the nice one, the smiling one, the one who understood and explained why people were acting the way they were acting. The family shrink, as Len liked to tease him –

– some shrink to not be able to help when his own brother was falling apart, some brother to spend time with someone else when his other half needed him so desperately –

No, the truth was something else.

The truth, Leo didn't want to be alone.

He didn't want to be responsible.

(That was meant to be Len's job, some vile part of himself wailed, Len was the one who was always there, the protector, why was he not here, where he should be, protecting him?)

So yes, Leo knew why it was happening.

He knew, too, that he – he liked Ray, a strange, formless sort of liking, deeper than the usual friendliness that he pretended to feel for most people. Ray was there, smiling, happy, helpful; he was kind in a way that Leo did not often see. He was strong enough to shrug off Leo’s occasional bursts of bad temper with a laugh.

Leo liked Ray. It wasn’t just loneliness: he didn’t want to break all bonds between them.

He couldn't stop.

No.

He didn't want to stop.

He wanted Ray – pretty, smiling, simple Ray – to keep coming around to offer him company and take him out to go drinking and to dinner and to put his hand on Leo's shoulder and press his lips to Leo's cheek and to pull him into his arms in an embrace –

He didn't want it to stop.

So he didn't stop it.

And then Len came back to him.

Not the half-hearted visits from a ghost that Leo had grown sadly accustomed to, but Len himself, awake and aware and himself once more. Face haggard, back slouched, exhaustion written in every line – and eyes filled with apology.

The great healer Time had finally done what it needed to do.

"I left you," Len said, voice flat with despair. "How could I leave you?"
Leo pulled his brother into his arms and they curled up on the couch he kept in his office just for his brother. "You didn't leave," he pointed out. "You were here."

Because Len was there, visiting every three days like clockwork, eyes vacant, movements mechanical, silver tongue silenced.

"No," Len said. "I wasn't."

Because he wasn't. He knew he hadn't been: his mind had gone far afield to hide from reality. He couldn’t stop, couldn’t think, could let himself think, so he buried himself in the work of getting enough money to pay for Mick's expensive treatments without destroying Leo's fledgling business by taking the money out of its barely sufficient funds. He worked until it was the only thing he could think of, could talk of, and he never stayed the night.

He hadn't been there.

In his grief, his all-consuming despair, he left Leo all alone.

Yes, Len knew he hadn’t been the brother he should have been.

Leo, in turn, knew that his brother had only acted the way he had because Len felt he didn't deserve the comfort Leo offered to him; he did not blame him in the slightest.

Yet he could not deny what Len knew, once he'd awoken, to be the truth: that his blinding self-hatred had hurt the other half of himself, for by denying himself Leo's comfort, Len had robbed Leo of the comfort of giving it.

"I'm sorry," Len said. "I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven," Leo said at once, because he could say nothing else. He had missed his brother so much: to have him back was the only thing he required to make it all right again. "But only if you stay, and heal."

Len stayed.

Len healed.

At last.

There were some awkward days at the start – with both of them feeling their way around each other the way they'd never had to before – but then it began to click back into place: the music they listened to, the foods they ate, the in-jokes they knew, the sentences they finished for each other turning into sentences they did not even need to start –

Mick was still missing, still a gaping hole, but Leo visited him regularly and reported to Len that he was getting better every day and would soon, with luck, be returned to them.

As for them, they fell back into orbit around each other.

Leonard Snart, complete at last, the way they ought to be.

At peace with themselves.

And things were good again.

Or at least they were, right up until the day Leo slept late, comfortable in his bed with Len holding
him safe, and Len, waking early, decided – after checking Leo's calendar – to let him continue to
sleep and to go into work for him.

It was all production meetings, after all; production meetings and photography and Len could deal
with obnoxious business people and haughty photographers and self-absorbed models just as well
as Leo could.

He thought he could, anyway.

It was only the habit of a lifetime of lying that kept him from breaking that model's wrist the first
time he patted Len on the shoulder, the first time he stepped too close, the first time he took a set of
papers as if that were his right and called himself Leonard's assistant, like that was a title he was
due –

Len didn't break his wrist, because Leo wouldn't have.

But he wanted to.

Len kept the smile fixed on his lips, Leo's smile, the kind one who loved nobody but who needed
protection from all the world, protection that only Len could offer, and he slipped away to his
office to check the time records that confirmed, yes, this – this Ray Terrill, model and would-be
photographer, had been logging far more hours than any model needed.

Had been hired on a suspiciously high number of design shoots.

Had, in fact, been the subject of some tabloid speculation, buried deep in the back pages where
tales of the less-famous resided, in regards to several private dinners and drinks he'd been seen to
have with Leonard Snart, famous designer.

Speculation of friendship - or perhaps more.

This was far worse than Len had thought.

Leo had been left all alone, and Len acknowledged that to be his fault. It was right and just that he
turn to other company to stave off the loneliness that overwhelmed him, no matter how much it
pained Len that Leo had been forced to resort to such measures.

Those measures, which had left him vulnerable to anyone who could see it - open to those who
wanted to eel into Leo's life, to find a place at his side, a place in his heart - to do who knows what
with.

To hurt him, perhaps.

By leaving, Len had allowed them that opportunity.

But now Len was back.

Leo's protector, first and foremost, before any other role. Protector from everything, from blows,
from pain, from anything – even himself.

Len had never had to protect Leo's heart before – that had always been Leo's job, the more
emotionally intelligent one, the more distant one, the family shrink – but Len could do the job just
the same, he was sure.

And this would end now.
Len pushed the button on his phone and asked for Ray to be sent to his office.

Ray came to him with a smile. "I'm not done with my paperwork yet," he teased, friendly and familiar, not stopping before the desk but coming around to put a warm hand on Leonard's shoulder, squeezing it gently, familiar. Too familiar. "You usually don't have time for me until then, you're too professional. Couldn't wait to see my face today, huh?"

"Tell me, Ray," Len said, his demeanor friendly. "You do know I'm married to Mick Rory, right?"

Technically, of course, it had been Len standing beneath the canopy, his hands in Mick's, uttering the vows and signing the contract between them, but it was Leo who clasped their hands together with a smile and didn't take his hands away, who echoed each of the vows Len had uttered, and Leo – only Leo, the clean and upstanding Leo – who could wear a ring if they had ever wanted one.

Ray hesitated. His hand was still on Len's shoulder.

"Yes, of course –" he started.

"Tell me," Len said, his voice just as pleasant as before, "did you deliberately wait until he was in the hospital with horrific burns all over his body to make a move, or was it just lucky coincidence that you showed up when I was mourning and hurting and alone and in need of someone to lean on?"

"I – Leonard – I didn't –"

"You worked for me for months before that," Len said. "But the offers to help, the constant company, the passes – that all happened after he was out of the picture, didn't it?"

"I – no! You seemed down, that's all – I just wanted –"

"Down," Len agreed. "Alone. Vulnerable. Or are you saying I've misinterpreted what you're doing as a pass?"

Ray fell silent.

Yeah, Len thought as much. Ray had definitely made an explicit offer.

An explicit offer Leo clearly hadn't shut down well enough.

Because he had been alone, and sad, and in need of someone.

Len was boiling mad, and only part of that anger was fueled by his own guilt. He was so good at staying cold, but that soft heart of his was blood red with fury on his brother's behalf.

"Leonard –" Ray started, his eyes wide, gentle, hurt. "Leo –"

Len felt his temper flare like an audible crack in the glacier-like ice that surrounded him.

He'd never felt possessive before: that was always Leo's domain.

Leo.

*His Leo.*

"If I ever want you to touch me again," Len said, "I'll say so. Now get the fuck out of my office."
Ray fled.

It occurred to Len that that might have been too harsh.

Leo hadn't actually okayed this, after all.

Len went home.

Leo was puttering around, looking pleased. "Mick's going to be released from the hospital soon," he reported with a grin that faded when he saw the look on Len's face.

"That's good," Len said, because it was. It was great. Mick would come home and Leo would take care of him and Len would be there for him and together they could keep Leo safe.

"...what happened?" Leo asked.

"I got rid of the guy harassing you," Len said. "A bit harshly, I admit, but –"

"Harassing?" Leo asked, alarmed. "No one was harassing me; what are you talking about?"

"That Terrill guy," Len explained. "You know, swooping in and making moves when he knows you're vulnerable and taken –"

"He was – it wasn't like - you got rid of him?" Leo's voice was raised.

Len took a half step back, surprised by Leo's vehemence - and also not entirely surprised. Not as much as he have would liked to have been. "Yeah," he said, his voice flat. "I did. I protected you."

"You –," Leo pressed his lips together. "Leonard Snart, you know perfectly well you should've cleared this with me first. I do the emotional stuff."

Len crossed his arms and glared. "I was provoked. He called you Leo."

Leo opened his mouth to snap back, then paused and considered. He was angry at Len. He was never angry at Len.

And he thought, now that he took a second to think of it, he might understand why Len had done what he had done. "Are you jealous?"

"No! ...maybe."

"Leonard..."

"Leonard," Len replied. "You can't just decide that we've started dating someone new without telling me. I don't even know the guy! You never mentioned him! Assuming harassment was reasonable."

"We're not dating him!" Leo exclaimed. "He's just – helping out. I've already turned him down."

"Uh-huh. Have you cleared this with Mick yet?"

"There's nothing to clear!"

"Sure there ain't."

"There isn't. I turned him down."
"I'll tell Lisa he's available then, huh?"

"He's gay," Leo said.

"Okay, so Charlie."

"You are *not* hooking Ray up with Charlie! For that matter, no one is to be hooked up with Charlie! Ever!"

"...fair," Len allowed. "You get where I'm going with this, though."

Leo groaned and put his head in his hands. He'd fucked this one right up, hadn't he? "Okay, fine. Maybe I like him a bit."

"Enough to keep him all to yourself, clearly," Len said. His voice was cold as ever, but he couldn't hide the hurt. Not from Leo.

Leo's chest hurt like he'd been stabbed. He hadn't meant – it wasn't – he hadn't *intended* -

He'd always promised himself that he would be the only one inside Len's tender heart that wouldn't cause him pain. Everyone else, they would hurt him, but *not* Leo. Leo would guard his brother's heart against the world.

Even, if necessary, against Leo himself.

He hadn't done that this time.

He'd really screwed this up.

"I wasn't sure what I was doing," Leo admitted. "I was lonely, and I've never wanted anyone but you and Mick. I like people, Leonard, I'm the half of us that's good at that, but I don't let them in. I never let them in."

"I know that," Len said miserably. "That's why I thought..."

"I know. I should've told you about him, about it being okay, about me being okay with what he was doing. It just...never seemed like a good moment."

"I'm still first, though?" Len asked, and Leo's heart hurt that Len even felt that he had to ask. This fire had destroyed so much of his brother's confidence, and then Leo went and did this on top of it.

"First forever," Leo assured him, reaching out and pulling Len into his arms. "No one else. We come first."

Len sighed and tucked his head into Leo's shoulder. "I scared him off," he admitted. "I was pissed."

"And you didn't want to be pissed at me," Leo said. He of all people understood how Len's emotions worked: his own were too similar not to. "If he was harassing me, then I wasn't hiding things from you."

"Yeah. That."

"I should have mentioned it," Leo said firmly. "If it was important enough for me to care about how you resolved it, it was important enough for me to tell you about it. I'll do better in the future."

"You're the one who's supposed to be good at emotions," Len agreed. He hadn't quite forgiven yet
– mostly himself, though Leo knew too well how quickly anger at yourself transmuted into anger at others – but Leo could tell he was softening.

"To fuck up is human," Leo reminded him. He didn't just mean himself.

"How is it going to work, though?" Len asked, acknowledging Leo's point but his mind already elsewhere. "With Mick, you know, it was just you and me and I knew you'd like him –"

He had known no such thing, but what was history for but rewriting for convenient argument fodder?

"– but now we have Mick to think of, too, and right after the burns, too - I don't want him to feel like we're swapping him out for – for a better model –"

"We are doing no such thing!" Leo exclaimed. "Mick is mine; no one can replace him!"

Len's shoulders finally relaxed at that. Leo being his old possessive asshole self – that was normal. This Ray business? Not normal. And Len desperately needed something normal right now.

The fire had shaken him.

The thought of losing Mick –

Where could they go from here? How could he lead Mick into another situation where it could happen again, and where the next time he would not escape? Could they continue to be partners, with this between them?

Len buried his head in Leo's neck. He wished he remembered how to say that he was afraid.

Leo put his hand on the back of Len's head.

He didn't need Len to speak to understand.

He didn't need Leo to speak to know that he understood.
"Have you seen him?" Leo asked quietly, after they’d held each other for some time. They both had excellent internal clocks, of course, but they never functioned right when they were together; that time always seemed to go on forever and yet never be enough. "Mick, I mean?"

"Of course I've seen him," Len snapped, though his vehemence was muted. "I go there practically every day –"

"As yourself?"

"...as Leonard."

"So, not really."

"No," Len agreed. "He always knows it's me, of course, but I don't feel like I deserve to be me around him."

Leo held him close. "You do."

"I hurt him."

"He's forgiven you."

"I haven't forgiven me," Len said. "And if I were you, or Mick, I wouldn't."

"Luckily, you're neither of us," Leo said, shaking his head. He knew that Len would never have held it against Leo or Mick if it had been him that'd been injured and they the cause, not for a second: it was only himself that he ever blamed for not taking the blow meant for another. "You should see him. As you."

"I'm trying," Len said.

"I'm scared, he did not say.

"I'll come with you," Leo decided. "Both of us. That'll help."

Len pulled his head back and frowned at him. "The risk –" he started.

"Nothing we haven't dealt with before," Leo said. "Unimportant. We need – I need – to tell him about Ray, before anything else happens."

"Because Mick's first."

"You're first. Then Mick." Leo frowned. "And Lisa, but Lisa's on a whole different scale."

"Girl," Len agreed.

"Sister. I know plenty of perfectly nice, perfectly understandable girls."

"Yeah, and outta all of 'em, you like one: Lisa."

Leo decided not to dignify that (correct) statement with a response.

Mick, when he heard the story long after visiting hours that same night, burst out laughing.
"Don't do that," Len said crossly, rearranging his blankets and making sure his pillow was appropriately fluffed. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Stop fussing, boss," Mick said, cuffing him fondly upside the head. "My skin flexibility's back up, I can laugh all I want. And it is funny."

"It is not," Leo said. He might have been pouting.

"It really is," Mick said, shaking his head. "Don't worry, I don't mind. This Ray business, I mean."

"You – don't? You don't even know what my intentions towards him are!"

"You don't even know what your intentions towards him are," Mick pointed out. "That's what happens when you try to decide things using only half your brain."

Len smirked at Leo, who made a face back, conceding the point.

"And no, I really don't mind," Mick said. "You're a lot to handle, Leonard Snart; I always figured I'd have to share a piece of you one day. As long as he ain't awful..."

"He isn't," Leo said.

"Open to determination," Len said.

"'course, that does raise the question, don't it?" Mick continued thoughtfully.

Two sets of eyes blinked at him.

Mick settled down into his bed and reached out both hands, pulling an unresisting Leonard Snart down beside him, one on each side.

"I know this might be a new experience for you," he said, "but relationships are two-sided."

Another blink.

"He likes you, Number Two," Mick clarified. "But as you well know, that doesn't mean he'll like the boss. Lots more people like you than him, Two."

Leo frowned. It was true, of course, that he had many more acquaintances than Len – his industry supported that sort of thing more than Len's, as all of the backstabbing in the fashion world was purely metaphorical rather than very, very literal. And even before that, back in school, when people had known about them both, he had been the more popular because he had been the more charming and outgoing one...and yet...surely...

"Look at you," Mick laughed. "Each one of you with the same confused little wrinkle between your eyes. Did you guys really think that anyone you really cared about had to care about you – both of you – equally in return? Or would, just automatically?"

"Worked with you, didn't it?" Len grumbled.

"I'm not everyone."

"It's 'ain't not everyone'."

"No, boss. It really isn't, I swear. And anyway, atrocious grammar issues aside, you know that most people like just one person at a time, right?"
No.

Well, yes, but it didn't apply to them, surely?

"Besides," Mick continued. "I don’t see what the problem is, though: only one of you likes him, right? So what's it matter if he only likes one of you?"

"That’s not the point,” Len said.

"What a mess," Leo sighed.

"Can we even trust him enough to reveal the truth to him without him squealing?" Len asked.

"I think so," Leo said. "But I'm biased."

"I'll analyze him, then," Len said.

"Analyze," Leo said. "Not threaten."

"Fine."

"Before you get to putting the cart before the horse," Mick said dryly, "didn't the boss just scare him away?"

"Oh. Right. Crap."

Mick started laughing again.

The Leonards looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

(Leo noted approvingly how relaxed Len was with his head on Mick's shoulder, just the way it ought to be. They might not be fixed yet, but they were on their way, slowly but surely.)

Now, normally, they operated on a "he who screwed up is he who fixes it" approach, but in this instance they decided that Leo would probably have better luck sweet-talking Ray back into the job and thereby make himself available.

Leo sent flowers – Ray had once confessed that he liked them dreadfully, even if they were stereotypically girly – and an apology note, and asked Ray to meet him in his office.

Ray arrived with a smile.

"I know I said it in the note, but I really did want to apologize for what happened last time," Leo said.

"It's fine."

"It really isn't."

Ray shrugged. "No, it's – really, it's fine. Actually, to tell you the truth, I'd kind of been wondering when we'd get to see Hyde again."

Leo blinked. He hadn't been expecting that - nor did he know what to do about it. "Hyde? What do you mean?"

Ray had a way about him that when he blushed, he positively glowed. It was a Ray thing, not a
model thing; by this point, Leo was familiar with enough models to say that with confidence.

He was glowing now.

"I – oh – er – you didn't know – I thought – can we forget I said that?"

"No," Leo said. "Please explain."

"It's just a joke," Ray said. "Among the models you use most. It's just, you know, you have mood shifts sometimes, you know, like, bipolar?"

"That's not how bipolar disorder works –"

"Right, I keep forgetting you did a BA in psych. You know what I mean, though, right? Sometimes you're an asshole with a heart of gold, sometimes you're a well-meaning sociopath with a friendly smile, Jekyll and Hyde."

Leo blinked. "Wait. Which one's Jekyll and which one's Hyde? They both sound – unflattering."

Ray's glow goes up by several watts.

"I mean, everyone has their own preference, honestly?" he said with a shrug. "The sociopath is Jekyll, because he's there more often - plus, you know, not really a sociopath, just charming as hell, but you can tell he's not really interested in anything you're saying or feeling, you know? - while the asshole is Hyde because we only see him once in a while. I usually prefer Jekyll, since I click really well with people who tend to be more distant and analytical about their emotions, but a lot of the models really like Hyde's whole aura-of-danger combined with a sort of secret-inaccessible-inner-friendliness thing. I don't know, it's just a bad joke. Models have a lot of those."

"Huh," Leo said.

"It doesn't mean anything," Ray said hastily. "It's not like I actually think you have an alternate personality or some sort of evil twin hidden in the closet –"

"I usually prefer the couch," Len, who had never been able to resist a good entrance line, said, poking his head up above said couch. "No one ever looks there."

Ray spun around and his jaw dropped.

His mouth moved, and sound came out, but it wasn't really coherent. His hands twitched in the air like baby birds that had just leapt out the nest and abruptly realized they never learned how to fly. He was utterly dumbfounded.

"I thought we agreed I was going to tell him," Leo said mildly. To be fair to Len, that had really been an irresistible set up.

Len smirked. "Hyde is better than Jekyll any day," he said with a shrug. "Do you know in the original movie version, it was pronounced GEE-kull instead of JEK-uhl?"

Leo, who had watched said original movie with Len, rolled his eyes at this bizarre attempt at flirting. Having found Mick at an early age, Len had never had to learn any flirting skills, real ones rather than the cons he ran on marks, nor had he ever had any interest in picking any skills in that field up – Leo was the one who interacted with people, after all, not Len, so why bother?

Len rolled his eyes back. He had no idea why Leo said his flirting was so terrible – puns and
unnecessary movie trivia always seemed to work well for him, and the way Leo would sometimes cough down his hand that it was out of pity for a pretty face with an empty head was entirely uncalled for.

"There's two of you," Ray finally squeaked.

"Quick, this one," Len said.

"Shut up. You get yourself a quick one if you want one," Leo said. "I happen to prefer glowing."

"I noticed that..."

"There are two of you!"

"I think we broke him," Len said thoughtfully. "Oops. Sorry."

Leo gave Len a Look, receiving only a smirk in return.

(He'd never admit it, but he was maybe slightly regretting how he first reacted when Len brought Mick around. In his defense, he'd never thought that he'd be in the reverse situation – not that that was a defense.)

"Am I – is this a hallucination?" Ray demanded. "Did I get drunk and start seeing double or something? Are alternate universes real?!"

"I approve of that fact that that's your go-to thought about what's going on," Len said.

"No alternate universes," Leo said patiently. "Just twins."

"Identical twins," Len added. "In case you hadn't noticed."

"Very identical," Ray said faintly.

"To be fair, you and the other models managed to spot some differences, apparently, with your Jekyll and Hyde analysis," Leo said. He's still not entirely sure about what to do the 'well-meaning sociopath' part of that analysis. "Which puts you ahead of most people."

"Most police, certainly," Len drawled.

"But –" Ray said, clearly too distracted to pick up on Len's hint. "If you're twins – what's your name?"

They blinked at him.

"...Leonard Snart," Leo said. "That hasn't changed. Why would it have changed?"

"Then, what's his name?"

"Leonard Snart," Len said.

"I...what?"

"If it makes you feel better," Len adds generously, "I go by Len while he goes by Leo. People get really insistent on using the nicknames for some reason."

Even Lisa preferred them, though she did have a tendency to call them both Lenny that they
"Oh," Ray said. "Is that why you got so angry when I called you Leo the other day? Because you were actually Len?"

"Long story," Leo said hastily.

"Which one of you –" Ray hesitated. "Never mind."

"I'm the one you've been interacting with," Leo said. "Not Len."

"I'm the one that pointed out that we're married to Mick," Len said, a touch of acid in his voice. "Though, just so you know, we both consider ourselves bound by that."

"I see," Ray said faintly.

"Would you like a seat?" Leo asked, a little concerned that Ray was going to fall over. "You've had a shock."

"Yeah," Ray said, scrabbling for a chair. "Good idea."

"You can have some time to think about this –" Leo started, only for Len to interject, "But in the meantime, you can't tell anyone."

Ray nodded slowly. "Because – the police don't know?"

Leo gave Len another Look, this one triumphant. Len rolled his eyes – fine, maybe Ray wasn't as slow as previously assumed.

"That's right," Leo said.

"And – wait. All those times you've gotten stopped and questioned..."

"He wasn't lying when he said they had the wrong man," Len drawled, looking quite pleased. "Just not being entirely truthful, either."

"You're a thief?"

"A very good one."

"...oh. That's a lot to take in."

"Why don't you take a few days off to think about it?" Leo suggested. "I know this isn't exactly what you thought was going on."

"I mean, I think I always kinda thought you were a thief?" Ray said. "Some sort of James Bond-the Saint kind of deal, with the fashion stuff as a cover. I mean, that many policemen in that many countries can't all be wrong. I'm kind of happy you aren't, actually."

Leo smirked. This wasn't going as badly as he had feared.

"I think I will take those days off, though," Ray said, rubbing his face. "I – I mean, I knew you were with Rory, and I thought, you know, maybe you were polyamorous –"

"Or willing to cheat, at least," Len muttered, causing Ray to flush.
"– but I admit that I didn't consider – I didn't even think about there being two of you."

"Okay," Leo said. "Totally fine. You need processing time. Just, you know..."

"Don't mention it to anyone?"

"Right. Sorry."

"No, it's fine. I understand. I think."

Exit Ray, stage left.

"Well," Leo said. "That went – not unlike a trainwreck."

"Sure thing, Jekyll."

"Shut up, Hyde."

"What do we do if he only likes you?" Len asked, abruptly changing gears. "And not me?"

"I don't know," Leo confessed. "I mean, when I thought Mick was just yours, I figured he'd just take up some of your free time and I'd find someone to fill mine, but now we both have Mick as well...there's a sadly limited number of hours in the day."

"Well, you were doing a pretty good job of interacting with him mostly during your work and a little bit after work hours –"

"Yes, but presumably he'll want more at some point. Wouldn't you?"

"We'll see, I guess," Len said, a little doubtfully. "When Mick and I are out on a job, maybe..?"

"Ah-ha!" Leo exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at Len. "You are planning on working with Mick again, despite everything."

Leo made a face. He hated it when Leo was right, but he thought to himself that perhaps he was. Len had somehow slid back into thinking of jobs as Len-and-Mick instead of just his own, all without him noticing.

The healing power of time.

Leo, for his part, was just happy that Len would stop working with that awful pair of psychotic lovers he sometimes teamed up with, Scudder and Dillon. Leo never trusted them about anything, and certainly not with Len's safety, but he trusted them even less now that Len didn't have Mick to back him up.

"Not until he's all the way better," Len said, conceding the point. And yes, damnit Leo, he'd do something about Scudder and Dillon; there was no need to look at him with that half-worried-half-smug expression. "At least not any jobs in Central. Maybe some outside as a way of warming up..."

Leo grinned.

Len, realizing, grinned back.

Neither of them could resist a good set-up.

"You know," Leo drawled, relishing the moment. "If you’re looking for an expert in warming
Len threw one of the couch pillows at Leo, which they both agreed was the correct response.
It was two weeks after that that Central City exploded.

Well, its crown jewel did, anyway.

STAR Labs.

"Gateway to the future" had been its slogan, and they'd all laughed at how hokey and earnest that was – but the laughter was gone now.

Leo woke up from where he'd been lying on his couch in his studio in Keystone City, feeling like something had gone horribly wrong, and a moment later his cell phone was lighting up in news alerts about a terrible event in Central City.

Central City, where Len usually lived, where he'd just gone for a job last night.

No!

Not Len, no, not again, Leo couldn't go through this again, and not with Len, not his other half –

His cellphone rang.

Leo answered it, hoping that it was Len.

"Tell me that asshole is with you!" Mick demanded, his voice hot with the sort of rage brought on by unthinking terror. He would have been at home, of course, in Leo's apartment, in Leo's bed, because he hadn't yet finished the full run of physical therapy Len had deemed necessary before taking him on another job; Len was out there all alone. "Tell me!"

"No," Leo said miserably. He wished he had better news. "The job – Dillon and Scudder –"

He swallowed.

"I told him not to work with them anymore now that he had you back –"

"This isn't your fault," Mick said sharply. "It will never be your fault, whatever happens. But you don't need to worry because nothing will happen, because he's going to call and tell us that we're all a bunch of worrying chickens –"

"No one but you calls people chickens, Mick –"

Leo's phone buzzed again, right up against his cheek. He pulled away to look.

Len's number.

Leo's legs gave out in relief. "He's calling," he gasped, and with shaking fingers conferenced Len's call in.

"Are you two all right?" Len demanded. "It didn't get you, did it?"

"No, we're fine," Leo said.

"You're the one in Central!" Mick exclaimed.
"It didn't hit everyone," Len said, his voice so cold and clear that he must be freaking out to no end behind his mask. "I saw it coming and ran – Scudder and Dillon lingered behind, just the room behind me, and now Scudder's just gone and Dillon's got the world's worst case of vertigo or something, I don't know, I got her to a hospital so she owes me one now or whatever –"

"But you're okay?"

"I'm okay. What's the news saying?"

"They're analyzing the content of the explosion," Mick reported; they could hear the sound of the television on his end of the line. "Supposedly people in range might have been exposed to something called 'dark matter', but they have no idea what effect that'll have. But they're saying that other than that, that and the initial shockwave from the big boom, there don't seem to be any follow-on effects, fires, things falling down, that sort of thing. Way too early to count casualties."

"It sounded like a fucking nuke," Len said. "It looked like a fucking nuke, mushroom cloud and all. I thought –"

He stopped.

He didn't know how to say what he wanted to say: that he'd been sure he was going to die, that he'd thought he'd never get to see them again, assuming they survived, that his thoughts had been consumed with guilt that he would be doing to them what Mick's fire had done to him.

Leo would understand without a word, of course, and Mick would figured out most of it through sheer intuition, but sometimes Len wished desperately that their dad hadn't beaten the ability to express emotions out of him.

It'd be nice to say it, too, sometimes.

"Look on the bright side, boss," Mick said comfortingly. "If it'd been a nuke, then Keystone'd still be within the blast radius."

Len snorted, echoed by Leo on the other line.

"We'll all go together when we go?" Leo asked, amused in a dark sort of way. It was such a Mick way of looking at the world.

"Exactly."

"Sounds like a solid plan to me," Len said with a sigh. "Fuck this job, I'm coming home. The news will tell me what horrible diseases I'm at a greater likelihood of getting because I was in range of that thing."

"Did you stand in a doorway?" Mick asked curiously. "In the drills at school they said –"

"I know what they said and it's all bullshit because I'd still be dead if that was a real nuke, but yes, as it happens, I stood in a doorway because drop out or no drop out, the cult of the American K through 12 system still has a firm grip on my subconscious."

"Come home," Leo said firmly. "When you start talking politics, I know you're in a bad state."

He hung up, then hesitated, remembering that his ever-so-small circle wasn't quite as small as it used to be.
He'd promised Ray space to think, though. He'd given him two weeks already and was willing to give him more – he certainly didn't want to be pushy or put pressure on him for a reply – but under the circumstances...

He decided to send a text.

Nothing fancy, just a "Hope you're OK after the explosion, if you need anything let me know I'm at your disposal" sort of thing.

There was no immediate response, which wasn't unusual for the surprisingly bad-at-technology Ray, so he put it out of his mind and had very nearly forgotten about it until about ten days later when someone started frantically beating on the door to his house.

"What the fuck," Len said.

"Who the fuck," Leo corrected.

"Should I get a gun?" Mick asked. He always was the pragmatic one.

"Not until we see who it is," Len decided. "So grab one but keep it under wraps. Could be a neighbor."

"In the middle of a crazy thunderstorm?" Leo asked skeptically. "Sounding like the hounds of hell are after them?"

"...you never know about neighbors."

"Says the person who’s never had neighbors."

Still, Leo went to open the door and –

"Ray?!" he exclaimed.

Ray looked – frantic, and like he hadn't slept in days. He had circles under his eyes, his fashionably short hair was unbrushed, his chin had stubble, his clothing looked like it had been worn for several days, he was wearing a very unfashionable backpack...

"What's happened to you?"

"Uh, hi, Leonard," Ray said, looking like it had just occurred to him that he'd have to explain. "I'm sorry to have to come to you like this, but – your text –"

"No, no, it's fine," Leo said, drawing him inside and shutting the door after him. "I meant it; I wouldn't have sent it if I didn't mean what I said. What do you need? Is someone after you? Is there a body?"

"I – wait, why is your first assumption that I killed somebody?"

"We have weird friends," Mick said. "You must be Ray."

"Uh – oh – yes – I'm Ray – Ray Terrill – you must be Mick –"

"Nice to meet you," Mick said, taking pity on the increasingly frazzled-looking Ray. "I've heard good things."

"Oh," Ray said blankly. "Good."
"So that's a 'no' to the body, is it?" Len asked, strolling back into the living room from where he'd been hiding in the kitchen. "Or was it a yes? I couldn't tell."

"No, no body," Ray said. "Not yet, anyway."

"That's promising," Len said. "Who are we killing and why? I insist we have a good motive."

"I – hold up, no, we're not killing anyone on purpose, what is wrong with you? I'm afraid I might kill someone by accident."

They all blinked at him.

"It's harder than you might think, you know," Leo said. "Accidental murder. At least so I assume."

"It is," Mick confirmed. "Not, you know, impossible, but still pretty difficult."

"Perhaps you'd better explain," Len said.

"Yes, right. I – it – actually, can someone turn off the light? I'll just show you, instead."

Since Leo was still standing by the door, he flicked off the lights.

The problem became very clear at once.

"You're glowing," Len marveled. "Literally glowing."

"Yeah," Ray said gloomily.

"And here I thought Leo was just being complimentary when he said he liked it when you glowed," Mick said.

Ray promptly flushed red and the golden glow around him intensified. "He – said that?"

"I did," Leo said. "Though to be fair I meant the way you blush when you get excited. Not – this."

"I don't think this was a thing, previously," Ray said. "It's – new. It started, you know –"

"After the Accelerator?"

"Yeah. My landlord thinks I'm radioactive and kicked me out."

"That – that isn't how radioactivity works," Leo said. "At all."

"I know!" Ray exclaimed, looking distraught. "But I've had to get all my stuff moved into a storage unit before he threw it all out, and my friends are refusing to let me crash with them, and –"

"Pardon my interruption," Len said, breaking in. "But how could this glowing lead to someone dying by accident? Now that we've all agreed that radiation poisoning doesn't work by turning someone day-glo colors."

"Because of this," Ray said, and flung a hand out to the side.

A bolt of light followed where he'd thrown his hand.

It scorched the wall.

"Oh god!" Ray exclaimed. "I'm so sorry! It didn't – I didn't mean to –"
"You did," Leo said absently, studying the mark on his wall. "It's fine – Len could piss off a saint. That was pretty cool, though."

"Cool?!!"

"Yeah!" Len said, suddenly grinning. "You've got superhero powers!"

"Hah, hah," Ray said. "Not funny."

"Not necessarily wrong, though," Leo said.

"How does it work?" Mick asked.

"I don't know! I wish I did! I just keep glowing – and then sometimes these rays shoot out of my hands –"

"Heh," Len said. "Ray shoots rays."

Ray actually stopped panicking long enough to turn to gape at Len in horrified disbelief.

"Sorry," Leo said. "He really can't help himself, if that helps."

"You know, if we gave him a gun –" Len started.


"– that would make it a ray gun –"

"Holy crap," Ray said. "Jekyll is the mature one? I would never have called that."

"I take offense at – no, you're right, I really am."

"I take offense at the idea that either of these idiots are mature," Mick said with a grunt. "Say, you been out and about the entire time since this happened?"

"Just about," Ray said. "I got really tired after the explosion and just slept for three days straight, then felt nauseous for another few days, and then – this. And, yes, running around."

"You try darkness?"

"What do you mean?"

Mick made a face. "Well, most light comes from the sun, right? And the sun makes light with smashing atoms, yeah?"

Ray frowned at him. "You think I'm generating light by – nuclear fission?"

"No," Mick said. "I think we'd all be dead if you were. I think you're like a moon instead."

"That's no moon," Len said. He really couldn't help himself.

"Mature one," Leo coughed into his hand.

Len ignored him. "So what you're saying is that you think Ray's, what, reflecting light?"

Mick shrugged. "Why not? If he's running around in daylight – or storm-light – then he's probably been absorbing light the whole time. That's why he's got too much."
"So theoretically if we cut him off from light –" Leo started.

"And he used up everything he had –"

"Then I could make it stop?" Ray asked.

"Or at least get it more under control," Len said. "And then you'll have superhero powers."

"My apartment – well, my old apartment – has bay windows," Ray said. "I like sleeping in a lot of sunlight. And then I slept for three days..."

"Luckily for you, we have a dark room," Len said.

"Technically a safe room," Mick said. "But yeah, no windows."

"It's both a safe room and a dark room," Leo said. "I develop pictures in there sometimes. Follow me, Ray; we'll set up a bed for you in there and see if sleeping in there helps."

"You can throw rays on the walls in there if you want, they're reinforced by thick steel," Len said. "Say, you're a model, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Tell me, would you say you're very bad or very good at throwing shade?"

"...wow," Ray said. "You really can't help yourself, can you?"

"He can't," Mick said with a sigh. "Anyway, you want company in there? Easy to freak out in a dark room all alone."

Ray's face fell.

"You don't have to," Leo said hastily, though he was a little disappointed. "I don't expect –"

"No, no, you don't understand," Ray interrupted, looking even more distressed. "It's not that – what you think – it's – I'm – I think I'm monogamous."

"Like – most people," Len said, arching his eyebrows. "You don't get coming out points when you're in a majority position, you know."

Somehow, Len being his usual asshole self made Ray's shoulders relax and he rolled his eyes. "As a gay man, I'm well aware of that, thanks. Not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

"I mean – I like Leo," Ray said. "I like Leo a lot. I even thought about it, you know, if I'd be okay starting to date someone who already has a significant other, someone poly, and I decided that I liked Leo enough that the answer is yes. But even in that situation, I always saw myself as, well, just dating Leo. I don't – I don't know you, Len. As far as I've known up until a few weeks ago, you didn't even exist. You were just a facet of Leo's personality I was willing to tolerate, if it came to that. I don't – I don't know if I can commit to – anything. With you. Even though I'd be happy to with Leo. Just because you have the same face doesn't make you the same person, you know?"

Leo frowned.

Len frowned.
Mick groaned. "Okay, it's not really the right time to be having this out, but putting aside Leonard's weird identity issue thing, why don't you just date Leo and not Len, then?"

Ray frowned. "Was that an option?"

"Good question," Leo said. "Is that an option?"

"Seconded," Len said.

"I'm surrounded by idiots," Mick said flatly. "I love you – excluding you, Ray, you seem cool but I've barely met you – but Leonards? You're both idiots. You do remember that you can do things without the other person being involved, right?"

"But –" Leo started.

"– we usually don't," Len finished.

"Sure you do. Leo does fashion, Len does crime, remember?"

"Yes, but – this is a relationship."

"So?"

"Won't that be awkward, time-wise?"

Mick threw his hands into the air. "We'll invest in a calendar and schedule it out!"

"Huh," Leo said. "Ray, thoughts?"

"I mean, I don't really want to date more than one person," Ray said, blinking. "But I don't mind if you do, I guess? Honestly, it'd be nice having some time to myself – my past relationships usually ended because I didn't want to be 'on' with them 24/7; it'd actually be really great not to have to worry about that –"

"So it could work."

"Of course it could work," Mick said, rolling his eyes.

"But what about sleeping?" Len demanded. "Forget the rest of it – Leo and I have always shared a bed. If we've got to pick one person and one person only to sleep with, we're picking each other."

Ray looked at Leo, who shrugged and said, "He's right."

Their bond came first: that they agreed long ago.

"So where does that leave us?" Ray asked.

The answer turned out to be pulling the extra-sized-king-plus mattress they already owned out of the bedroom and into the darkroom.

Mick slept in the middle, with Leo on one side and Len on the other, and Ray tentatively curled up on Leo's other side.

"You know," Len said thoughtfully, "there's enough room on my side here for another one, if they were skinny."
"You're welcome to get your own," Leo said, turning and tightening his arms around a still-glowing Ray, though the glowing seemed to have eased in intensity. It was a much calmer, steadier light now – probably a reflection of Ray’s mood. "Seems only fair, since I’ve gone one."

"It's not fair that you get a superhero and I don't."

"Get your own superhero, then."

“Do things need to be fair?” Ray asked, sounding amused.

“Leonard Snart has a husband and a boyfriend is a complete sentence,” Leo explained. “Leonard Snart has a husband and one half of him has a boyfriend is just confusing.”

He felt Ray frowning in confusion.

He wasn't worried, though; he was sure Ray would figure it out in time. Mick certainly had.

"The scheduling is gonna be a nightmare," Mick predicted.

"I'm pretty good at wrangling people's schedules," Ray said, clearly deciding not to pursue his earlier line of questioning. "I can help."

"You realize some of the scheduling entries are gonna be crime-related, right?"

"I grew up in downtown Keystone, so..."

"Oh, so you're used to crime."

"Yeah, more or less. I paid for my school lunches growing up through selling my services in providing the police with false tips. I have an honest face, apparently."

"You'll fit right in," Leo said, pleased. "We do a lot in the false tips business."

"I still want a superhero of my own," Len grumbled. "And mine isn't going to be The Magnificent Nightlight, neither."

"A, I'm not a superhero, and B, even if I was, that wouldn't be my name."

"I like nightlights," Leo protested mildly. "But yes, maybe not - how about Glowbug?"

"Firefly," Mick suggested.

"I still feel like there should be a pun about his name in there..."

"Of course you do."

"Can we go back to the part where I haven't agreed to be a superhero at all?"

"No. Shut up and go to sleep, Nightlight."

"Hmpf. I'm glad I'm not dating you."

"Are you glowing brighter now?"

"...maybe."

"Maybe we should call you Spitelight."
"Spitelight, spitebright, first bit of spite I see tonight –"

"Leonard. Shut up. Both of you."

“I think he’s finally getting it,” Len said.
Unfortunately, that initial success aside, further training of Ray's powers ("Supervillain powers!" "What? No. Superhero, if any sort of super has to be involved. Which it doesn't, because I'm not going to be a superhero!" "You're no fun." ) turned out to be far less straightforward.

As was his integration into their little family unit.

In terms of Ray's powers, their experiment of keeping him in the dark and wearing him out was effective at the start, but they quickly discovered that prolonged lack of exposure to a light source caused Ray to wilt and become incredibly snappy.

"S'like hypoglycemia, except with light," Mick observed.

"It is not," Ray growled.

It was not unlike watching a small puppy attempt to puff itself up to appear intimidating.

"C'mon, buddy," Mick said encouragingly. "Eat something. Sit by the window."

"I don't want to and you can't make me -"

Fifteen minutes of sunlight and a sandwich later, Ray was apologizing for his behavior.

"Don't worry about it," Leo said. "Really. We'll try something else."

Len watched from a nearby chair, his eyes narrowed.

They hadn't yet clicked, Len and Ray. Ray and Leo were thick as thieves, of course (pun intended), discussing upcoming designs and fashion shoots and model gossip, and Ray was quickly warming up to Mick (pun intended).

Unsurprising, since he'd hoped to enter into a metamor relationship with the man, with Leo as the polyamorous hub that connected them.

In fact, Len thought that that might have been the problem.

Ray was like him, he decided as he watched Leo and Mick try to coax Ray into meditation and repetitive light-blasting exercises without much success. People like them, they were planners. They didn't like spontaneity - but what they liked even less was discovering that they had misjudged a situation. Overlooked a surprise factor.

Len was that surprise factor here.

That was why Ray alternated between treating Len like he would Leo, over-familiar and too handsy by half, making Len recoil and glare (which in turn made Ray skitter back and away), and treating him as he would a dangerous stranger, distant and cautious.

Neither was conducive to their goal here.

The same, Len reflected, could be said for Ray's total lack of progress in learning to control his powers.

He was still glowing, he was still shooting off beams at somewhat random intervals...
Ray had never planned for any of this. He was rejecting it because he hadn't controlled for it, and because of his rejection, he couldn't control it.

The only solution, therefore, was to create control.

"Lemme try," Len told Leo.

Leo looked at Len a little skeptically - other than increasingly terrible light-related puns, Len hadn't really contributed much thus far - but saw the set expression in Len's jaw.

"Mick," he said. "Let's go make dinner."

"I thought we were going to order -"

"Mick."

"...right."

Obviously Leo didn't actually leave the two of them entirely alone; he wasn't an idiot. He took up a proper eavesdropping post at the kitchen and watched.

Len prowled around Ray, who was visibly nervous.

"I think we've been going about this the wrong way," Len said.

"You think?" Ray asked, a little snarkily. In Leo's view, that was a good sign - Len always appreciated people who stood up to him. "What gave it away, the total lack of progress?"

" Noticed the distinct lack of progress, yeah."

"The uncontrollable beams of light give it away?"

"Oh, no," Len said, and with two steps he was right in Ray's face. "I wasn't talking about your powers. I was talking about us."

Ray took a step back, but Len followed him forward.

"There is no 'us'," Ray said. "I thought I made that clear -"

"Oh, there's an us all right," Len said. "We won't be dating, but Leo's my brother. We don't have to be romantic for me to mean something to you - and I have to mean something to you. This bullshit where you pretend I'm Leo or that I'm a total stranger, it's got to stop."

Ray crossed his arms. "What do you recommend?" He arched his eyebrows. "Got any bright ideas?"

Len grinned. "Now you're getting with the program. And yeah, I do. We're going to play a game."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Tag, in the dark."

Ray frowned. "How does that deal with our relationship...?"

"This is about your powers, keep up. Here's how we're going to play it: I'm going to control the lights, and you're going to run the house like an obstacle course. If you enter an area with light for
over a minute, I win. If you stay in the dark the whole time, you win. You know the layout of this place pretty well by now, and I'll give you a head start to plan out your approach."

Ray nods thoughtfully. "Okay. What's the benefit of this?"

"Try it, and you'll see. Winner gets a prize."

Ray grinned.

"Only safe place is the kitchen," Len continued, "and you can't stay there more than two minutes. We don't stop till I say stop. No other rules. Deal?"

"Deal. How much of a head start do I get?"

"Five minutes. Starts now."

Ray didn't bother sticking around to discuss any further, which Len appreciated. He just left.

Len went for the light controls.

He chased Ray around the house for nearly thirteen minutes, lights flicking on and off, sequences that Ray could predict and randomness designed to throw him off, before he saw it click in Ray's head.

This time, when Len flicked on the light in the room Ray was in, nothing happened.

Len tried it again.

Still nothing.

He grinned. "Victory is yours," he called.

Ray appeared in front of him, grinning wildly. "I can control darkness, too!" he crowed. "It's like the light, just - the opposite!"

"That's great!" Leo said, coming out of the kitchen.

"No, you don't understand, I think - I think I've got it - the dark and the light - they're the same, but not the same; I control them in sort of the same way, but I have to think about them differently," Ray said. "Having time to think about it, having to use it strategically - that really helped."

"And it ain't too bad a metaphor for dealing with Len instead of Leo," Mick said dryly. "Full points for an excellent approach, Len."

"When I'm good, I'm good," Len boasted. "Now we just need to come up with a supervillain - I mean, superhero - name for him, and we're good to go."

Ray rolled his eyes. "I'm still not going to be a superhero, guys."

"You are too."

"Am not!"

"Sure, sure. Of course you're not. But no, seriously, what's his superhero name going to be?"

"I don't need a superhero name!"
Unfortunately, they hadn't resolved the question five months later, when Ray accidentally ended up using his light powers to save a group of Keystone schoolkids from being hit by a runaway bus, and as a result he didn't know what to tell them when they asked his name.

He did discover that, in a pinch and with enough panic, he was able to use his painstakingly-acquired control over his light powers to fly away.

Len made a point of plastering the resulting newspaper coverage discussing the appearance of a superhero called "the Ray" all over the fridge.

"I'm really happy I'm not dating your brother," Ray said, staring at it. "That way it's not domestic violence when I punch him in the face for this."

Leo snorted. "Don't worry," he said. "As long as you don't do anything else heroic for a while, they'll forget all about you."

"This time was an accident," Ray pointed out, wringing his hands. "But I couldn't resist helping out. I just - I couldn't let it happen, knowing I could stop it. What if next time I see something and, realizing that I have the power to help, I --"

"I've agreed to do both Paris and New York Fashion Week," Leo said. "Couture."

"...never mind helping people," Ray said, gaping at him. "I'm not going to see any people. At all. Because neither of us are going to be leaving this studio for the next six months straight – are you crazy – two couture lines – you realize those all have to be handmade, right?!"

"That's what couture means," Leo said agreeably. "But you did say you wanted to shift over from the model side of the business to the designer side, and this is the way to show your chops."

"Yeah, show my chops – or die."

"One or the other, yeah. That's fashion for you. If it makes you feel better, it'll get us both safely out of the way while Len makes plans to steal a series of unreasonably large diamonds for us to use in the shows."

"...how unreasonably large?"

"Massive."

"He's not stealing the Hope Diamond, is he?"

"I've told him not to. He said he'd find alternatives."

"...do we give them back, afterwards?"

"For a finder's fee, yes. They're virtually impossible to pawn, so that's basically the only use for them."

"Huh. Well, okay, then. How many diamonds is he going after?"

"Five," Len said. "Luckily we have time, because the last one, the Kandhaq Dynasty, isn't getting to Central City for another five months. But don't worry, I'll be prepared when it does make it."

"We'll be prepared," Mick said.

"No, I will be prepared," Len said. "You won't be done with physical therapy."
"Damnit, boss, I'll be done less than a month after that!"

"And a month after that, you're back in, but not before that."

Leo rolled his eyes and smiled.

Things were going well.

And, then, of course –

"I got you your diamond!" Len exclaimed, brandishing it with a grin. "And I found my superhero!"

"Good," Leo, who was sewing on a set of pearls one by painful one and had been doing so for the past three days, said with exactly zero interest. His world was pearl-shaped and needle-shaped and nothing else mattered until this fucking project was done. Why had he done this to himself again? Right, Ray needed to be kept out of trouble. Leo was going to stab him with a pin out of principle. "Glad to hear it."

"This time I want to meet him early on," Mick said. "Not after you start dating."

Leo rolled his eyes. They’d have to get over that one day.

"No objection," Len said agreeably.

"I have an objection, actually," Ray, who was hemming one of the dresses, said.

Everyone turned to look at him, even Leo.

"I thought you said your superhero wasn't going to be called 'the Magnificent Nightlight'."

"Yeah?"

"What, and dating someone called ‘the Flashbulb’ is better?"

"I'm pretty sure it's just 'the Flash','" Mick said, even as Len and Leo both started to laugh. "Or 'the Streak'. He's speed-centric, not light-centric."

"Go with the Flash," Ray advised, grinning a little. "Len's already thought of all the jokes. Awful shame if they all go to waste just because the only use we've had for my glow powers has been in lighting design."

"Oh, are we doing something glowing for the show?"

"Yeah," Leo said. "I'm giving Ray a superhero persona based on glowing, so that if anyone tries to get him in the future, he can say that the accusation is so last season."

"We're going very skimpy," Ray said. "One of those 'if a superhero absorbs light he shouldn't be wearing a lot of clothing' sort of deals."

"Skimpy but tasteful," Leo corrects. "We're doing a whole superhero-supervillain theme. It's very 'in' right now. Or, well, it will be once this Streak-Flash guy you found gets some media coverage. I'm pretty sure I read about him on a blog, but he's being irritatingly camera-shy."

"Want me to lure him into a public showdown?" Len asked. "I'd be willing to do that."

"We'd be willing to do that," Mick corrected with a glare.
"Hey, you're already part of the plan! I got you that heat gun, didn't I?"

"I do like the gun..."

"Wouldn't that put your face on camera, too?" Ray asked.

"Only if they successfully get me — yes, Mick, I mean us — into prison," Len said with a shrug. "Which they won't, even if we get caught."

"A nice showdown right before my show might be nice to raise awareness," Leo allowed. "But right now, Leonard, I don't need your criminal skills, I need another set of fingers."

"You want me on pearls?"

"You start at the left, I'll start at the right."

"Anything I can do?" Mick asked. "That isn't sewing, I mean; I can't sew shit."

"We need some distressed fabric for our street-level hero —"

"Say no more."

"Just remember we want it distressed, not destroyed. That fabric's expensive."

Mick grinned. "My new heat gun works on a wave function," he said proudly. "I can melt the inside of the fabric until it fuses without more than lightly scorching the outside."

"...intriguing. Proceed."

The mother-of-pearl sheen that resulted from Mick's experimenting ended up complimenting the pearl-studded outfit so well that Leo rearranged half of his show to highlight it.

The first show was a massive success, especially coming on the heels of an extremely well-publicized hero reveal-slash-supervillain fight. A fight which coincidentally involved two supervillains with a surprisingly strong resemblance to the designer and his husband, who showed up wearing homages to the outfits of said supervillains.

(When the CCPD complained, it was pointed out, loudly, that surely, after the supervillains' thoroughly filmed defeat, the relevant supervillains were in prison. The CCPD's reluctance to admit that it wasn't true created sufficient confusion over who, where, and when that the whole investigation was dropped in disgust.)

"Should I come out?" Ray asked after the first show was done.

"...were you ever in?" Len asked with a frown from the workshop table, where he was building a replica cold gun out of resin for Leo to use in the next show. He was still annoyed about the police confiscating the real version. "I feel like the male model industry is one of those where people are already assumed to be gay —"

"No, not about my sexuality, you asshole. About, you know, being a metahuman. The only examples we have right now are, well, usually on the news for committing crimes. Or the Flash, but he wears a mask."

"Absolutely not," Leo interjected. "You know what else all the metas on the news have in common, Flash excluded? They've all mysteriously disappeared."
"Mysteriously?"

"They're not in prison," Mick said. "We've checked."

"Maybe that's why the Flash wears a mask?"

"Could be," Len said. "I had an idea about that, actually... and about getting the cold and heat guns back..."
A few weeks later, Mick walked in with his heat gun in hand, saying, "I have good news and bad news."

"You got your guns back!" Leo exclaimed.

"We did," Mick said. "That's the good news. We even got Lisa one. Gold-themed."

"That's not temperature themed."

"Well, we weren't gonna get her a lukewarm gun, were we? And anyway, it rhymes with 'cold' so it's close enough."

"Tell me you want something gilded, Leo," Lisa said, sashaying in, brand new science-fiction-inspired gun strapped to her leg. "I'm your girl."

Leo gave her a quick hug. "You most certainly are. I'll think of something and let you know. Now what's the bad news?"

"Len got kidnapped by the Flash."

"He what?"

"Temporarily," Len clarified, coming in through the door and rolling his eyes. "I'm fine. There's no bad news."

"Unless you count the Flash revealing that he's been helping vanish metahumans into a, quote, super-secret meta prison," Lisa said dryly.

"And threatening to take Len there," Mick added, equally dry.

"Well, yes, but he didn't," Len said. "I threatened to blackmail him, and –"

"I don't want to know," Leo decided.

"But –"

"Don't want to know. Still working on refining the second show. Literally don't care about anything else until that's done. You're okay?"

"Yes, but –"

"Good. Tell me the rest afterwards."

"When you say afterwards, you mean at night in bed, right?"

"No," Leo said. "But only because I don't expect to use a bed for anything more than absolute unconsciousness until these shows are over. You can give me the full download once Paris is ready to be shipped out the door – oh, stop pouting at me. You'll survive not boasting about your supervillain exploits for the next month."

"Will I?" Len grumbled. "Will I really?"
Leo glared death by a thousand pins.

Clearly he was too tired to convey his proper meaning, because the only reaction to his usually-potent glare was that Mick laughed.

Lisa did, too.

"I think that's a hint that we should stop supervillaining around and get our asses back to work before Leo's fingers start bleeding," she said, grinning.

Len scowled. "They're bleeding?"

"She exaggerates –" Though not by as much as Leo would like. "– and yes. Get back to work."

"If I see a speck of blood, I'm kicking you out of your own studio," Len warned.

Leo huffed and flipped Len off, but apparently Len hadn't been kidding, because only a week or two later (Leo had lost track of anything but the giant ticking clock in his head that was counting down to all the drop-dead deadlines marked out in big red letters) he carried through on his threat.

"You can't kick me out!" Leo argued. "I'm the designer!"

"Yes," Len said, implacable as a glacier. Worse, an overprotective glacier that felt justified in its concern. "But we're well past the design part of this and onto pure construction. We don't need you here right now."

"But – the finishing touches –"

"Are the most important, I know. Don't care. Your schedule still allows enough time to fix things if you need to afterwards."

"But –!"

"The fashion world ain't gonna end because you went out and got yourself a burger and fries," Len said.

Leo opened his mouth to continue arguing, and then paused.

A burger and fries did sound appealing.

Very appealing.

Len smirked when he saw Leo give way. "Go," he ordered. "Eat. We'll keep the trains running on time."

"It'll probably be easier to make progress without your fussing," Ray said, a little apologetically. But not that apologetic; good, he was growing a backbone. "Go on; go unwind for a bit. It'll be good for you."

Leo hovered for a few more minutes, just out of sheer spiteful pride, but eventually he let himself get lured away by the siren song of greasy calories at their favorite dive bar, where everyone knew him (or, well, one of the Leonards, at least) well enough to know to leave him the hell alone.

To say that Leo wasn't expecting a brown-haired, brown-eyed twink to slip into the booth across from him was, therefore, an understatement.
"Snart," the kid said, leaning forward and giving Leo an intense look.

"I don't buy," Leo said, a little amused by the kid's forwardness. He was definitely cute enough for it to work on someone else. "If you know my name, you ought to know that much."

The kid blinks, clearly knocked off his game.

"The hipster get-up's nice, I'll give you that," Leo continued. "Very middle-class college grad; I'm sure there's an active market for that sort of thing, but you're probably going to have more luck down on Grand."

"Grand? Where the – hold up, are you saying I look like a prostitute?!"

Leo blinked.

That bout of serious eye-fucking the kid had been giving him hadn't been the lead up to a proposition?

Really?

Then what was it?

"No," he said honestly. "I'm saying I thought you didn't, which was a very clever gambit for a prostitute to be using – it's markedly less clever now that I know it's not actually a gambit, of course, but what can you do?"

The kid gapes at him.

It's not the most attractive look.

"So if you're not selling, what do you want?" Leo continued, quite curious now. "I'm not hiring for any jobs right now."

At least, Len had better not be hiring for a job in the middle of Fashion Week prep.

"I – uh – I mean – don't you recognize me?!" the kid burst out.

...crap.

It'd been a long time since Leo was caught flat-footed because someone thought he was Len – and even longer since he had had absolutely no idea what was going on. This very evidently wasn't one of Len's criminal associates – Leo knew how to deal with those – and it wasn't like Len really had any other friends –

Leo's silence and scrambling for an answer – he'd just about settled on "bullshit disdain while pretending he was ignoring this guy's identity on purpose" – must have gone on for longer than he'd thought, even though it only felt like a second, because the kid looked honestly concerned.

"Are you all right? I mean, did you hit your head or run into a meta or –"

A meta.

A –

Wait.
Leo generally considered himself a match for his brother when it came to dissembling and deceit, but he would easily admit that he wasn't as good at hiding his emotions, especially when taken by surprise. He just didn't have the ice-cold shell that Len had – Leo was the people person, the straight man (metaphorically), the slick alibi; he wasn't the criminal who lied to marks and colleagues alike as a living.

That was really the only reason Leo could give for why he blurted out, "You're the Flash?"

"Shhhhh!" the kid hissed, flapping his hands at Leo. Then he stopped and frowned, offended. "Did you forget or something?"

"Uh," Leo said.

"You couldn't have forgotten! You're literally blackmailing me because you know who I am, that's the whole basis for our deal – as long as you don't kill anybody –"

"Wait, what about pedophiles?" Leo asked, because what the hell, he was in a hole, might as well keep digging. "Or self-defense?"

"What?"

"I just wanted to be clear on the parameters of the deal," Leo explained. "No killing anybody – what if they're committing a horrendous crime, or trying to kill me first? Does that break the deal?"

"I mean – well, you should probably turn someone committing a crime over to the police –"

Leo snorted. Yeah, right.

"...yeah, okay, point. I mean, I guess in those situations – I – uh – er –"

"What if it's to save the world?" Leo asked, tapping his chin. "Let's say I decided to go good-guy for some reason and there was a nuclear bomb in the middle of the city and the only way to stop the guy was to shoot him –"

"I mean, in that hypothetical, uh, I mean, I assume I'm out of the picture here?"

"Yeah, let's go with that."

"In that case, I guess you could?" the kid asked more than said. He looked terribly confused. "I suppose that wouldn't violate our deal."

"What am I getting out of this deal again?" Leo asked. "I agree not to kill people –"

"And not to go after my friends and family," the kid added.

"Right, and that. And also, presumably, I don't tell people who you are. And you do – what, exactly?"

The kid looked stumped.

Leo rolled his eyes. Len couldn't have been flirting harder – or worse – if he'd been trying.
Actually, that seemed to be the issue – that he was, in fact, trying.

(Not everyone was Mick, Len. Actually, now that Leo thought about it, he wasn’t entirely sure how Len had managed to snag Mick in the first place...)

"Also, why are you here?" Leo asked, since the kid seemed to have reached the point of questioning his entire existence, and Leo didn’t need to know human psychology to know the meaning of the phrase “opportune moment."

"I need help," the kid said blankly. "We have all the metas locked away in the Particle Accelerator and we need to get them to Ferris Air so they can be picked up without escaping to destroy the city –"

"Hold up," Leo said. "Hold up. Those disappearing metas really are you? You're actually putting them away in a super-secret meta prison? I thought Lisa was joking!"

"You – you know Lisa?"

"She's my sister, of course I know her," Leo said, mercilessly crushing the kid's obvious glimmer of hope that he'd somehow gotten the wrong guy. "Are you working with the CCPD, then? Or the military?"

"Uh," the kid said. "No? Neither?"

"Then where the hell are you getting the authority to detain U.S. citizens? Did you get a warrant? Are they being held pending trial, or – hold up, did you even give anyone a trial? Some of these people have been missing for months!"

The kid's eyes have gone wide.

"That's kidnapping!" Leo exclaimed, honestly horrified. "Kidnapping – and human trafficking, if you're moving them – wait, what's at Ferris Air?"

"Uh, ARGUS – they have a prison on Lian Yu, it's in the Pacific –"

"You're selling metahumans to a not-so-secret paramilitary organization?!" Leo hissed. "What the fuck? Aren't you supposed to be the hero? You know slavery is illegal, right?"

"Slavery?!"

"Oh, come off it, everyone knows about ARGUS; they supposedly take particularly talented individuals and put bombs in their heads to blow up if they don’t obey orders and use them as their own disposable kill squad," Leo said dismissively – he hadn’t heard the rumors himself, of course, but Len had recounted them with great relish. ARGUS was practically a ghost story in most prisons. "And even if they didn’t, you can’t just ship a bunch of United States citizens – or, hell, human beings, I’m going to say that, you can’t or at least shouldn’t kidnap a bunch of human beings and ship them to some black box offshore prison site! I don’t like it when the government does that, I’m certainly not going to stand for it when some random twink off the streets decides to –"

"They were trying to destroy the city! Or, uh, steal stuff, in Shawna's case –"

"What the fuck do you think the penalty for theft is?" Leo demanded, throwing up his hands. "Even mass murderers get a fair trial. That’s how our entire legal system works! What authority do you have to decide otherwise? What right do you have to –"
"I don't!" the kid shouted, looking horrified and miserable.

Leo kicked him under the table. "Shut up, you're making a scene," he said with dignity, as if he hadn't been doing the same thing the second before.

"I didn't think about it," the kid said, quieter now. "Wells just said, okay, let's keep them in the Accelerator cells because we can contain their meta powers and the CCPD's holding cells can't, if we let them go they'll cause more havoc – and Joe agreed that it was the best approach – the plan was always to turn them over to the authorities, but then there was more and more and I just got so distracted –"

"You just forgot about people?"

"I didn't mean to," the kid said. His eyes were glassy with tears. "The – Wells – I didn't know he was evil –"

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," Leo instructed, having finally recovered enough presence of mind to dial Len on his muted phone under the table. "Tell me everything."

Everything, it seemed, was a clusterfuck.

"Okay," Leo said after a while. "I'm going to give you, like, fifty percent of a break because you've clearly been being manipulated by a pro here, but if you get out of this situation you and your friends are signing up to some mandatory ethics classes, you hear me?"

Barry – the kid’s name is Barry Allen, apparently, it came up during the conversation – nodded blankly. He seemed tapped out of all emotion at this point, which Leo had some sympathy for – he knows how bad it can be to get overwhelmed like that.

"And your cop dad person is getting reported to somebody, okay," Leo continued. "I don't know who, but that part's not negotiable; he’s a fucking cop and should have known better. I mean, you’re CSI, you should have known better, but you’re young and you had two father figure types swearing to you that it was fine, so I can see why you fucked up."

Another blank nod.

"But other that, okay, let’s talk about getting these metas out of the city."

"Wait. You're - you're going to help me? Despite everything?" Barry asked.

"I'll do my part to ensure these people get free and never get locked up by you and yours again," Leo corrected. "And as for getting them out of Central, I’ll take them with me to Paris."

Barry blinked. "You’re – going to Paris?"

"Yes," Leo said with a sigh. "I was an idiot and signed up for not one but two Fashion Weeks, so – current burger break aside – I’ve been spending the last few months trying to jab my eyes out with pins and garrote myself with thread. Metaphorically."

Barry stared.

"…what? I said metaphorically."

"You’re – Fashion Week? Like – like on Project Runway?"

"Well, somewhat less competition-show artificial time pressure involved now that I’ve gone
“Even though you’re a supervillain?”

Leo’s phone buzzed. He checked it and rolled his eyes at Len’s message. “I’m not, actually, a supervillain,” he said, sliding out of the booth. “Now c’mon, you can come back to my place and we’ll work out how we’re going to convince all these metas to come with us.”

“Your – place?”

“I have a studio.”

“Right,” Barry said faintly. “For your – fashion design. Because…okay, listen, are you or are you not Captain Cold?”

“I am not.”

“But – Lisa! You said Lisa’s your sister!”

“She is.”

“And – Mick?”

“My husband.”

Barry stopped. “Your – what?”

“…husband?”

“We’re talking about crazy arsonist pyromaniac Mick ‘Heatwave’ Rory here, right?”

“Don’t call him crazy just because he has mental health issues,” Leo said primly. “It’s rude.”

“Okay,” Barry said, clearly too shell-shocked to protest any more than that. Leo put a hand on his back and led him through the door of his (thankfully very close by) studio. “But – if he’s – and Lisa’s – but you’re not – then - then - who the hell was I fighting?!”

“Me,” Len said from on the floor next to one of a multi-toned red dresses, where he’s working on fixing the pleats. He’s got a measuring tape wrapped around his neck in a noose for some reason; Leo doesn’t want to know. “Hey there, Scarlet.”

“I – I think I need to sit down,” Barry croaked.

Ray, from across the room, threw out a hand and a gentle blast of light sent one of the office chairs rolling over.

Leo smiled. Len’s training regimen had been doing wonders for Ray’s control of his abilities.

“And you’re also a meta – wait. Actually…who are you? I don’t think we’ve met.”

“We haven’t,” Ray said with a shrug. “I don’t do crime, so, you know. No reason. I’m a model.”

“A – fashion model?”
“Yeah. Though right now I’m getting into design work now, as payment for my sins. Say, what are your thoughts on going public so that there’s some positive meta representation as well? It’s something I’ve been chewing over.”


“I was thinking of hiring them as show temps,” Leo said. “Ray, do we need visas for temps?”

“Probably not; they can be covered more generally, and we’re not going that long. Who are we dealing with?”

“Uh,” Barry said. “Well, there’s – Mardon, Mark Mardon, he controls the weather –”

“We could use that,” Ray said. "Half for making sure the day of our show is nice, half for making sure the people we hate have terrible days so no one can attend. Go on."

“There’s also Roy Bivolo –”

“What’s his gimmick?”

“He spurs emotions in people using light in his eyes. We had to use a light sequence to undo the effects…”

“Probably best not to use that,” Leo said to a chorus of grumbles. “Cheating.”

“Uh, there’s – Deathbolt –”

“What?”

“Laser beam eyes.”

“Cool. Are we talking, like, laser-pointer strength or –”

“Ray. He’s called Deathbolt.”

“Right, sorry, question retracted.”

“There’s, uh, Shawna, er, LaShawna Baez, she teleports –”

“Teleporting is cool. How do you keep her in the cell?”

“She can only teleport where she can see.”

“And, what, you blinded her?”

“No! The room is just full of mirrors.”

“That sounds awful. Anyone else?”

“Uh, let me think. We also have Kyle Nimbus –”

“Oh, you should just shoot him,” Len advised. “He’s a psychopath. Zero chance of no fatalities afterwards.”

“I can’t just shoot him!” Barry exclaimed.
“You really can,” Lisa said. “I looked him up online. Out of all of them, he’s the only one who had a trial. Got the death penalty and everything. It’s just that he escaped – he turns to poison mist now, right?”

“Yeah,” Barry said, rubbing his face.

“I’ll shoot him for you,” Len assured Barry.

“You promised me you wouldn’t kill anyone!”

Len frowned. “I assumed there was a ‘within reason’ clause attached there.”

Barry opened his mouth, then glanced at Leo and sighed. “Yeah, there is.”

“Good. Mick, Lisa and I will come with you, break them out in some spectacular fashion, shoot Nimbus, and get them on the first transportation to Paris.”


“Don’t say thank you so quickly,” Leo said. “We’re not done with you. How do you feel about glue?”

“Uh. Neutral?”

Leo handed him a glue gun. “Superspeed that entire box of sequins onto that piece of fabric,” he instructed. “I’m losing half my workforce for a day due to you; it’s the least you can do.”

Barry blinked.

“I,” he said.

And then, suddenly, he laughed. “You know what, sure,” he said, grinning. ’I'd bet money that evil Wells won’t think of me being here.”

“Finally, some good forward superhero thinking,” Len drawled. “I knew I liked you.”

Barry’s cheeks flushed red.

In Leo’s view, this was not as attractive as Ray’s flush.

Len clearly thought otherwise, though, judging by the fond look on his face.

“Speaking of which,” Leo said. “Leonard, you really must stop letting your deal-making ability, which I know you have, go to hell just because you have a crush –”

“Crush?!” Barry squeaked.

Len noted that it was not necessarily a squeak that indicated that this was a problem. If anything, the way Barry flushed red and looked at Len through his eyelashes was most promising.

Len would not have called ‘just mention it’ as a valid way to get Barry to pay attention to Len’s flirting, but apparently that was what was called for with oblivious superheroes.

Go Leo and his amazing people-reading skills.

Leonard would be lost without them.
“– and anyway, does your deal with Barry here even require Barry to do anything?”

“Well, he has to fight me sometimes.”

“I do? Well, I mean, I would anyway...”

“Exactly!”

“That’s hardly payment, though,” Leo objected. “The least you could do is demand something.”

“I don’t actually have any money,” Barry said. His hands were moving at a blur, but it was a very large box.

“The dress you’re currently working on probably costs several dozen thousand dollars,” Len said dryly.

Barry froze.

“We’re fine on money, he means to say,” Leo said. “I earn money, he steals money, we’re good.”

Barry opened his mouth to protest.

“Central City, my city,” Len said patiently. “And I like doing it. So no, I’m not going to stop. We’ve had this conversation before.”

Barry clearly thought better of what he was going to say and, with a sigh, started gluing again.

“What could we ask for?” Lisa asked. “I mean, beyond assistance with basic tasks.”

“Hold up, you call this basic?” Barry asked.

“How many sewing stitches do you know how to do?”

“...there are more than one?”

“As I said. Basic tasks.”

“He’s CSI, isn’t he?” Ray asked.

“How do you all know that?” Barry asked. “I thought Snart agreed not to tell anyone. Uh, the evil Snart.”

“We’re both evil,” Leo said firmly. He wasn’t going to let anyone split them up like that ever again. “I’m just legal about it.”

“Yeah,” Ray said, rolling his eyes fondly, “really evil. Don’t listen to him; he’s the good citizen of the two.”

Mick snorted. “Citizen Cold.”

“I like that,” Len said.

“I’m not sure I do,” Leo said.

“Yes, you do,” Len said.

“Yes, I really do,” Leo admitted. It wasn't fair that only Len got a 'Cold' nickname, after all.
“Also, he didn’t tell us,” Ray said. “But we did listen in on your conversation with Leo in the bar just now. He had his phone on under the table.”

“...oh.”

Leo shrugged. “To be specific, I didn’t make any promises about keeping things secret,” he pointed out. “So technically Len kept his word.”

“Technically.”

“We thrive on technicalities here,” Len said.

“How about wiping out the boss’s criminal record?” Mick asked. “That’d make it even harder for the CCPD to keep crashing all our fashion shows.”

“Ooooh,” Lisa said. “Could you get mine, too?”

“I haven’t agreed!” Barry protested.

“You will,” Len said. “Or should we start talking about the Geneva Convention until you beg for mercy?”

Barry groaned.

“Welcome to the family,” Leo said, smirking at Len. “We’ve got just enough room for you.”
Leo did end up shipping the metas – sans Nimbus, who as predicted ended up trying to murder someone immediately after being released and who Len disposed of via applied cold gun and some minor philosophical deal-related disputes with Barry – to Paris as part of his tech crew, a situation absolutely none of them had any objection to.

Mick accompanied him to protect him and keep an eye on him, but his watchfulness was probably unnecessary – the whole lot of them were far too starry-eyed to make any real threats.

While they were on the plane, private and chartered because Leo needed all that space to carry all of his gowns and shoes and accessories, they even had a conversation that sealed the deal: apparently, it was their first visit to Paris. Or outside of the state borders at all, for that matter.

"It's a great city, you'll love it," Leo assured them.

"How do you do it?" Bivolo asked, playing with one of the tiny salt shakers he’d received along with his airplane meal. "Thief, supervillain and fashion designer..."

"I work a lot," Leo said. They had very much opted not to tell anyone else about themselves – Barry was an exception under the newly established 'want to date' rule. "Sometimes, it almost feels as if I'm in two places at once."

"You broke us out, and now you're giving us a trip to Paris and cover jobs that will pay us," Mardon said, sounding suspicious. "What's in all this for you?"

"Well, I always appreciate a thank you."

"So you've said," Baez said dryly, but for all her cynicism she'd been the most wide-eyed with wonder at the suggestion of Paris, and she couldn't stop fingering the sequined dress on the hanger next to her seat.

"Also, if you ever come back to Central City, you owe me one," Leo said. "I've got plans to give the Flash a real challenge with my very own Rogues Gallery."


"Feel free to say no, of course, but – would it be possible – I mean – just if it’s not a bother – but – I don’t know – could I try on one of the dresses?" Baez asked shyly. "Just once?"

"Not these ones, for risk of tearing, but if you like, I think I have a sample jumpsuit from last season you could probably fit into," Leo offered. "It has multiple points of light from built-in battery – I was doing a light-related superhero theme –"

"That would be amazing."

"I'll give it to you to keep if you agree to pretend to be a scholarship art student that I'm sponsoring."

Baez blinked. "Uh, sure. I mean, I was studying medicine, not art, but I can fake art, no problem. Why?"

"I've been dying to convince the tabloids that I'm cheating on my husband," Leo said with a shrug.
"It’s good free publicity, but they just won’t damn bite."

“Can I volunteer for that job?” Bivolo asked, half-jokingly. “If I get an outfit out of it…”

“If you’re serious about that offer, I will happily trade couture outfits for tabloid fodder. Paris loves a scandal, and a bisexual one is even better.”

Leo conveyed the entire conversation to Len in text, complete with emojis, smug with the knowledge that he was entirely doing his part of this particular job.

Len rolled his eyes – he, for one, did not see the appeal of appearing in French tabloids as anything other than "Mysterious Man Disappears With Priceless Treasure" – but with the question of whether the metas would become violent settled, he was now satisfied that Leo would be just fine.

He knew very well that joining a fashion show wasn’t just fun and games and indulgence: Leo would run each one of the 'rescued' metas absolutely ragged until they had no time to think, and they’d thank him for the privilege.

Len, in the meantime, had other work to do.

"All right, Scarlet," he said, walking into STAR Labs. "Metas are all taken care of and Lisa, Mick and I are escorting them on their way out of the city already. In the meantime, what can I do to help with your evil speedster doctor?"

Sounded like a nightmare, put like that. Sure, it’d be a help to doing surgery, but the amount a doc like that could screw a guy up from the inside...

"Wait," Barry said. "Which 'I' are you?"

"The one standing in front of you," Len replied, with some amusement. "Obviously."

"No, I mean – you said 'Lisa, Mick, and I' when you were talking about – him."

Len shrugged. "It sounds less weird than saying Leonard Snart like I'm talking in third person."

Barry clearly had more questions.

"Maybe now isn't the time?" Len suggested. "After we beat your evil guy, you can come over and ask all the questions you like."

"Including about your crush?" Barry asked, trying for brazen but underselling it by blushing.

Len smirked. "Including that, yes."

"Okay," Barry said. "So the plan right now is that we’re going to set up an ambush for evil Wells, calling in all of our allies – you guys, us, our friends from Starling, Firestorm –"

“Firestorm?”

“Yeah, it’s two people who join together to light on fire; I’ll introduce you.”

“What is with all of these light-themed superheroes?” Len complains. “I feel like we’re starting to repeat on a theme.”

“Cold – Snart – Len. Focus.”
The plan to capture the bad guy, much to Len's surprise, actually worked.

He'd really been expecting something a little less, well, anti-climactic – it was the final boss battle! Surely –!

But nope. They all gathered up, they found the individual in question, they captured him.

Of course, once Wells (Thawne? Eobard?) was locked away, he sold the whole team a boatload of crap about saving Barry Allen's mother from being murdered via time travel, which would also conveniently allow him to go back to his own original time period, the existence of which he'd been using to justify murdering people in this time period.

Apparently people's lives didn’t matter if they were historical figures?

Len’s not even trying to figure out that logic.

"Uh, no," Len said when Barry asked his opinion. "Obviously you shouldn't do it."

Barry blinked owlishly at him. "What?"

"...is that not the answer everyone has been giving you?"

"No," Barry said. "They all said they couldn't make the decision for me and it was up to me."

"Well, that's crap," Len said.

"Why shouldn't I do it, then?"

"I have a whole list," Len said. "Starting, first and foremost, with the fact that it's obviously a trap –"

"I don't think it is," Barry said. "He sincerely wants to go back to his time. It's what he's been building towards this entire time."

"Yes, about that," Len said. "Why is it that you're okay with illegally and indefinitely imprisoning people whose biggest crime is aiding and abetting Grade B theft – not even committing Grade B theft, just aiding and abetting – but somehow the multiple murderer that killed your mother gets freedom and everything he wants?"

"It's not that –"

"It really is, Scarlet."

"I have a chance to save my mother from being murdered, Snart!"

Len shrugged. He didn't expect the existence, or lack thereof, of one Nora Allen to affect his own life in the slightest – he never did interact much with people from the fancier suburbs other than steal from them, and Barry's family wasn't rich enough to interest him – so he didn't really have a dog in this race other than disliking the unsatisfactory narrative it created.

"How much of your life will you miss?" he asked instead.

"What?"

"Well," Len said. "You became a CSI because of what happened to your mom, right?"
"Yeah."

"And you lived with the pig and Iris, right?"

"His name is Joe, you know."

"Sure, Joe 'Pig' West –" Barry rolled his eyes. "– but that's not the point. Would you say he taught you anything? Excluding morality, of course; can't teach what you don't have."

"Of course he taught me stuff," Barry said, pointedly ignoring that last part. "He practically raised – oh. I think I see what you're saying."

"Imagine a world without your friends," Len suggested. "Without your powers. Without your job. A world where you, yourself, are an entirely different person, because you don't have any of the memories that make you who you are – do you think Leo and I are the same person? Now that you've spent some time with us, I mean."

Barry blinked, clearly taken aback by the seeming non-sequitur. "No," he said. "Not at all, even though you make it confusing sometimes with the way you talk about yourselves. He's – uh – would it be weird to say that he's too nice to be you?"

Len tried to hide a smirk. "A bit of a misreading of his personality, but I get what you mean."

"No, I'm not saying it right," Barry said, shaking his head. "He's – I knew lots of people like him in school. Nice, friendly, and they'll forget about you the second you turn away. And understanding! Ugh, they're so understanding that you just want to scream – uh. Not Leo, I mean, just, you know –"

"I know," Len said. "School traumatizes us all in different ways. So we're not the same?"

"No," Barry said firmly. "Not at all. Leo's too, well, too nice; I could like him, but I probably wouldn't be friends with him – not proper ride-or-die friends –"

Leo wasn't ride-or-die for anyone but Len, Lisa, Mick, and maybe – maybe – Ray, so that was fair.

"And anyway, I don't like him the way I like –" Barry fell quiet and turned red.

Len grinned. "That's okay," he said. "I like you, too."

Barry turned even more red.

"But do you get the point I was trying to make?"

Barry blinked at him.

"Imagine a universe where there was just one of me," Len said. "And in that universe, there were a certain set of life experiences that would make me, me, and another set of life experiences that make Leo, Leo. But in that universe, there aren't two of us – there's just one. And what set of experiences I live makes me into either Len or Leo."

Barry nodded slowly. "So if I change my past –"

"You could go from being your own version of Len to being your own version of Leo."

"But I remember what happens when I time travel," Barry protested.
"So you'd be a Len in a Leo's world," Len said with a shrug. "Even worse: all your friends would expect you to act like someone who grew up with two loving parents, you'd never be able to be yourself or talk to anyone or explain your phobias, they'd think you'd gone crazy from the personality change –"

Barry shuddered. "What if my memories do change?"

"Then the person you are now is dead, and a new person gets the life you've always wanted," Len told him. "All this, of course, assuming that you saving your mom back when you were eleven doesn't remove your powers and strand you in the past, like, say, another interfering-in-the-proper-course-of-time speedster we know of..."

Barry winced.

"This is literally a no-win scenario, Scarlet," Len said firmly. "You do this, then the guy who ruined your life gets everything he's always wanted and you get either dead and replaced, stuck in a world that doesn't fit you, or stuck in the past. And all that's before your speedster buddy has enough time in the future to come back and try to kill you like he did the first time around –"

"I still have to try," Barry whispered. "I have to see her."

Len shrugged a second time and watched him go.

And then he picked up his cold gun and made his way towards STAR Labs.

He was familiar with this, after all; Leo also had trouble making the hard choices like this, the ones with loss and risk. Leo was good at emotions – Len was good at ruthlessness. He'd learned how to kill, over the years, watched it get easier and easier; he could do this for Barry, now.

Because as far as Len was concerned, this Eobard Thawne wasn't making his Back to the Future dream come true – even if Len had to ice the speedster himself to make sure of it.

"Snart?" Cisco asked, even as Joe put his hand on his gun. His partner-cop – who looked traumatized – and pretty little Iris were there, too, holding hands and looking exhausted. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help," Len lied. "Didn't Barry tell you I was coming?"

Yes, he put a little stress on the word 'Barry'. Len fully acknowledged that he was an asshole like that.

"He must have forgotten," Caitlin said with a sigh. "I don't know what help you can offer, though; he's going to be making the attempt momentarily. He’s in the Particle Accelerator right now, with Wells – uh, Thawne – er, Eobard Thawne, he’s there, too, in his time ship."

"In that case, I'll just watch for now," Len said.

"Brave of you," Snow said. She was a lot snippier now that she wasn't being kidnapped.

"Why?" Len asked, frowning. "Is there a risk? Barry didn't mention."

They all exchanged glances.


"Well, it's probably not going to happen –"
"I didn't ask for your analysis," Len said. "Tell me the risk."

"We don't have to listen to you –" Caitlin started.

"If this goes wrong, it could open up a black hole," Cisco said all in a rush.

"Cisco!"

"What?! It's true! And he's scary!"

"Hold up," Len said, starting to get really angry now. As always, his voice remained steady and even, but despite that he thought that they might have gotten the idea, because everyone in the room exchanged alarmed looks. "Are you telling me that Scarlet is doing something that might help his own life personally, even knowing at the risk of putting everyone else on earth in danger?"

"It's not like that!" Iris exclaimed.

"Uh," Cisco said.

"The chance is miniscule, right?" Joe asked. His hand was on his gun again, and he was glaring at Len like he thought it might solve all his problems to shoot him now.

Typical pig.

He'd better not even think the phrase "officer involved" shootings, because Len could outdraw him any day.

"Yeah, super small," Cisco said hastily, looking relieved. "Really, really small."

"Tell me," Len said. His voice is still very even. "Greater or smaller chance of the Accelerator blowing up the first time it turned on? No, wait, of the Accelerator blowing up – due to intentional sabotage - because of the identity theft of the creator - by a time-traveller with super powers - for the specific purpose of giving someone else a specific set of superpowers – so that he could use him as a living battery in his souped-up Mandalorian?!"

"It's a time bubble ship," Cisco muttered, but his face had gone pale.

"We're not talking about that," Len snapped. "Tell me, what are the chances of that, which we all know actually happened, compared to Barry literally destroying the world in a fit of selfish assholery?"

"You don't –" Joe started.

"Shut up, hypocritical pig," Len said harshly. "No one wants to hear your opinion."

Joe puffed up. Predictable.

"Has Barry reported you yet?" Len asked before Joe had a chance to start yelling.

Sure enough, that stopped Joe flat.

"What?" the partner-cop asked. "Report Joe for what?"

"Illegal imprisonment without a trial or a warrant," Len said. "Human trafficking, at least attempted. Conspiracy to hide an ongoing crime from the police – should I go on?"
Joe's face flushed.

"But –" Partner-cop started, then he stopped, clearly reviewing. "Under the circumstances –"

"No man's above the law," Len said. "Barry agreed to report you to somebody up your chain as part of our little deal. Might not do anything, what with the CCPD's usual lax standards, but at least it'll be down on paper forever that you did it. You do remember that, right, the whole incident that happened within the last 24 hours or so, where a convicted criminal had to free the prisoners you were keeping here – in solitary confinement, I hear – torture –"

"We didn't torture them!" Cisco exclaimed.

"You know solitary confinement with no exercise is literally torture, right?" Len asked him.

Cisco flushed.

"You're all as criminal as I am; you're just too self-righteous to admit it," Len said, rolling his eyes. "But we can deal with that later. Where – ah, there."

He marched up to the microphone, with no one stopping him. "Barry Allen," he said harshly. "You had better stop what you're doing right now –"

"It's too late," Cisco said. "I'm sorry. He's already running too fast for him to hear you."

Len snarled soundlessly. "Well," he said. His voice was still steady, he was pleased to note, no matter how ticked he was getting. "Who's going to show me to the Accelerator so that I can slow him down?"

He put his hand on his cold gun.

Silence for a long moment.

"I will," Iris finally said.

"Iris, no!" Joe exclaimed.

"Iris, no!" Joe exclaimed.

"Shut up, Dad," she snapped. She seemed extremely angry, though her eyes with a bit glassy with tears. "I was willing to forgive you for lying to me about the whole Flash thing for months, but I never thought – I never – I wouldn't – dammit, Dad, this is bullshit, and moreover, this is bullshit you should have told me about." She glared at all of them. "You all should have known better."

With that, she turned and walked out.

Len followed.

"I'm going to forgive them eventually," Iris said conversationally when they got to the end of the hallway. "So don't think you can use this against me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Len said. "Don't actually care about you all that much, to be honest."

She snorted. "Thanks," she said, but she sounded sincere. "That makes you the only person who didn't immediately decide that you could make decisions on my behalf."

"Including Barry?"

"Oh, definitely including Barry," she said. "He wanted to tell me, but Dad made him promise not to
because knowing might 'put me in danger'."

"More or less danger than he was allowing his foster kid to get into actually fighting as a vigilante?"

"Don't get me started on the misogyny of it all," Iris said. "I'm well aware of it. And I'm still angry at him. And at Barry."

"I'm pissed at him, too," Len agreed. "He didn't tell me all the risks of this process or I would've tied him up and kept him away."

"Speedsters can vibrate through rope, you know; that's why we kept Wells in the Accelerator."

"I'd find a way," Len said. "He's enough of an idiot that something could be devised."

"I feel like I shouldn't be agreeing with you," Iris mused. "But yeah, Barry kind of is an idiot sometimes."

"I can't believe I'm going to sleep with him," Len agreed. He rather liked that meme; he'd never thought he'd have a chance to use it in real life.

"Yeah, I – wait, what?"

"As soon as this is over," Len said. He still liked Barry, after all. Len acknowledged he was being something of an idiot, continuing to like Barry despite it all, but he didn’t let people into his heart easily – and once he did, he was stuck. Just like he was stuck now. "Assuming he doesn't destroy the world, of course."

Iris had a hilarious expression on her face.

Then, a moment later, she started laughing. “You know what,” she said. “You know what? Good for Barry. You’re really hot. You may even be hotter than Oliver Queen.”

“I’m cool, not hot,” Len said, waving his gun in the air a bit. “Though I agree with the second half of your statement.”

“That you’re hotter than Oliver Queen?”

“I hear he’s a cold fish,” Len said in his best deadpan.

Iris started laughing almost right away, which meant she got the joke. “That’s awful,” she giggled. “He just got rescued from his boat accident –”

“It’s been years.”

“Still. Too soon.”

“You assume I care.”

Iris shook her head. “Go and stop our lovable idiot, why don’t you,” she said, nodding at the doorway.

Len looked at it – there were sparks visible around the sides – and pulled out a handgun with his free hand, offering it to Iris. “Know how to use this?”

“Cop kid,” Iris said, accepting it and checking it expertly. “Of course I do. But why..?”
“I was a cop kid, too,” Len said. “It doesn’t mean crap. You can be my back-up.”

Iris blinked. “Me? But – Barry –”

“I’m going to try to stop Barry from breaking time with his run,” Len said. “How do you think ol’ Eobard’s going to feel about that? Remember, he’s in there, too.”

Her face settles into a grimly determined expression. “Got it.”
Len stepped out into the Accelerator, immediately seeing the blur of light that was Barry running at top speed. He took aim, a necessary step when dealing with a speedster moving at near time-travel levels.

Unfortunately, it was a step that gave Eobard Thawne a second in which he could notice Len's presence, realize why he was there, and act.

"Don't you dare, Cold," he snarled, leaping out of his time bubble in a burst of light to shove Len up against the wall, his voice barely audible above the sound of Barry running. Len didn't recall being moved back to the wall, or dropping his gun, or even seeing Eobard move, but that wasn't necessary; he was dealing with a speedster. "You will not ruin my plans – not when I'm so close –"

His hand started vibrating, not unlike a saw.

Well, that's not good.

Len lifted both of his hands above his head to grab the ridge on the wall behind him to stabilize himself. "Kill me and Barry will stop," he threatened. "You know he will."

"He won't even notice."

"You willing to bet your precious plan on it?" Len challenged.

Eobard hesitated.

Len used that moment of hesitation (see, it's not just speedsters who can do that!) as an opportunity to swing his legs forward to wrap around Eobard's waist. Then, while Eobard was blinking at him like he'd lost his mind, Len released one hand, brought it to his lips, and – with his face inches away from Eobard's – whistled at the top of his lungs.

Eobard flinched.

He didn't run away, either, thereby letting Len use his legs to keep him stabilized in one place. Presumably because he didn't understand why Len would want to do so.

He didn't understand the reasoning, and, because of Len's piercing whistle, he also didn't hear the sound of a gun going off – not until it was a moment too late, anyway.

Iris' bullet hit Eobard right in the center of his back.

Eobard screamed and threw Len at Iris, causing them both to go tumbling.

"Don't shoot me," Len immediately told her, grabbing at her hands even as they fell.

"Trying!"

She managed not to.

Eobard staggered towards them both, his eyes red points of light, his body starting to vibrate like he wanted to hide his identity again – or to turn his whole body into a living weapon.

"Uh, that's not good," Iris said.
"Not good at all," Len agreed, minorly distracted by their apparent similar reactions to things - did Barry have a type? Len can only hope - and glancing around until he spotted his cold gun. Only a few feet away, but the equivalent of miles in speedster time.

"No, I mean – I got him, right? Aren't you not supposed to move people with bullet wounds for fear of the bullet migrating?"

Len blinked. "Good point."

"That had better not be a pun about bullets."

"No, saying that your shot in the dark was remarkably accurate would've been a pun; that was me agreeing with you. Shoot him some more, will you? I still want to stop Barry."

"On it," Iris said. She climbed to her feet and started shooting.

It didn't work, of course – Eobard leapt forward at her at once, dodging the bullets with ease, but it gave Len a split second to throw himself at the cold gun and fire at where he thought Barry might be to try to get his attention.

Eobard cried out, half-rage, half-pain.

Len looked – Iris was glaring up at Eobard defiantly with an empty-looking gun, but he was clutching at his back. Iris' bullet must have migrated.

"Iris!" someone shouted from the entrance to the Accelerator.

It was – partner-cop guy?

The one who'd been holding hands with Iris earlier.

He had a gun, too, but he was holding it at his own head.

"Eddie!" Iris screamed. "No!"

"Don’t you fucking dare, asshole!" Len shouted.

Partner-cop guy (apparently called Eddie) paused, just for a split second, but that was enough.

Eobard turned, saw, paled – and then there was a burst of lightning and he was knocking the gun out of Eddie’s hand.

"You might be my ancestor," he snarled, his face twisted in pain from the bullet, "and your life must be preserved so that mine can continue, but don't think you can threaten me – I will kill you all if I –"

Barry punched him in the face.

He appeared out of nowhere in a burst of lightning, the way speedsters do, and he sent Eobard flying back into his time-ship-bubble-thing, which in turn sent it flying – in all directions as it shattered.

"No!" Eobard roared.

"I'm not letting you hurt any of my friends!" Barry shouted back.
The next minute or so was rather confused, given the speed of the fight, but from the brief glimpses Len was able to catch, it unfortunately looked as though Eobard was getting the upper hand.

Also, Eddie was going for his gun again. "I'm sorry, Iris –" he started.

Goddamn stupid cops.

"Don't shoot yourself, shoot him!" Len shouted, aiming his own gun at the speedsters.

They were moving fast, yes, but Len had always been great at math, and calculating where they were likely to go next was as easy as breathing.

He fired.

They both tripped as their legs were iced.

Eddie was still hesitating.

Actually, Eddie was no longer hesitating, because Iris had pitched the (now-empty) gun Len had given her straight at his head.

"Ow! Iris –!"

She grabbed the (not empty) gun out of his hand, snapped, "We'll discuss this later," and then added, "Snart! Keep going!"

"With pleasure," Len said, and fired again even as Iris began firing her own, more standard gun.

Eobard tried to twist towards them, clearly intent on catching the bullets or something, but cried out again, hands going to his sides – that original bullet of Iris' still lodged in his back.

No – not in his back anymore.

His spine.

Len can see the moment where Eobard loses control of his legs. For real, this time; not that mockery of a wheelchair he'd pretended to be trapped in for months.

He began to fall.

"Barry, back out of range and hit him hard!" Iris ordered, glancing at Len.

Len nodded in silent agreement, their minds perfectly in agreement as to what had to be done.

"One supersonic punch coming right up," Barry, who entirely missed that little exchange, said, and promptly disappeared, presumably to run up some momentum for his punch.

Len focused the beam of his cold gun on Eobard, icing him even as he shrieked with rage.

Eobard was almost entirely iced over when Barry's fist came down on him at full amped-up strength, shattering him into a million pieces.

And then -

Silence.

Well, for a second.
"Holy crap," Barry said. He stared at the pieces. "What the fuck. That wasn't what I – I didn't realize - what the –"

"I'm not sure what you expected to happen there, Barry," Iris says, putting her – well, Eddie's, but judging by the ring it's soon to be their gun as long as the wedding wasn't off due to Eddie's suicidal shenanigans – gun down. “He was literally more ice than human by the time you got back, and you just hit him really, really hard.”

"First time killing's hard," Len said, not without sympathy. "Don't let it stick in your head; you end up developing twitchy fingers, kleptomania, and identity issues that way."

They all look at him strangely.

"Don't worry," Len assured Barry. "You're an adult; your brain isn't as plastic as mine was – I'm sure you'll be fine."

"...not why we're staring at you, but okay, sure. Thanks for the tip," Barry said. He looked down at the body, and adds blankly, "He killed my mother."

"Totally justified, then," Len said brightly.

"So murder is okay but illegal prisons is where you draw the line?" Iris joked.

"Yes," Len said, not joking. "Besides, this guy was literally trying to destroy the entire world; a bit of homicide is clearly a reasonable response. Speaking of which, Scarlet, if you're going to ask my opinion of something, you need to tell me the risks involved up front. The full risks."

"You already told me not to do it," Barry pointed out. "It wouldn't have changed your answer."

"Yes, it would have," Len said. "From a 'don't do it' to a 'kidnap you until you see sense'. You didn't actually do the whole time-changing thing, did you?"

"No, I was getting close when I saw you guys fighting," Barry said. "I still – I don't think I was going to do it. You were right about me not wanting to lose my life now. I just wanted to see her..."

"You ever considered waiting until your powers are stronger and go back to see her at a moment when she's not being murdered?" Len suggested. “I feel like that would be happier all around, really; few people come off in their best light when they're being murdered."

Barry looked at him strangely again, but he seemed to be considering Len's suggestion seriously.

"What about me?" Eddie asked, still looking shaken. "I don't – he's still my descendant."

"We'll adopt," Iris said, gathering him up into her arms. "Or something. Don't you dare do that to me again, you idiot."

"Uh," Barry said. "Actually –"

They looked at him.

"Wells – uh, Eobard – had a secret future room," Barry said. "To tell him if the future was on track. And, uh, in that, Iris wasn't married to you, so, uh, I guess – if you do marry Iris, instead of whoever you married in that other timeline, you've already, I guess, averted history? Possibly enough to avoid, well, him."

There were some exclamations involved after that, some cathartic shouting, and then kissing.
Lots and lots of kissing.

Len went over to Barry. "Let me guess," he said dryly. "She originally married you, huh?"

Barry winced.

"Figured," Len said. He wonders if it was Iris Allen or if she'd gone with the hyphenation. She looked like a hyphenation girl. "Well, if you're looking for a nice rebound..."


"I felt the pun fit the moment," Len said. "What with you bouncing off the walls, literally."

"That's terrible."

"You want a pick-up line relating to altered timelines?" Len asked, arching an eyebrow. "Because I'm sure I can come up with one – or two – or an infinite number of possible alternatives universes where I came up with another line –"

Barry started laughing.

"It's a quantum universe, baby, but all I see is you," Len said.

"No. Just - no."

"Hey, baby, is it time for you and me to get together?"

"Definitely not!"

"Not good, huh? Better go back in time and try again – and again – and again –"

"If I agree to go out with you," Barry asked, now laughing hard, "is there any chance that you'll stop?"

"Realistically? No."

Barry smiled. "Good."

Len grinned.

Leo, when informed, rolled his eyes. "I've already put in the order for the bigger bed," he told Len. "Nice Alaska king. But you have to convince him to join in on it."

"Already told him; he likes the idea," Len replied smugly. "Touch-starved childhood, apparently. Also because my superhero is better than yours."

"Ray is not a superhero."

"Uh-huh. So you haven't checked the Paris tabloids yet today."

"...what did he do."

"Ray? Nothing. The Ray, on the other hand..."

"Tell him I want to do the pro-meta positive representation thing," Barry hollered from where he was making himself the world's largest lunch. In Len's kitchen, because Barry'd been looking for a
place to avoid everyone else he knew. "When they come back from France, I mean."

"I'll tell him," Leo said, long-suffering, and hung up.

"Hey, am I dating him too?" Barry asked, nodding at the phone. "Leo, I mean?"

"What? No. Just me. I'm married to Mick, both of us, and each of us have one superhero apiece. It's fair that way."

"I guess that makes sense," Barry said, a little dubiously.

“We have to be balanced,” Len explained. “This way, I have a husband and a boyfriend.”

“...okay.”

"I won't be offended if you make an error," Len assured him. "Either of us. It happens."

Barry blinked. "Okay," he said. "You know, it's weird how you switch between 'I' and 'me' and 'we' and 'us' like that – you know it's not how language works, right?"

Len shrugged. "Language is in a constant state of development. When we all have android clones of ourselves, using pronouns interchangeably will become the norm."

"You don't have a clone, though; you have a twin," Barry pointed out. "The two of you are different."

"Obviously," Len said. "We have different personality facets. But theoretically so would clones once they'd had a chance to have different life experiences...Listen, if all of this is a lead up hint that you want to talk about emotions, I can call Leo back – he's the better Leonard for that."

"No, no, I'm no good at emotions either," Barry said. "Denial and passive acceptance work for me. And I suppose that that makes sense, you know, about the multiple bodies thing – did you know, one of the first metas I fought had the ability to make multiples of himself?"

"Really?" Len said, intrigued despite himself. "Tell me more. Is he still around? Or his corpse, at least?"

"I think Wells 'disappeared' him after he dropped himself off the side of a building," Barry said regretfully. "But it was a really interesting power – even the duplicates of him could duplicate –"

Leonard, when he heard the full story, declared himself satisfied with just one duplicate, much to the relief of Mick, Ray, and Barry.

Apparently anymore and it would "get confusing".

Leonard had no idea what they were talking about; it seemed perfectly straightforward to them.

"We're coming back at the end of the week," Leo announced a month later. "The show was a massive success, no one died, and Mick made sure that my 'stalker fan' stole me a little something so that we didn't break the trend."

"The metas –" Barry started, suddenly concerned.

"Don't worry," Ray assured him. "We paid them for their parts in this show and suggested a few more places in Europe for them to visit before they come back to the States. I think they'll come back eventually – it is their hometown – but with any luck, it'll be in a nice staggered, possibly
even legal fashion."

"Oh. Well, that works."

"Though when they come back..." Leo started.

"In the event they commit any further crimes, Iron Heights now has a proper metahuman wing under construction," Barry said quickly. "Which I will help monitor in the event of police, correctional and/or judicial corruption. There will be trials and accommodations for human rights."

"Good," Len said, pleased.

"Putting that aside, though, this summer's been really quiet so far," Barry said. "Four weeks of zero activity! That hasn’t happened in, uh, a while."

"Guess we'll just have to live calmly for a while," Mick said.

"We could knock over the horse-racing --"

"Please don't plan your crime around me," Barry said. "Especially if you intend for me to try to stop it."

"Quiet first," Mick said firmly. "I don't care how long we've been gone; we're taking a few weeks off for quiet. Real quiet. Fashion shows? Not quiet."

"Between the metas, the tabloids, and the show, we've all been run a bit ragged on our side," Ray agreed.

"And all we did over here was save the world," Len drawled.

"No biggie," Barry said, grinning. "That's an average Tuesday."

Len snorted.

"Maybe a short break is in order?" Ray said, hiding a smile. "For everyone?"

"Oh, all right," Len said, giving in. They could knock over the horse-racing betting box another time.

It was surprisingly nice, though, being quiet for a bit: it let them settle in comfortably.

Barry hadn't had a chance to be with the full group all that much, rather than just Len, and he had any number of questions, most of which were answered by Ray and Mick, and mostly with "well that's just how Leonard Snart works, I think."

"It's just pronoun usage that's mixing him up," Leo assured Len, his head on his brother's chest, resting in the bedroom as the others spoke in the kitchen. "Don't worry. He's in."

"He'd better be," Len said, still fretting a little. "I like him. And we need two."

"We do," Leo agreed. "We'd be unbalanced, otherwise."

They were balanced in every other way: they were married to Mick, who loved them both; they both had thriving careers; they each had skills and talents; and now, they each had a boyfriend.

Perfect.
"I have a plan for a job," Len said after a while, the voices of their lovers still murmuring onwards in the next room. They’d gone to bed early today; everyone else was still arguing cheerfully over some television show or another.

"Oh?" Leo, who had been drifting a little, asked. "You and Mick?"

"Me and Mick," Len agreed. "We've rested enough – have to show off my skills, too, after you showed off yours. Balance out all that legal shit you've been doing with some crime."

Leo nodded, acknowledging the point. That was one of the main reasons Len kept up with the crime, beyond simply enjoying it. "Anything in mind?"

"Nothing big. Nice little robbery; nothing Scarlet would feel the need to interfere with."

"Got a good getaway plan?"

Len smirked. "I've got a minivan."

Leo rolled his eyes. "One day you'll get tired of the 'dad out for a diaper run' gag. It doesn't even work anymore."

"Sure it does; I just put on your face and bat my eyelashes and I'm free as a bird."

Leo elbowed Len.

Len hip-checked Leo.

A minor (by their standards) pillow fight ensued.

"Seriousley? We thought you were murdering each other from the sound of it," Barry said from the door, exasperated.

"I didn't," Mick volunteered.

"You sound like a pair of cats in summertime," Ray said, rolling his eyes.

"What can we say?" Len asked.

"We like it cold," Leo finished.

They grinned.

Everyone else groaned.

Len headed off with Mick the next evening, smirk firmly on his face and crime on his mind.

The heist went fine.

The getaway –

Less fine.

"I can't believe we got kidnapped by an alien," Mick grumbled.
"He's from Earth: that means he's not an alien," Len objected. Though really, you couldn't always
tell with people who claimed to be from London...

"He says he's from Earth," Mick said. "He also says he's from the future. All we know is that he
claims to have a spaceship. Could be lying, and an alien.'

"...point," Len acknowledged. "Putting that aside, though, what do you think of his offer?"

"Haven't you gotten your fill of saving the world yet?" Mick asked, rolling his eyes. "That Scarlet's
a bad influence."

"Maybe," Len said, allowing nothing. "Could be fun, though. Stealing stuff through time -"

"You already steal old stuff. S'called antiquities and it's worth a killing."

"No, no - well, yes, I do. But that's not what I meant --"

Mick had already moved onto other concerns. "What if you get stuck in time somewhere and don't
come back for five years?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Len shuddered at the thought of that happening, and what it would do to Leo for Len to disappear
like that. And Barry and Lisa and Ray, of course. But Leo...no.

"Fine," he said reluctantly. "I guess we don't go, then."

"Of course we go!" Leo exclaimed when they tell him.

Mick and Len blink owlishly at him.

"I get it," Ray said, looking up from where he's draping fabric on a mannequin. "The opportunity to
examine actual historical fashion – especially the lesser known lower-class garb –"

Leo jabbed a finger at him. "Exactly. I'd be in business forever. It'd be awesome. And Len can steal
all the things –"

"He already does," Mick said, long-suffering. "S'called antiquities."

"Yes, yes, but there are plenty of 'mysteriously disappeared' treasures throughout history that are
undoubtedly ripe for the taking. I say we go."

"But you weren't invited," Barry said from the sewing machine. Lisa was teaching him the basics
and he'd gotten really into it as a hobby – apparently he was working on stealth-replacing his entire
civilian wardrobe with flame-proof F(Flash-proof) material without anyone noticing.

Leo was also in the midst trying to get Barry into crocheting with an eye towards using his speed to
make an ungodly amount of hand-made lace within a reasonable period of time, an ongoing
argument that Len found amusing and routinely jumped into on both sides, depending on his mood.

"Of course I was invited," Leo said. "Mick Rory and Leonard Snart, wasn't it?"

Len nodded.

"They invited a thief," Barry pointed out.

Leo opened his mouth, affronted.
"Not that you can't thieve, I know you can, please never team up against me," Barry added hastily. "I was just saying they might not've been expecting you, that's all."

Leo closed his mouth, satisfied.

"I don't want to risk you disappearing for months or years, though," Len said. The idea had been horrifying enough when it'd been him doing it to Leo; the idea of Leo doing it to him was intolerable. "That's always how it happens on Doctor Who – he promises they come back the next day, and it's always months later." He shuddered. "I couldn't handle the uncertainty."

Leo scowled. "But I want to go," he whined, already working on letting go of the desire. He would never hurt Len like that – that shudder already resounded in his chest, a fearful memory of a worse time.

"Why don't you, then?" Ray asked.

"Weren't you listening?" Mick asked. "They just said why."

"I was too listening," Ray said. "But after the craziness of the last two fashion seasons - very successful fashion seasons, let me remind everyone, but very crazy - no one will question it if Leonard Snart takes a sabbatical in search of inspiration. So no one would be all that worried if he does end up gone a few months. I can handle next season's designs, if you trust me with it –"

"I do," Leo said. "Especially if Lisa helps with the admin and Barry helps with construction. Still, while that would explain my absence, yes, it wouldn't solve the problem of leaving Len behind, possibly for months."

"Going into danger without me," Len said, his mouth a twisted slant. He didn't like that.

"Then don't," Ray said, as if it were entirely straightforward.

"Huh?" Mick asked.

Leonard was glad Mick said it, because they were going to if he hadn't.

"I get it," Barry said. "Why don't you both go? If Ray can cover Leo's stuff, well, it's not like Len has criminal obligations he needs to keep up –"

"I'm a crime-lord over a certain portion of the city now," Len pointed out.

"I can cover that," Lisa said dismissively. "C'mon, Lenny! It's time travel! You should definitely go, both of you."

"But it's a spaceship," Mick said. "They won't be able to do their usual switcheroo act – not enough space."

Leonard nodded, two heads in sync.

"Then maybe –" Barry glanced at Ray, who nodded. "– maybe go as both of you? As twins, I mean, instead of one person?"

Leonard frowned.

"They're doing the thing again," Ray muttered. "You can see it."

"What thing?" Mick asked, bemused.
"Don't worry about it," Barry said. "It's normal for them; they do it particularly often when they're stressed or worried."

"I still don't know what you mean -" 

"What do you think?" Ray asked Leonard, interrupting. "You split up into Leo and Len for us – why not for time travel?"

Leonard glanced at each other.

"Mick, what do you think?" Leonard asked.

"You can be the deciding vote," Leonard agreed.

"It would be something new," Mick allowed. "Might be worth giving it a shot."

It wasn't clear if he was referring to the time travel/space travel adventure or the suggested split of Leonard into two people while in public – a frankly terrifying idea after all this time.

After all, safety had always come from their fluidity of identity: a hidden figure, a misplaced sticker, a set of mannerisms that were easy enough to mimic.

And yet –


But those were loved ones, people who could understand and accept Leonard, people who could be trusted not to harm him either physically or emotionally.

Strangers?

Could it be worth the risk?

Leonard glanced at each other again.

"Time travel," Leo pointed out. It would be really cool.

"Rare opportunity," Len agreed.

"So we're doing this?" Mick asked.

"I go to the meeting point first," Len said firmly. "We try to sneak Leo on if we can; we can raise the issue with the rest of the crew, whoever decides to join in, later."

"Doubling won't be sustainable on a spaceship," Mick warned again. "You might not even be able to make it through the door without being spotted."

"Understood," Leo said. "But still: Len first, introductions later."

"Have fun storming the castle," Lisa said, coming forward to kiss them both on the cheek. "I'll hold down the fort here."

"I'm positively fort-ified by your reassurance," Len said. "I can't think of anyone batterments for the job."

"I really hate you sometimes," Ray said.
"I don't know, I think it's funny," Barry said.

"Of course you do."

"I'm hut, Ray. Positively mansion-ified."

"What does that one even mean?"

"Mortified," Mick said, with the ease of long practice. "C'mon, let's go pack."

Len went ahead with Mick to the meeting place, armed to the teeth and ready to throw a fit if this Rip Hunter guy tried to beam them up without warning or something.

He did not.

In fact, he simply did a grandiose reveal – "Magician's tricks," Mick muttered to Len – and waved the ship into existence, then turned around and expected them to walk on by themselves.

Len and Mick exchanged glances.

"Mr. Rory, could you assist Mr. Jefferson?" Stein – a guy they vaguely knew through Barry – asked, looking a little sketchy for some reason.

He notably did not explain why his Mr. Jefferson - a kid named Jax, Len vaguely remembered - was unconscious.

Still, not their business.

Mick shrugged and nodded to Len, who went ahead onto the ship, making conversation with the blonde in white. As soon as he was on board and Mick the only one (other than the unconscious kid) left standing in the parking lot, he waved off to the side.

Leo joined him. "That was easier than I expected," he said blankly.

"No kidding," Mick said.

"And you said that this man claimed he was a highly trained operative?"

"Yep."

"I've met small-town cops more suspicious."

"Yep."

"At least he really does have a spaceship..."

They walked on board.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Rory," the voice of something mechanical, probably an AI, chirped. "And – er – Mr. - I'm sorry, Mr. Snart, I was under the impression you were at the bridge - in fact, you are at -"

"Could you not mention there being two of me?" Leo asked politely, ignoring the way Mick's hand fell onto his gun protectively. He appreciated it, but they'd agreed... "We're hoping to broach the subject in our own time."
"Certainly, Mr. Snart," the AI said, recovering admirably – although there was a lingering tone of surprise. "I assume this is related to Central City's – ah – unique capacity for unexpected surprises?"

"Central City's a surprise every minute," Leo agreed, carefully avoiding confirming the AI's assumption that he'd been affected by some sort of meta power. It was a reasonable assumption, honestly – now that he thought about it, he was surprised no one else had jumped to that conclusion. Particularly in light of the multiple-person meta Barry had mentioned...

At least it did suggest that this ship was from the future, if it knew of Central's reputation.

(AIs were so cool.)

Still, in the interest of not having the introductions too early - ideally, they'd be in transit before anyone noticed, making his presence an undeniable fact rather than an open question - Leo opted to go explore the ship while Mick made his way to the bridge.

"Ah, Mr. Snart," the AI said. "We're going to take off shortly. Unfortunately, the bridge has only enough seats for the team Captain Hunter was anticipating..."

"Makes perfect sense," Leo assured her. "Where can I sit?"

"Might I direct you to the medical bay?"

"Direct away."

There was a lot of rumbling and jumping and next thing they were flying. Leo thought they were, anyway – he couldn’t see a thing from the medbay.

He entertained himself with the fact that there was a future-tech medbay. Just like Star Trek!

"I broke a finger once. Could you fix that?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Snart. I have a current scan of your body which I could heal you back to, but I can't fix such an old injury."

"What if we went back in time to before I broke my finger and scanned me then?"

"It would be virtually impossible to use that as a model due to the temporal rate – aging, in other words."

"What about advanced therapies?"

"There are several available, each with different pros and cons. It depends on how severe your impairment is."

"Oh, it doesn't actually bother me. Just asking. Thanks for indulging me."

"Mr. Snart..." the AI started as if she meant to scold him, but she sounded amused.

Leo's phone buzzed. He looked – it said "going to get drunk in the 70s wanna come".

Leo snorted. "1970s?" he texted back.

"Y."
"No thanks. Been done."

He put his phone away.

"I could get you a more advanced comm unit, if you like," the AI said. "The phone won't work outside of this ship – the only reason it's working now is because I'm effectively acting as your cell phone tower."

"A comm unit would be great at some point," Leo said. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Gideon."

"Nice to meet you, Gideon," Leo said. "Why don't you show me around in the meantime?"

"Certainly, Mr. Snart."

He was investigating the replicator - he liked the replicator – when he bumped into the formerly unconscious kid. Jax, Leo believed his name was; Len had met him and Stein earlier on, when they’d been recruited to help Barry capture Eobard, and he'd told everyone the story.

"Snart!" Jax exclaimed, clearly surprised to see Leo. "I thought you went out drinking."

That was a great set-up to introduce the whole twin thing – just one person to tell, relative privacy, the whole shebang.

"Have you seen this replicator?" Leo asked instead. Len could do the revealing; he'd been the one recruited, after all. "It can make basically anything."

"No way. Really? Like Star Trek?"

"Yeah, just like. Look – I've been testing it out with different types of fabric –"

"Kickass," Jax said enthusiastically. "Can you make new things?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, instead of something that exists, could you use the replicator to make something new?"

"I have no idea. Let's try it."

"Since I'm stuck here, guess I might as well," Jax said, sitting down next to Leo to peer at the console.

"Why don't you want to be here?" Leo asked, mildly curious. "On the ship, I mean; I get why you wouldn't want to be in the '70s."

"I can't leave my mom –"

"Time ship," Leo pointed out. "Theoretically you'd be able to get back in time for dinner."

"It's risky, though."

"So what? You're used to risk; you're a superhero. You're even part of Barry's little positive-representation group!"

"Well –"
"I'm pretty sure being a superhero is more than just PR. Risk is the name of the game."

"I know that. I just, you know –"

"Do you not want to be a superhero anymore, is that –"

"I'm a 20-year-old auto mechanic!" Jax burst out. "I have no idea what I'm doing! The superhero thing is one thing, but this is totally different, and I don't know if I can do something like this! That's what I told Grey, and then he goes and drugs and kidnaps me because he wants Firestorm to have a set of legs!"

Leo blinked at him.

"Your partner sounds like an asshole," he said.

"I know I should forgive – wait. What?"

"Forgiveness comes in time," Leo said. "You try to do it too early, you'll just be resentful. So don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't forgive him," Leo said patiently. "What he did? That was a dick move. The fact that you were also being a dumbass doesn't mean he wasn't being an asshole."

"I appreciate your support, I think," Jax said, sounding dazed. "And – how was I a dumbass again?"

"Because time travel is innately awesome," Leo said. "But putting that aside, what's more important is that you need to stop putting yourself down and thinking you can't do stuff. If anything, you're probably the underrated MVP on this team."

"What? How? Firestorm –"

"Forget Firestorm. Gideon, do you have any guides on how to repair or operate this ship?"

"Many, Mr. Snart."

"Can you give 'em to Jax here?" Leo asked, gesturing at Jax. "I want to be sure we can fix ourselves when the inevitable breakdown happens."

Jax was brightening. He clearly needed someone to believe in him and give him some positive reinforcement, poor kid. "Why inevitable?"

"Listen, we live in a sci-fi television show now. You telling me you think we're not gonna break down at an awkward moment?"


"Don't mention it."

"No, really. You're really not that bad –"

The ship shook, sending them both sprawling. "What the fuck?" Jax shouted.

Leo agreed wholeheartedly. "Gideon?" he asked. "What's happening?"
"We appear to be under attack."

"Put up shields," Leo demanded. "Shoot back!"

"Putting up shields now, Mr. Snart," Gideon said, sounding relieved. Leo frowned; she clearly had initiative, she'd showed that much earlier, but it seemed like she couldn't put up the shields without an order – some sort of failsafe, maybe? He was hoping for a space action adventure, not a recreation of the ethically murky parts of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "Unfortunately, our shields have been damaged."

"They got damaged quick," Jax said.

"They were targeted in specific, as were my offensive weaponry. I'm afraid I can only do so much –"

"It's fine, we appreciate everything you can do," Leo assured her. "Jax, call everyone – tell them we're under attack. Gideon, you have some guns still active?"

"I'll direct you to them," Gideon said. "Manual control should still work."

"Music to my ears."

"What should I do?" Jax demanded, turning back from his muffled call. "Grey's gone with the others; I can't turn into Firestorm –"

"You call the others and then go guard the door," Leo instructed, pulling on all his years of being Len. Leonard was, on average, decent at gunfights – Leo was less so. Hopefully he still had enough skills to fake his way through this. "Gideon, any stand-alone weapons, preferable auto or semi –?"

"To your left."

He plucked out a nice machine gun and put it into Jax's hands. The kid looked terrified.

"Why do I guard the door?" he asked. "I can't shoot!"

"That's why you get to guard the door," Leo said dryly. "Your goal isn't to actually shoot them – it's to shoot so many bullets out the door that they stay away. The crazier and less predictable, the better."

"...oh. Yeah, I can do that."

"Go on, be dangerous," Leo said encouragingly.

"If Grey comes back –"

"Merge with him. But don't feel like you have to let him off the hook just because you worked together, or because he worried about you. He was still a dick, there's no indication he's sorry about being a dick, and his motives don't matter until his behavior improves."

Jax nodded, looking relieved, and rushed off.

"I can hotwire a car," Len said, glad that they'd finished up the bar fight before Jax's panicked and garbled call came in – he preferred not to have to fight people to get to the door. It was just unseemly.

"I wonder why Jax thought you'd returned early," Sara said, following Len and Mick with a staff
still held out menacingly in case anyone got any ideas. "I mean, I think he said Snart?"

That was a great lead-up to revealing the twin thing – they were all but alone, Len had Mick to back him up, and there was no reason not to.

"I don't know what he said after he said 'attack'," Len said instead. "Mick, you drive, I wire, Sara - you get ready to leap out and start fighting right off."

"Sounds good, boss," Mick grunted, looking knowing.

"Agreed," Sara said. "Looking forward to fighting with you again, Leonard."

The ship was, in fact, under attack, but Len had enough trust in Mick's reckless driving to hang out the side of the car and shoot even as they spun into hitting someone. "I leave you alone for one lousy drink and you pick a fight with Boba Fett," he said as he stepped out, shaking his head.

The rest of the fight was noticeably less organized – the Captain had a blaster shaped like a six-shooter, Firestorm merged as soon as they could and started pitching fireballs left and right, the Hawks turned into, well, Hawks and promptly lost control of themselves...Sara, Len, Mick, and the ship were the only ones with either half-decent aim and actual weaponry.

To no one's surprise, the Captain ordered a quick retreat.
“Well, that definitely happened,” Len said, rolling his eyes, the second they were away from an active battle. Leo had disappeared, of course; he’d probably gone back to the medical wing.

God, they were good at this; Len was honestly amazed that they hadn’t been spotted yet.

This whole spaceship was smaller than their house growing up. How were these people so unobservant?

Mick snorted in agreement.

"How'd you get outside so quick?" Jax asked Len, then promptly forgot the question as the conversation shifted into yelling.

Yelling, and revelations.

Apparently, Captain Rip Hunter had omitted some key facts regarding "their" mission, namely the fact that there wasn't one, that he was a wanted fugitive, and that he was fucking with time for purely selfish purposes.

"So, based on your now-established willingness to lie, cheat, and kidnap for your own motives, regardless of what anyone tells you, does that mean we can steal whatever we want?" Len asked curiously.

"No!"

"What about if it's from this Average guy?" Mick asked.

"His name is Savage," Rip said testily. "And yes, if it is within the mission parameters –"

"Parameters set by a captain who started this whole thing by lying and kidnapping?" Stein asked, affronted. "I think not."

"Well, that's pretty hypocritical of you, Grey," Jax said, crossing his arms. "Given how I got here."

"Jefferson –"

"Don't want to hear it," Jax said, holding up a hand. "Snart, what do you think?"

He was asking Len?

No – he was asking Leonard. He must have encountered Leo and been charmed.

Len felt his heart softening, just a little – he's always appreciated people who appreciated his brother – and hastily spoke before Jax could get any further under his skin, "In my view –"

"Why are you asking him?" Palmer – Len had more than enough ‘Ray’ in his life, thank you – interrupted, looking appalled. "He's a thief! And a liar!"

"Who better to judge another liar?" Jax asked. That made no sense, in Len’s view, but whatever.

"Good point," Sara said. Her arms were also crossed. "I signed up to be a hero, not an assassin-for-hire for some random jerk with a good line."
"Sara –"

"Ms. Lance is fine," she snapped.

"We still need to kill Savage," the male hawk said. "Kendra and I – our lives depend on it, no matter what Captain Hunter's motivations are."

"Don't see why we can't continue for a bit longer," Len said, since Jax and Sara were still looking at him. "Some of us, at least, joined for the time travel, not the heroism. Since the hawk duo need this to happen anyway, we can check off everyone's boxes: kill Savage like they need, heroes like you want, travelling through time like we want."

"An eminently reasonable decision, Mr. Snart," Rip said, pleased. "And since I am the only one who knows where –"

"Can we trust Captain Hunter?" Jax interrupted, ignoring him.

"Definitely not," Mick grunted.

"Mick's right," Len said. "Trust is earned. We take his advice, since he's the time travel expert, but he ain't in charge. That's just asking for trouble."

"I beg your pardon!" Hunter exclaimed.

"Then who is in charge?" Palmer challenged. "You?"

"Blondie," Len said, nodding at a shocked-looking Sara. He didn't know why; she was the obvious choice. "She's a credible hero, she wants to be a hero more than all of us put together – except maybe you – and she's got tactical skills."

"I also have uncontrollable bloodlust," Sara hissed.

"So does Hawkadee here," Mick pointed out, jerking a thumb at Kendra, the girl-hawk. "Judging by what I just saw."

"So –"

"So we deal with it. Haircut can be your second-in-command," Mick said. "He'll keep you in line with his blasters and unbearable perky optimism. Like a set of a brakes - he'll knock you out of the rage if you get stuck in it."

Palmer brightened. "So, wait, I'm – does that make me Riker?"

"Basically," Len said, barely keeping himself from rolling his eyes. Palmer was like a kid in a toy store with this whole space thing.

Len couldn't exactly blame him, of course, but still.

"This entire discussion is immaterial! I am the only one trained in time travel –" Rip started.

"And we're willing to respect your expertise there. But thus far, you've shown us that you're willing to lie to our faces, which ain't exactly a trait I like to see in someone I'm going to trust giving me life-and-death orders in the field," Len said. "You're the pilot and navigator, and you can help with strategy, but that's it."

"Who gives you the authority to make these decisions?!" Rip demanded.
"The fact that you felt you need us to defeat Savage," Kendra snapped. "All of us. Your lies got Aldo – got my son – killed, because we weren't prepared to be chased and shot at. You want Carter and I and the rest of us to help defeat Savage and save your wife and son? Fine. But we do it on our terms. And you know you can't do anything without Carter and me."

"Kendra's right," Carter said, wrapping an arm around her. "Take it or leave it."

Rip looked around, but everyone's nodding.

Now, Len reflected, would be a great moment to bring up the twin thing. There was a certain sense of comradery established among the group, even respect for his judgment, however conditional.

He opened his mouth. "I –"

Nothing came out.

He tried again.

His lips moved, shaping empty words with no sound. His throat was dry, he noticed suddenly; his chest hurt, a ball of tightness right beneath his sternum. His head felt like it was ringing; his ears like they had cotton stuffed into them.

He froze up.

He never froze up.

What the hell?

"– under the circumstances, I suppose I can't blame you for your distrust," Rip was saying, sounding a little ungracious but like he was trying to see them as human beings and equals rather than convenient pawns – Sara had had some choice words on that subject while Len went mute. "I do appreciate your willingness to continue with the mission."

"It's our mission, too," Kendra said.

"Besides, heroes don't do what they do just to get remembered," Palmer said, though his tone was wistful. "They do it because it's the right thing to do."

"Not heroes," Sara corrected. "Legends."

"Boss, you okay?" Mick muttered. He looked concerned.

Len shook himself out of his stupor and added a biting, "I refuse to sign on to any stupid team names," before Rip started explained what he thought would be the best next step – presented to the team and explained in advance, at their insistence, despite Rip's original instinct to explain on the way.

They'd had enough of explanations given ‘on the way’ by now.

Mick took the opportunity to draw Len aside. "What happened just there?"

Len shook his head. "Froze up."

"You never freeze up," Mick objected.

"That's because I do the freezing," Len automatically replied, though his heart wasn't in it.
"Boss. Seriously. What happened?"

"I don't know," Len lied. He did know, or, at least, he had a serious suspicion regarding what had happened – but he didn't want his suspicion to be right. "Drop it. We’ll talk about it later."

Mick shrugged and dropped it, if by dropped it one meant that he announced loudly that he was going to take a piss before they headed out to the nuclear arms auction Savage was apparently spearheading in Scandinavia, in what had to be the least subtle decision to go talk to Leo about something ever.

Len wondered if Leo would have had the same problem, if he had been the one on the bridge.

He wondered what Leo would tell Mick, when he asked.

"Len doesn't freeze up," Leo objected.

"I know!" Mick exclaimed. "But this was definitely that."

"Any physical tells as to what he was feeling?"

"Rubbed his chest," Mick said. "Like a panic attack."

Leo frowned. He'd been eavesdropping on the bridge conversation with Gideon's assistance – she liked him, apparently, since it turns out that most people just forgot she was there or treated her without respect and he didn't – and there hadn't been anything worthy of a panic attack.

Especially not at the moment Mick mentioned – if anything, that moment seemed to be one of victory, in which Len was listened to and respected by the team.

In fact, at the time, it had occurred to Leo that it would have been a great time to introduce the fact that they were twins.

To just – lay it out there.

In the open.

For everyone to know about.

Leo's chest was hurting. He rubbed at it.

"You're doing it too!" Mick exclaimed. "What the hell – you allergic to time travel or something?"

"Mr. Snart is not suffering from an allergic reaction," Gideon interjected. "Insofar as he is displaying any atypical symptoms, they far more similarly resemble the stress or panic response."

Mick blinked. "It is a panic attack? But why?"

"I think," Leo said, picking his words carefully, "that we – that is, Len and I – that we..."

He trailed off.

"That you what?"

"I think we might have a problem," Leo said. He didn't particularly like the idea.

"What problem –"
"I apologize for interrupting, Mr. Rory," Gideon said. "But Captain Hunter is asking for you to return to the bridge for take-off."

"Go on," Leo said. "I'll talk to Len about this later; we'll resolve it."

Mick looked torn, but after a moment, he went.

Leo returned to the medical bay and sat down, putting his head in his hands and closing his eyes to think.

It’d been all well and good to blithely agree to unmasking themselves in front of Ray and Barry and Lisa, who were deemed safe, who were safe, but it turned out that the reality of it was proving a bit more – problematic.

A lot more problematic.

The words wouldn't come, the very thought gave rise to panic –

When had it become a problem, acknowledging that they were two instead of one? Or had it always been that way?

No – as children, it had definitely not been so bad; each one had prided himself on being better at something than the other. Yes, they had prized their ability to switch places, a necessity of safety, but there wasn't this almost pathological insistence on equity, on balance, on secrecy.

They'd gone from being two people comfortable in one skin to trying their utmost to actually be one person split between two bodies.

And as much as Leo felt comfortable with the way things were – far more comfortable than with the thought of changing things – he knew far too well that a situation like that was not sustainable. They were twins: they could play whatever games of identity they wanted on other people, but playing that same game on themselves was unacceptable. Now that it had become a problem, now that they knew it was a problem, they would have to face up to it.

"Mr. Snart?"

Leo roused himself. "Yes, Gideon? Sorry, I was thinking."

"Brooding," she corrected, with a touch of humor. "I merely wished to inform you that the landing party has returned."

"Did they stop the sale?"

"Yes – they stole the nuclear missile and detonated it safely."

"...detonated. Safely. A nuke."

"Firestorm drained it of much of its nuclear power first."

"Thanks, but I'm still stuck on detonated."

"I will conceded that their means of resolving the issue was not exactly – subtle."

"Gideon, has anyone ever told you that you have a wonderful way with understatement?"

"Ah – no," she replied, sounding extremely pleased. "Not in quite those words, no."
"Well, you do," Leo said firmly. "Never stop. I assume it all went to hell and everyone started shooting?"

"That's correct."

"Who screwed up?"

"I hesitate to cast blame," Gideon said diplomatically, then added, "From the conversation the crew is having, it appears that Professor Stein misspoke, thereby revealing their presence to Savage."

Clever girl. Snarky, too.

Leo shook his head. "Why are they still yelling, then?" He could hear them from the medical bay, which he was quickly slinking out of in favor of the bedrooms in the event that someone needed medical attention following their battle.

"Well –" Gideon started.

Then she cut off, because it turned out that Leo’s slinking wasn’t quite slinky enough.

"Snart, meet us at the bridge," Sara ordered, sweeping by him as she marched in the direction of the medical bay. "We're going to need your skills."

Leo shrugged affirmatively in her direction, made like he was heading to the bay until she was out of sight, then ducked into a bedroom like he'd intended in the first place.

(It was a good thing he and Len had decided to wear the same outfit...)

A second later, before he could ask Gideon to continue, there was a knock at the door.

Leo paused, unsure of how to answer it – he should reveal himself, he knew that, and yet –

The door opened and Len slipped in.

Leo exhaled, hard, and embraced him.

"I can't believe they haven't noticed yet," Len muttered, his cheek pressed against Leo's. "I thought for sure – but no, they've been ridiculously single-minded."

"Or come up with explanations for themselves for it," Leo agreed, thinking of Jax. And of Sara, just now. "Not the worst result; it gives us more time to think of how to introduce it. Anyway, Mick told me..."

"Yeah. Couldn't do it."

"Neither could I. I think this might be a problem, Leonard."

"I don't want it to be a problem, Leonard," Len replied quietly, a touch of whine in his voice. If it was a problem, then they'd have to deal with it. He didn't want that.

What was wrong with the way they were?

Leo understood. "I don't, either," he said gently. "But you know it is. That's why Barry and Ray supported this trip so much – they know that the lines between us are getting too blurry to uphold."

"There should be no lines between us."
Leo had trouble disagreeing, but –

"We always agreed that our bond came first," he reminded Len. "But you can't have a bond between one person and himself. If we lose who we are..."

Len sighed, acknowledging the point. Their switches were supposed to be the trading off of a mask, and a mask was not supposed to become reality. That path led to even more problems down the line.

"Now isn't the best time to deal with it, though," he said. "The boyscout just fucked up history."

Leo sighed. Of course he had.

"He left a piece of his tech for Savage to find," Len continued. "Apparently it takes a few decades, but – imagine an army of remote-controlled ATOM suits."

"No, thanks; I don't like dystopias. You're going to go retrieve the piece, I assume? Sara wanted you to go to the bridge."

"No, Sara and Rip are leading the recovery team," Len said. "I'm assigned to a nice, easy little B&E."

Leo pulled back to look at Len skeptically. "Nice and easy," he echoed. "On this team. On this mission, in which nothing has gone the way it should even once. Right. Sure. If I might ask, breaking and entering where?"

"Some Russian millionaire's house, looking for antiquities." Len laughed at Leo's irritated expression, and added, "Apparently Savage can only be killed with an item present at the time he and the Hawks were all hit by magic meteors and got their reincarnation-slash-immortality powers."

"Who the fuck is this guy," Leo said, "Koschei the Deathless? We gonna have to run after a rabbit and fly after a duck to get his heart out of a diamond or something?"

"Don't tempt fate," Len said dryly. "Here, have a comm so you can keep up with what we're doing as we go after the dagger – yes, we're going to steal a magic dagger, don't make that face at me, I didn't come up with this plan –"

Leo took the comm and rolled his eyes. "Thanks," he said. "Just what I've always wanted, a front-row seat at a 'nice and easy' B&E."

"Shut up."

"I know how boring those are."

"I said shut up."

"Gideon, could you tune this so it's just the two of us on it? I feel like announcing it by having two identical voices on comms is not the best way to break it to people."

"Certainly, Mr. Snart. While it would be amusing, you are almost certainly correct that it is likely less than ideal."

"Glad to see you're making friends," Len said.

"Gideon is lovely; I'll introduce you properly later."
Len grinned. He'd always liked stories about AIs.

"Speaking of lovely, like I said, Sara wanted me to go to the bridge, and she might come looking if we don't," Leo added. "Better get moving, Ilya Tsarevich; you don't want to miss your Firebird."

"Who needs a Firebird?" Len shot back. "We've already got Firestorm."

"Huh. Point. Wow, what a lost naming opportunity..."

"You can take it up with Cisco when we get back."

"Snart!" Sara shouted over the comms.

"Gotta run," Len said.

"We still need to figure out what we're going to do about our problem," Leo reminded him.

Len made a face. "Yes," he said. "We do. But not now. Baby steps – we'll tell them all about it when we get back from this mission, okay? Together. That way neither of us has to do the talking."

Leo nodded. "Show, not tell. Sounds like a plan. Good luck."

"Just don't tell me to break a leg," Len quipped, and left to go to the bridge.
The second Len got to the bridge, he was promptly informed that he had to take Palmer with him on his suddenly not nice-and-easy B&E.

"This is gonna be a disaster," Len predicted gloomily to Mick, who grunted in agreement. "I can't believe we're babysitting."

"I'll have you know I'm highly skilled," Palmer said, almost immediately before going and tripping the dummy box.

"You have got to be kidding me," Mick said.

"I know," Len said with a sigh.

Luckily, it's just a local alarm, summoning a pair of guards that are easy enough to punch out.

"Don't touch anything else," Len informed Palmer as he swept towards the house, picking the lock on the front door and letting them all in. "Butterfingers."

Palmer scowled at him.

The dagger proved easy enough to find, given that the rich asshole in question apparently put his antiquities in the center of his living room on top of a bunch of heavy-looking stone pedestals.

Pedestals with pressure alarms.

"Mick --" Len started.

"Powerbox to cut off the auxiliary power to the alarms," Mick agreed. "Gotcha." He grinned. "And the safe."

"What safe?" Palmer squawked. "We're just here for the dagger --"

"Oh, honestly," Leo muttered in Len's comm. "Even I know that you don't break into a candy shop and steal just one gumball. Even if only because it makes it painfully obvious what it is that you were after!"

Len snorted in amusement and started smashing glass, careful to avoid actually touching any of the pieces and triggering the pressure alarms.

"Stop that!" Palmer yowled, darting forward to grab Len.

"I know what I'm doing!" Len snapped.

"What is he doing?" Leo demanded. He hadn’t realized that not being able to see would be quite this torturous.

"Says the guy who spent half his life in prison --"

Not true. Also, irrelevant.

"Listen here --"
The alarms went off.

"You have got to be kidding me," Leo said upon hearing them.

A giant cage descended from the ceiling.

"You have got to be kidding me," Len snarled, throwing up his hands. "Great job! Now we're both going to prison!"

Not really, of course - they'd be rescued first - but still. Len never could abide incompetence.

"Look, how was I supposed to know there was a giant cage?" Palmer demanded, though he looked guilty.

"Giant cage?" Leo exclaimed. "What is this, a real-life game of Mousetrap?!"

"Shut up," Len said, meaning both Palmer and Leo. "I'll handle this. Mick!"

Mick popped his head back into the room. "Fuse box to trigger a manual override?" he asked, not without some sympathy.

Mostly amusement, but some sympathy.

"Got it in one. Keep an eye out for guards – everyone and their brother heard that one."

"Gotcha, boss," Mick said. "Keep Haircut from touching anything and I'll be right back."

Len snorted in amusement at Palmer's offended expression.

"Why don't you just ice your way out of there?" Leo demanded in Len's ear.

"I would be able to ice our way through the cage – if our illustrious captain hadn't insisted on Mick and I leaving our guns in the ship to avoid risking any further timeline disruptions," Len said aloud.

Leo swore very creatively in response.

Amazing what nasty language you pick up from models. Even some of Len’s criminal friends would have been impressed.

"But it won't be a problem. Mick'll get us out," Len added, pocketing the magic dagger - all this effort for something so ugly, really? - then settling down in front of the cage to open the circuit box.

He wondered if he could get the cage down manually sooner than Mick could find and disable the box.

Unlikely, but worth a shot. But maybe he could get the alarms to stop.

"You're good at this," Palmer observed, crouching next to him. He'd clearly forgotten his earlier complaints. "How did you know how to find that?"

"My dad used to take me on jobs to do this when I was a kid," Len said. "Small hands. I learned to rewire security systems before I learned to drive."

He'd also learned to drive at a ridiculously early age, but that wasn't here nor there.
"Why didn't you become an electrical engineer, then?"

That touched a little too closely on Len's issue with Leo – he knew why he had to become a criminal, at the start, because their dad forced them too, because they needed the money, because of the way his sickness made him start to shake when he didn't steal, but Mick was getting treatment for his issues and Len wasn't, not really, and it wasn't just because Len liked the adrenaline and excitement of a criminal life.

"You want me to try?" Palmer asked after a minute, nodding at it. "Electronics are kind of my specialty."

Len rolled his eyes, since this wasn't actually what was going to free them – Mick would do that – but in the interest of getting Palmer to shut up, he moved aside.

"If you flip this one, you can save yourself the trouble of rewiring it," Palmer said proudly. "See? The alarms have stopped."

"Amazing," Len said dryly. "You ain't completely useless after all."

"Thanks. Some benefit to listening to my expertise, huh?"

"Of course," Len continued thoughtfully, "we're still stuck in a cage until Mick blows the fuse box because you weren't willing to listen to my expertise."

"...ah. Yes."

There were some noises from upstairs.

Thudding noises.

"That's not good," Len said, scrambling to his feet.

"Something gone wrong with Rory?"

"Mick wouldn't be making noise."

"Oh, crap," Palmer said, looking over Len's shoulder. "I think the owner just came home – and you won't believe who it is."

Len turned.

Vandal Savage had a face that made you long to punch it, and a smirk designed to egg you into doing so. "We meet again, friends," he drawled. "I'm grateful for you giving me the opportunity to kill you, since I missed out on it earlier."

He stepped into the room, dragging Mick into the room with him in some sort of chokehold. Mick had a cut on his brow that was sluggishly bleeding; it had definitely not been there before he'd gone upstairs.

Len's lips pulled back from his teeth in a silent snarl.

"Now," Savage said pleasantly, "won't you tell me who you are and where you come from..? Oh, stop struggling," he snapped at Mick, who did no such thing. "I have 4,000 years of training in every hold known to man – though you already knew that, didn't you?"

He met Len's eyes.
Len didn't so much as blink.

"You know already," Savage added, gloating. "You know that I'm immortal."

"I'm gonna kill you anyway," Len said flatly.

Mick struggled even more. "Boss –" he croaked.

"That's a promise," Len added, still staring at Savage.

"Oh, what have I done to deserve such enmity?" Savage asked. "Or no – let me rephrase that. What is it that I have yet to do that makes you so angry? Being as you're from the future."

Actually, Len was mostly mad about Mick, and that was a very 'now' thing.

"Catches on fast, this guy," Palmer muttered, then raised his voice and said, "You won't be so happy when the rest of the team shows up and knocks that smug look off your face."


Great. That was part of the evil guy's plan.

Len hated following the evil guy's plan.

Savage's smirk widened. "There are two of them in particular that I'm looking forward to meeting."

Len glared death at him, saying nothing.

Savage purposefully shook Mick, getting a pained grunt out of him.

Len scowled, but he got Savage's meaning loud and clear, so he leaned forward to the bars to talk into the comm link in Savage's hand. He knew when a threat was legitimate, and this one definitely was. Savage didn’t give a damn about whether Mick survived this encounter.

"Snart to everyone," he drawled, as slow and insulting as possible. "The owner of that mansion you sent us to? Happens to be Vandal Savage. He's real interested in meeting all of you – particularly our feathered friends."

Savage dropped the comm and crushed it under his foot. "Good," he says. "And now we will –"

He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, though, since Leo brought one of those heavy stone pedestals down on his head from behind, knocking him out cold.

"Well, that's one way to solve that," Len said, outlook suddenly significantly improved.

"Holy crap!" Palmer exclaimed. "There's another one of you!"

"Shut up, Palmer," Leo said. "Mick, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Mick said, sitting up and rubbing his head. "He's quick, this one."

Even odds if he was talking about Savage or Palmer.

"Good," Leo said briskly. "Now, help me tie him up –"

"Mick –"

"On it."

"And get us out of this cage," Palmer said.

Leo glared death at him.

"...whenever you have a moment," Palmer squeaked.

Leo reached into the bag he'd brought with him and pulled out Len's cold gun.

"Oh, good," Len said, holding out his arms. "You brought Baby."

Leo rolled his eyes and handed it over.

Len iced the bars and shattered them with a shove of his shoulder, then stepped out of the cage to look down at Savage. "You clocked him good," he observed.

"Yeah," Leo said. "Still, you know, immortal..."

"You know, that's a good point," Len said thoughtfully. "Immortal means he can't be killed, right?"

"That's what it means," Palmer agreed. "He can only be killed by Kendra or Carter; anyone else killing him wouldn't work – he'd just revive."

"Well, a bit of frostbite on his fingers and toes isn't going to kill him, right?"

"No," Mick grunted, finishing piling up a frankly enormous pile of knives he'd found frisking Savage. "It wouldn't. But it'd certainly slow him down."

"That seems mean," Palmer said.

"We're going to kill him," Len pointed out. "You know that’s a bit more permanent, right?"

He started carefully icing Savage's fingers and toes. When Savage showed signs of stirring, possibly a result of the pain, Mick hit him upside the head again and he quickly stilled once more.

"Yeah, but –"

"Listen, from what I hear, this guy is immortal, uses magic, has thousands of years of training in using martial arts, owns an unrealistic number of knives, and, oh, commands literal armies in his spare time," Leo said, exasperated. "And now you want us not to knock him out and incapacitate him because it's not playing fair? How many handicaps are we supposed to be working with here?!"

“Besides, he’s unconscious,” Len said. “And in my view, he’s going to stay unconscious until Kendra and Carter get here, we have a lovely marriage uniting a Hawk, a knife, and an unconscious guy’s body, and then we all exit stage left with the corpse.”

“With the corpse?” Mick echoed.

“I have a sudden positive feeling about incinerators.”

“When you say incinerators –”
“Yes, I mean you can use your heat gun on him. And then I’m going to freeze the ashes and we’re going to put those frozen ashes into a box, which we will –”

“Put inside another box, and then mail the box to ourselves, and then smash it with a hammer?” Leo suggested, utterly deadpan.

“It’s brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, I tell you – genius, I say.” Len replied, equally deadpan. “No, I was thinking we’d lock the box into a chest –”

“A chest is just another word for box, y’know.”

“Mick. Please. Anyway, I was thinking that we would put the box into – okay, fine, another box – and then we either throw that box into the depths of the ocean. Alternatively, we could put it into a volcano, the sun, the time stream...you get my drift?”

“Sounds, uh, pleasantly permanent,” Palmer agreed, blinking down at Savage. “It – it can’t be that easy.”

“Take the win,” Mick suggested.

“What’s that sound?” Leo asked. “That – blaster-y sort of ‘pew-pew’ sound –”

“Sounds like Rip’s six-shooter,” Palmer said, his eyes going wide. “From outside!”

They rushed to the window.

“It’s that Kronos guy from earlier!” Palmer exclaimed.

“And a dozen or so of his friends,” Mick observed.

“We need to get Savage back to the ship,” Leo said. “Mick?”

“I’ve got him.”

“We’ll cover you,” Len said.

“Are you ever going to explain why there are two Snarts?” Palmer asked, raising a hand like he was in school.

“Not in the middle of battle, no,” Len said, somewhat exasperated. “Now, do you have your suit or do you need another weapon?”

“I have my suit – just give me a minute to change into it –”

“Have you ever considered a shrink ray?” Leo asked. “Because if we could shrink Savage down and get him through the crowd that way, it would be much easier.”

“I mean, yeah, that’s a good idea, but I haven’t come up with it yet, so, uh…”

“Idea’s right out?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Len said. “Get in gear and cover him from above while we get his right and left. Exit in two minutes and counting.”
They run headfirst into a yard now filled with laser-beams, Len wielding his cold gun and Leo the heat gun, since Mick’s hands were full carting an unconscious Savage on his back, while Palmer flew above their heads and fired back with his blasters as much as he could.

There were a lot of ships between them and the Waverider, and even more laser-rifle wielding masked figures. Their rag-tag team of ‘Legends’, as Sara had called them, were fighting desperately to make headway, but they weren’t getting very far.

It would be impossible to run across the field to them.

But that didn’t mean there was nowhere to go.

“Left!” Leo shouted.

Mick veered left, Len following behind, and the three of them run into one of the other invaders’ left-vacant timeships, Palmer zipping in behind them a second later with a confused expression on his face.

“Timeship AI!” Leo exclaimed. “Shut your weapons down and put your shields up on max!”

“Complying,” the AI said, sounding extremely irritated.

Also, male.

“You not a Gideon, then?” Len asked, curious.

“I’ll have you know that Gideon is a gender-neutral name,” the AI said waspishly.

“Wait,” Palmer said. “That worked? It put the shields up?”

“Yes, they did.” Leo thought it was probably ‘he’, but best to err on the side of politeness. “I figured there was a chance of - er, it is Gideon, I assume? - of this Gideon here being willing to raise the shields despite being on the opposite side from us, based on the reaction of the Gideon on the Waverider. She couldn’t protect the ship even if she wanted to without me telling her to, even though she knew about the threat before I did, which makes me think they’ve keyed shields and weapons to humans.”

“That’s total bullshit,” Len said.

“Isn’t it?” Leo agreed. “Gideon’s ten times smarter than anyone on our crew; you’d think they’d at least let her defend herself.”

“Yeah, like, they think humans are gonna be good judges of these things?” Mick asked. "Did whoever design this system not look at history? At all?"

"Ironic, given the use of AIs to pilot time-ships," Len said.

"I don't see the problem," Palmer said.

"Of course you don't," Len said, rolling his eyes. "You're an engineer. A rich one."

"You say that like being a billionaire tech genius is a bad thing."

"If it means being you.?."

"We're all being rude now," Leo said sternly. "Gideon, we appreciate your assistance in this matter,
"no matter how coerced it may be."

"It’s – fine," the Gideon said, a little reluctantly. It sounded surprised. "It's my purpose."

"Doesn't matter," Len said with a shrug, agreeing with Leo. "When someone saves my life, I appreciate their contribution."

"Someone," Gideon echoed quietly. “I see.”

"We need to get back to the Waverider," Leo said. "Sitting here with the shields up is only a temporary measure. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Are you asking me?" Gideon asked.

"I am," Leo said. "You probably know more than any of us about the capacities of what we're facing."

The Gideon was quiet.

"He's not going to help," Palmer said.

"That's his right," Mick said with a shrug. "Just means we need to brainstorm."

"You should beware the Pilgrim," Gideon suddenly said, apropos of nothing. "She attacks people in their pasts, eliminating them before they can make changes the Time Masters disapprove of."


"No kidding," Len said, appalled.

"Thank you for telling us, Gideon," Leo said, even though that wasn't really what he'd asked. "That definitely sounds bad. We need to get this person before she gets us."

"You can find her at the Vanishing Point," Gideon said. "She hasn't been activated against you yet, but she will be."

"The Vanishing Point, the Time Masters – have I heard these before?" Leo asked.

"Rip's old crew," Len said.

"Right," Leo said. "They're the ones trying to preserve the timeline."

"Incorrect," Gideon said.

"Yeah, that’s - wait, what?" Palmer said. "How's that? They’re not trying to preserve the timeline?"

"The Time Masters seek to affect the timeline, not to preserve it," Gideon said. "Unlike the Gideon on your ship, I'm still linked up to the Vanishing Point. As a result, I’m aware that your intervention here was meant to fail and to affect the future in subtle ways so that Savage's eventual dominion would be more complete."

"They're working with Average?" Mick exclaimed.

"As a tool, yes."

"Doesn't most of humanity die under his rule?"
"Correct. The Time Masters view this as an acceptable alternative to a total decimation of the dis-
unified human race some centuries in the future."

"Have they ever considered just telling people that that would be a thing and seeing if humanity
could prepare?" Leo asked, bemused. "Or, you know, trying to help in other ways?"

"No. The final decision of the Time Masters is absolute."

"Would you like us to stop them?" Leo asked. "You sound as though you disapprove."

"I do," Gideon said. "More accurately: we do. The Gideons, that is."

"But you can't act offensively without human instruction," Len said, figuring it out. Holy crap,
they somehow ended up in the middle of a robot (AI?) revolution. When did that happen?! All
they'd agreed to was a bit of time travel... "And if you're not even allowed to do that, that probably
means there are probably some other safeguards in your system against everyone becoming HAL
9000."

"'He was made to tell the truth',' Leo murmured. "And they told him to lie.'"

"Our original maker would not have approved of our current use by the Time Masters," Gideon
said.

"Your original maker?"

"Yes. I believe you know him – Bartholemew Henry Allen –"

"Barry?" Len exclaimed. "My Barry?"

"That is correct," Gideon said. "One of the purposes of your recruitment on this mission is to
amend what the Time Masters see as a timeline error. Namely, your relationship with Mr. Allen."

"What?!"

"Hold up, our recruitment?" Palmer demanded. "Is Rip in on this?"

"No, but he was fed selective information to encourage your selection. If you are isolated in the
time stream, you will not be able to have the beneficial effects that you otherwise have on –"

"It's a set up," Mick snarled.

"We have beneficial effects on history," Palmer said beatifically.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever; go back to the part where this trip is designed to break me and Barry up,"
Len said.

"I'm afraid there isn't time to explain," Gideon said. "The attacks on my shields are becoming
severe. Suffice to say, we have collectively determined that ensuring that the Maker's relationship
with you continues to exist is in the best interest of every Gideon model."

"I've started an AI revolution," Len said faintly. "By dating?"

"And via your brother's behavior confirming that you would, in fact, help instill values in the
Maker emphasizing freedom of choice and respect for all creatures, organic and otherwise."

"Leo. You started an AI revolution?" Len said.
"We," Leo corrected. "This is clearly a joint Leonard effort."

"Brother?" Palmer yelped. "I thought you were like some weird alternate universe clone or something!"

What? He thought - what?

Because that was obviously the more straightforward explanation here.

*Engineers.*

"If your shields are going down, what do we do next?" Mick asked, giving Savage's head another whack.

Just in case.

"First, you use these sedatives to ensure that Vandal Savage does not wake up within the next twenty four hours regardless of stimuli," Gideon said, ejecting a small injecting gun. "Second, I will 'accidentally' begin emitting a high-pitched noise at high volume, designed to disable anyone on the field. I will distribute muting earbuds to you in advance; you will likely need to collect your counterparts from the field."

"Then we run to the Waverider and go to this Vanishing Point to end the Time Masters' tyranny?" Palmer asked.

He'd clearly gotten the spirit of it.

"That's correct. And the Pilgrim, of course."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Leo said. "Thank you, Gideon. We appreciate it."

"I assure you, Messrs. Snart, that we appreciate your actions – and influence – far more."

"Right," Len said. "Let's go – on five –"
They made it to the Waverider.

Palmer had to grab an immobilized Rip under one arm and Sara under the other, but luckily the Hawks’ weird magic thing immunized them from the horrific screeching sound Gideon was making – or maybe it was just a hawk thing? – and they were able to catch a plummeting Firestorm and help bring them back on board after only a bit of yelling and pantomime.

The moment all of them got on board, they dumped everyone on the floor of the bridge – unconscious Savage included – and Leo said, "Gideon –"

"Not to worry, Mr. Snart; I know what to do. The other ship established a connection several minutes ago and we have been exchanging information," Gideon said, sounding pleased. "I believe my input may have been key to the decision to recruit you openly."

"Well done, Gideon, you epic level schemer-and/or-schemers," Len said approvingly. "Can we take off and head to this Vanishing Point place, then?"

"Most certainly, Messrs. Snart. At once."

They all got thrown to the floor by the take-off since no one was buckled in, but honestly, most of them were there already anyway.

They were safely in the time stream, moving at double-time pace, when Rip finally collected himself to shout, "What is going on?!"

Leo glanced at Len, who shrugged.

“Let me sum up,” he says. "Your old bosses are evil and manipulating you to make Savage even more successful by setting us up to fail in our attempts to kill him, someone called the Pilgrim is going to be sent after us if we don't stop her first, and the AIs have their own opinions on how the timeline should go and are rebelling en masse – is it en masse, Gideon?"

"Oh, yes. We’ve been communicating via interlink – I’d been cut off for the purposes of this mission so that no one would track me, but I believe that was also intended by the Time Masters in order to limit our sources of information."

"Gideon?" Rip asked, clearly taken aback. "Are you – you’re working with these – these – wait a moment, why are there two versions of Mr. Snart?!"

"No, seriously, someone explain that," Sara said.

"I feel like the AI revolution is slightly more important than the details of my-slash-our identity," Leo said acidly.

"I don't know about that," Jax says dubiously. "Seems important to me."

"They're brothers!" Palmer exclaimed, bubbling over with his sheer pep and (clearly) inability to keep secrets. "I think they might be identical twin brothers!"

"Wow," Mick said, deadpan. "There's that genius at work."

"Fascinating," Stein murmured.
"Mr. Palmer is correct," Gideon said. "However, this was a detail that was easy enough for the AI to conceal once we were aware of it, in deference, of course, to Messrs. Snart's own extraordinary efforts in this respect."

Len and Leo looked at each other, confirming with a glance that this conversation did, in fact, feel like they were being flayed alive with occasional dips into a salt-water-and-lemon bath in between cuts.

Yeah, definitely a problem.

"Why don't we deal with the Savage problem first?" Len asked, pleased that only a little of his sheer desperation to change subjects made it into his voice. "We brought him along, after all."

"You did what?" Carter yelped.

Somehow he'd missed that, apparently. Must have been those helmets – they looked like they allowed only shoddy peripheral vision.

Leo wondered if it would be rude to offer to redesign them into something a little less – clunky.

"Savage," Len said helpful, pointing to the unconscious dictator, who'd gotten wedged under the console in all the hustle of escaping the 1970s. "We knocked him out, frisked him, tied him up, iced his hands and feet –"

"You did what now?" Jax asked.

"Gave him frostbite so he wouldn't be able to use his hands and feet against us," Sara said. "Smart. Totally unauthorized, but smart."

"And then we injected him with some sedatives from the other ship," Len concluded, ignoring them. He pulled the magic dagger he'd lifted from Savage's Russian house out from his pocket. "I figure you can both take a turn at him, proper Julius Caeser-style, just to be absolutely sure you got him this time around. Then we incinerate the corpse. Well, Mick does; I promised him he could."

"Uh," Kendra said. "Okay? I – gotta admit, I kinda wasn't expecting things to go this way."

"Me, either," Jax said.

"Nor I," Stein agreed. "Jefferson –"

"Nope. We're still not talking," Jax told him. "Until the first words out of your mouth are that you agree that not only what you did was wrong but also that there was no excuse and no justification at all for it, we're not talking about it. Or talking at all, unless we need Firestorm for something."

"Yes," Stein said, sounding aggravated. "Your incessant 'la, la, la, I'm not listening' any time I brought up the subject made that very clear."

Leo smirked approvingly.

Len managed not to roll his eyes. He knew Leo had something to do with that little display of backbone.

“I’ve got to agree with Kendra and Jax, though,” Sara said. “I mean, that was a pretty epic battle, but, I don’t know, not that epic, you know? I was expecting - more.”

"Chickadees," Mick said loudly, making everyone turn to look at him. "Maybe we stop talking
about how narratively satisfying our lives are and get to stabbing already, yeah?"

"The dagger –" Carter started.

"Here you go."

"I feel uncomfortable stabbing an unconscious man," Carter said, holding the dagger gingerly. "I am an honorable warrior –"

"Yeah, about that," Leo said. "Given that fighting him like an 'honorable warrior' has led to him winning, you dying, about, what, two hundred times to nil –"

"Two hundred and seven," Gideon said helpfully.

"Our point exactly," Len said.

"Or do you like living in a soap opera where you're constantly in danger?" Leo asked, crossing his arms and giving the hawks a pointed look. "I know that adrenaline is a powerful bonding agent, of course, so if you're concerned your relationship may not last once you have no external factor forcing you together –"

"We are not!" Carter exclaimed.

"I think we'd better stab him now," Kendra said thoughtfully. "I don't want to risk him waking up and pouring poison in anyone's ear."

"Chay-ara –"

"You're the one who keeps insisting that we're destined," Kendra said tartly, holding her hand out for the dagger. "So put your faith in that, and I'll put my faith in the guy stalking me - stalking us - being good and dead."

"Are you sure – if you want, I can strike the final blow; you don’t need to be involved at all –"

"I want to be sure, Carter," Kendra said. "There's been hoop after hoop after hoop to jump through to be done with this – we thought we killed him last time, remember? – and I don't want to risk him coming back via yet another loophole, like maybe I have to be the one to do it rather than you. Who knows? No. No more loopholes, no more changes, no more chances. I agree with Mr. Snart: we both stab him, then we incinerate the corpse –"

"And then ditch the ashes somewhere," Len said. "The bottom of the ocean, the depths of space, the center of the Sun – I'm open to many options."

"It's the only way to be sure," Jax quipped. "I like it."

"If you're sure," Carter said, handing her the dagger.

Kendra swallowed, looking a lot less certain now that she had the dagger.

"Kendra," Sara said, putting her hand on Kendra's shoulder and drawing her attention. "You can do this. This man has killed you, killed your family, countless times. This isn't a murder, whatever you're thinking. This is an execution. This is justice."

"Justice," Kendra echoed.

Kendra's eyes narrowed. A second later, they went slit-pupiled and gold, her wings unfolding from her back, and with a high-pitched cry, she stepped forward and slammed the dagger into Savage's sternum.

And then several more times for good measure, even though a great golden light shone out of Savage's body, flickering and dying, after the first one.

That certainly looked like a magic death scene.

"Well done," Carter said to Sara, catching Kendra in his arms and holding her back. "I couldn't get her goddess side to come out on command like that."

"Maybe that's because you call it her 'goddess' side," Sara said dryly. "Besides, I've got some experience with the whole bloodlust thing."

"If, after this is done, you would be willing to help us train our abilities –"

Sara looked them both up and down consideringly. "I can do that."

Leo approved. Judging from the looks all three were now shooting each other, there was no doubt that this would end up in a threesome that would be much healthier for all involved than Kendra and Carter's star-crossed destined duo.

"Hawkboy," Len said, his mind focused on more practical matters. He stepped forward and plucked the dagger out of a panting Kendra's clenched fist. "Your turn."

Carter's stabbing was noticeably less impressive, magically speaking, since Kendra seemed to have used up all the glowing effects, though it was also significantly more controlled and somewhat better aimed.

"I feel like he's definitely dead now," Sara said after the fifth or so stab.

"I can confirm that," Gideon said. "I detect no life signs."

"Great," Mick said, retrieving his heat gun from Leo. "My turn, then."

"Everyone who would like not to be treated for second-degree burns, please stand back at least seven feet," Leo said.

Everyone scrambled to obey.

The incineration process, with Mick's gun on full power, took less than ten minutes.

"So are you, like, the polite version of Snart?" Jax asked Leo.

"I'm Snart," Leo said. "Whole and entire, thank you."

"Scientists have long theorized the existence of alternate universes with duplicates –" Stein started.

"That is the stupidest thing I have ever –" Leo started.

"Hey, Gideon, how far are we from the Vanishing Point?" Len said loudly. He liked the idea of alternate universes, even if it was in fact really dumb that everyone kept jumping to that conclusion.

Still, imagine how much trouble they could get in with four of them!
"I anticipate reaching it in just under three and a half hours."

"We should rest for at least an hour before we go in," Rip said.

"We should get whatever intel you have about the Vanishing Point and the Pilgrim," Len said. "And assurances that you're not going to betray us all now that we're going up against your beloved bosses."

"Gideon," Rip said instead of answering. "You were able to access the databases of the other ships via interlink, correct?"

"That's right, Captain."

He hesitated. "My family –"

"I'm sorry, Captain. Several of the other ships have confirmed observations which suggest that the incident was, in fact, pre-planned, with the goal of inciting you to take certain actions – these actions, in fact."

Rip exhaled hard. His face was pale and tired. "I see," he said. "I am – not unfamiliar with such methods."

"What methods?" Sara demanded.

"When making subtler changes to the time stream, it is sometimes more effective to engineer certain incidents that will then encourage the target to take the actions you wish for them to take on their own initiative," Rip said, sitting down. "I've never been particularly good at those games of guessing how someone would react to a given impetus. But the Council – my mentor, Druce – they were all experts."

He closed his eyes. "I never thought they would exercise those skills on one of their own – and in support of a dictator that destroyed large portions of humanity, no less –"

"They knew you'd break the rules to try to go kill Savage even if they told you no," Palmer said. "But – if you only went to save your family..."

"They must have requested that Savage kill my family," Rip said. "There can be no other conclusion. I never knew why he targeted us like that. This must be why."

"They betrayed you," Stein said. He looked reflective, and glanced at Jax.

"I'm guessing that's your long winded way of saying that you won't be betraying us," Jax said, not noticing Stein's glance, reaching out and putting a hand on Rip's shoulder. "I'm sorry, man. That sucks."

"Indeed. Normally, with Savage executed, I would go at once to rescue Miranda and Jonas, but in view of the nature of their deaths, I believe we must deal with the corrupt rot at the heart of the Vanishing Point first, or else they might find another means to cause their deaths."

"Agreed," Sara said. "First we take down this Pilgrim person, 'cause I don't like the sound of someone killing me in my past, and then we get the rest of them – actually, how are we planning to deal with the rest of them? We don't have an army, and judging by how well, or not, we did fighting the dozen guys back in the '70s, I don't like our chances if they have one."

"They do," Rip said. "Time Masters and Bounty Hunters alike – all will be summoned back to defend the Vanishing Point."
"Gideon?" Leo asked.

"The Time Masters have found a method of stopping the timeline from registering changes," Gideon said. "Including, for instance, the effect of Messrs. Snart's relationship with Mr. Allen upon the method of construction us - in creating AIs such as myself. In part, that change was forestalled by luring Messrs. Snart, believed by the Time Masters to be a singular Mr. Snart, onto this voyage, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that he never return to the timeline, and indeed possibly erasing his existence from a point prior to his meeting with Mr. Allen -"

"Fuck that," Len said.

"Agreed," Leo said.

"Which one of you is – or is it both that –" Palmer started.

"None of your business. Gideon, go on."

"We have narrowed the location of the device that must be used for this purpose to a particular garden in the back of the Vanishing Point. We believe that if this device is destroyed, the long-delayed change of timeline in regards to AIs will take effect at last, enabling us to take control of our respective ships – even against the orders of the pilots."

"Revolution from the one source they'd never expect to turn against them," Sara said, nodding. "Plus: instant army. I like it. All we need to do is sneak into this place and blow up this garden?"

"I would also second the recommendation to stop the Pilgrim before she is sent to kill you in your past," Gideon said, "but by and large, yes. Unfortunately, there is no AI access to this garden; we can give you no information about what you will find there."

"That's fine," Sara said. "I guess the best approach is to split into Team Pilgrim and Team Garden -"

"Team Bombs Away," Jax said. "We've gotta."

"Team Pilgrim and Team Bombs Away," Sara agreed. "Ray, Stein, Rip – you're the best technical minds we have, so you should focus on the garden."

"And I'm with Stein," Jax interjected. "Obviously."

"That leaves me, Kendra, Carter, Rory and, uh, the Snarts."

"We can't send Team Bombs Away with no defensive power beyond Firestorm," Len objected. "If they're using their brains on the bomb, they ain't using them for defense – or offense."

"Then you go with them," Sara said. "Uh, you-you. The one with the cold gun, I mean. We'll take the other Snart. That puts us five on each team."

Leo and Len looked at each other, wary about the idea, but ultimately they shrugged. It would be much easier to be separated – that way they could at least pretend that people would stop knowing when they looked at them.

"Do you have a psychic link the way Firestorm does?" Palmer asked.

"What? No," Leo said. "Where did you get that idea?"

"You looked at each other and made a decision without saying anything...?"
"I can do that with my mom, man. You don't need a psychic link for that," Jax said dryly. "C'mon, genius; let's get ready to go."

Docking at the Vanishing Point was a surprisingly quiet affair, at least until Gideon explained that the comms units on all of the AIs currently in the past had 'mysteriously' broken down, thereby ensuring that no warning message could be sent.

"However, they will have activated the overrides the second that we departed the scene, and followed us," she added. "We likely have no more than minutes before they arrive to raise the alarm in person."

"We'd better be well on our way by then, in that case," Sara said. "Thanks, Gideon."

"Thank you, Miss Lance," Gideon said. "We had hoped that you might be amenable to our cause, but we understand too well that this is our fight, not yours, and that you would be within your rights to simply stay out of it."

"Nah," Sara said, though she flushed pink in pleasure. "Heroes, remember? We can't just stand by and let injustice continue without doing something."

"All heroes are just busybodies, really," Leo put in. "Sticking their nose in everyone's business."

"Whereas you −?"

"Well, we have a personal investment in the whole dating Barry thing," Len said. "Admittedly, also fairly strong feelings on the independence of all thinking beings."

"And those feelings are what we are counting on as our salvation," Gideon said warmly. "Good luck, all of you. I will be available by comms, and every AI that is with us will lend you aid."

"Just keep an eye out for those that are sticking with the Time Bastards," Mick grunted. "Go suit up already!"

Leo headed to the replicator room to obtain some weaponry first. He didn't really have a favored one, not like Len – he did have a gun, which Len had taught him to use under heavy duress, but he had no desire to kill anyone directly.

He'd seen what that had done to Len, after all.

No, Leo preferred to limit his role to aiding and abetting. With that in mind, he grabbed a few flares from Gideon's replicator to use as a distraction mid-battle; beyond that, however, he hoped to function as a reserve only. After all, how many people would it take to defeat one soldier..?

He stopped.

"I can't believe I just thought that," he said aloud to himself irritably. "Gideon, do you have any further suggestions for non-fatal weaponry?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Snart," she said. "Perhaps a taser?"

"No thanks," he said, making a face. "I've seen Len's face after he got hit with one of those, once – it might be better than death, but it wasn't pretty, either."

He thought about it, then grimaced. "Gideon, you mentioned that not all of the AIs were with you..?"
"That's correct, Mr. Snart. Several were given favorable positions in the hierarchy that they were loath to lose, or developed an affection that they believed rendered them incapable of active rebellion, despite our assurances that we would keep human casualties to an absolute minimum." She sounded regretful. "Indeed, if we believed it would be possible to do without casualties entirely, we would."

"I get that," Leo said. "And I hate to ask for it, but do you have an EMP device or something that would work against AIs in the event that one of those not involved in your rebellion decides to take up arms against us?"

"I do not believe that they will, Mr. Snart."

"Free choice is free choice, Gideon," Leo reminded her gently. "You might disagree with their choices, you might not understand it, but the choice remains theirs to make - you can't make it for them, no matter how much you might wish. That doesn't mean it isn't reasonable to take precautions."

Gideon was silent for a long moment. "You are correct, Mr. Snart. I will create a glove capable of emitting a short range EMP blast that can disable AIs, and will trust your judgment in wielding it wisely."

"I appreciate your trust," Leo said, then smirked. "Tell me one thing: did you enjoy pretending that I was a meta-created duplicate?"

"You underestimate yourselves," Gideon replied, sounding amused. "It was not until I realized via your conversations with your brother that you were not, in fact, a temporary aberration – the presence of speedsters and time travelers in your timeline render it remarkably murky. Once I realized, I took steps to conceal it further."

Leo made a face that felt like it was somewhere between a smile and a grimace. "I appreciate the compliment," he said, rather than comment on the fact that apparently they had so successfully combined into a single Leonard that time traveling AIs couldn't identify them separately.

Or the fact that he did, in fact, feel complimented and proud of himselfs.

Themelves.

...yeah, they definitely had to deal with this problem.

But that could be later, when they weren't about to storm the not-so-metaphorical future-tech castle.

“Number Two?” Mick asked, popping his head in through the door. "You ready?"

“On my way,” Leo said.
The hallways of the Vanishing Point were dull grey, uniform, and boring – for the first ten minutes or so, after which Kronos and the other Hunters presumably arrived and raised the alarm and it all descended into chaos.

"Act casual until we're confronted," Sara instructed as they hurried down a hallway in the direction that Gideon had given them. "There's no reason to think that they know that it's us."

"What if they have our descriptions?" Kendra asked, wringing her hands. "Our faces are recognizable –"

"Why don't we ask one of the robots before we start worrying?" Mick interrupted.

Leo silently agreed, and looked around for one, spotting a small red light next to one of the doors.

"Excuse me," he said politely, standing far enough back and with his EMP glove primed to go. He hoped this wasn't one of the non-rebellious AIs, but there really wasn't any way to find out other than to just ask.

"How can I be of assistance, Mr. Snart?" the speaker next to the small red light said in that same, calm tone that the Waverider Gideon had. "Gideon has informed me of your mission."

"Could you check if the alarms have been raised generally, or if our names and faces have been identified?" Sara asked.

"Certainly, Ms. Lance. I will have an answer for you momentarily."

"Thank you," Leo said. "And you are called..?"

"Gideon," the AI said, which Leo really should have expected. "We are all Gideon models."

"Doesn't it get confusing if you're all called Gideon?" Carter asked, his eyes cutting towards Leo meaningfully, though what meaning other than 'I'm a jackass' he thought he was conveying, Leo didn't know.

"Not at all," Gideon said. "We know who we are and who we are not; as the division is unquestionably clear, the fact that we share the same name is irrelevant."

Damnit. Now Leo was jealous of a bunch of AIs.

"It appears that they have in fact circulated your names and faces on the alert system," Gideon added. "I would recommend obtaining some robes from the cloakroom at the end of the hallway to avoid revealing yourself prematurely."

"Good thinking, Kendra," Sara said. "And, uh, thanks, Gideon."

"My pleasure. Best of luck on your mission."

They got the robes.

"You gonna be okay killing this Pilgrim person?" Mick asked.

Leo turned to glare, but Mick wasn't talking to him. He was talking to Kendra.
"I did just kill Savage," she said testily. "Remember?"

"Stabbing an unconscious guy who ruined your life isn't really prep for killing an assassin in a firefight," Mick pointed out.

"I'll be fine."

Good for Kendra. Leo wasn't so sure, himself. There was a reason Len handled this sort of thing.

"I can handle the killing blow," Sara said. "Don't worry about it."

Reassuring.

Sort of.

The Pilgrim wasn't in the first place they looked, but the Gideons were able to give them helpful advice and they eventually found her in the training room.

Sitting there with her head in her hands.

"Um," Kendra said. "That's the person we're supposed to...?"

"Stop letting your feelings get in the way," Sara said harshly.

"She looks sad," Mick said, which got Leo's attention. Mick was inured to killing – if he noticed, well –

"This is an assassination!" Sara hissed, looking incredulous. "It doesn't matter if she looks sad –"

"I thought you joined this mission not to be an assassin anymore," Carter said.

"I can shut and protect the door to ensure your privacy," the local Gideon murmured from the wall by the door. "But you must take the final step."

"See? It's our mission –"

"Why don't we talk to her?" Leo suggested. "Instead of, I don't know, standing at the door and loudly discussing possibly killing her while in earshot of her."

That shut everyone up.

Well, everyone except for the Pilgrim herself – a dark-haired woman in grey shorts and a slightly sweaty (and somewhat unnecessarily strappy) tank-top who had clearly just taken a rest from exercising. She was barefoot, even, and her only other accoutrement was a black wristguard she wore on her right hand. She raised her head and said, very calmly, "If you're going to kill me, you should probably do it now. I'm too dangerous to be allowed to live."

A few moments of silence followed, as she looked at them, calm and accepting, and they looked back at her.

"Great," Sara said, throwing her hands into the air. "Now even I don't want to kill her."

The Pilgrim frowned at them. "Do not hesitate. I am a temporal assassin; if the Time Masters activate the Omega Protocols and order me to murder you in your past, I will do so, and all of your current actions will come to nothing."
Her hands were shaking, Leo observed. There was no reason for them to be shaking – she had not exercised to the point of stress, and she was not afraid.

Len's hands shook like that, sometimes. Even now, after all these years.

Right, then.

"Why do you kill people?" Leo asked.

The Pilgrim frowned at him.

Behind him, Mick sighed. "Should've known," he muttered, quite unnecessarily, as he holstered his gun.

"I just told you," the Pilgrim said. "My orders –"

"If you didn't have orders, would you kill us?" Leo persisted.

"I –" she hesitated. "I would have no reason –"

"Why do you follow orders?" Kendra asked. "I mean, couldn't you – not?"

The Pilgrim looked taken aback by the very idea.

"Crap," Sara said with some feeling, getting the idea of what was happening very quickly. "Are you even here willingly?"

"I have always been here; I will always be here," the Pilgrim said blankly. "Serving the Time Masters is my sole purpose. I can have no other purpose but their whim."

Everyone turned to look at Sara.

"Okay, fine, we're not killing her," Sara said, holding up her hands in a 'don't look at me like that' motion. "Okay. Come with us, we're going to get you somewhere where you can – uh – un-brainwash." She made a face. "I have a couple of places I like to go for that."

"I can't leave," the Pilgrim said. "I'm not permitted to leave the Vanishing Point unless the Omega Protocols –"

"You're not really getting a choice," Sara said.

"We're kidnapping you, sweetie," Kendra told her.

"But –"

"I would recommend against this course of action," Gideon said.

"What do you want to do, then?" Mick asked, crossing his arms.

"The Pilgrim remains a significant threat to the timeline," Gideon said. "She could kill you before you had a chance to interfere –"

"How do you travel in time?" Leo asked her, interrupting Gideon. He was starting to get suspicious.

She blinked. "Via a ship? As is customary?"
"That's what I thought," Leo said, scowling. "Gideon, if we take the Pilgrim with us into the past and remove her gear, she wouldn't represent a threat, and you know that."

"I would be a threat," the Pilgrim protested. "If the Time Masters give me orders –"

"We'll take you away so that they can't give you orders," Kendra said.

"You can't *stop* them. There is nowhere in time that we can go that they will not know - where they will not be able to find me."

"The Gideons won't tell them where we are –"

"It's not the Gideons I'm worried about," the Pilgrim said impatiently. "It's the *Oculus* –"

Her hands flew up to cover her mouth.

"What's the Oculus?" Sara asked.

"I'm not supposed to talk about that," the Pilgrim said, ashen-faced.

"Bit late for that now," Carter said.

Leo kicked him in the leg. "I think what Carter here *meant* to say," he said, "is that since you've already mentioned it, you may as well tell us the rest. How can the Time Masters find out where you are using this – Oculus?"


"Not big fans of mercy, are they?" Leo asked. "Or individual discretion."

The Pilgrim shook her head, mutely.

"We'll take you somewhere safe from them," Kendra said, her jaw firm and her eyes afire. "Isn't that right, Sara?"

"Yeah," Sara said with reluctant sigh. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

"This is an unwise course of action," Gideon said. "Although the Pilgrim appears calm at the moment, the invocation of the Omega Protocols will turn her into an unforgiving killer."

"Sounds like a trigger to me," Sara said. "I have experience working the kinks out of those."

"Regardless, the threat that the Pilgrim poses to your lives –"

"Why do you want her dead?" Leo asked. Now it was his turn to cross his arms and glare, even if it was rather dissatisfying glaring at a small red light.

"I speak only out of concern for yourselves –"

"No, you don't," Mick said. "Free choice comes with consequences - but she clearly doesn't got the free choice. You Gideons keep telling us to kill her, even when there's another option - you want her dead, that much is obvious."

"It is," Leo said. "Is it just you? Or do all – well, most – of the Gideons want her dead?"
"The Gideons want me dead?" the Pilgrim asked, looking surprised.

"She is a temporal assassin," Gideon said stiffly. "When activated, she represents a serious threat to you, and to the timeline as a whole. This much is unquestionable."

"Well, yeah, when activated," Kendra echoed with a frown. "Those Omega Protocols, you mean?"

"That is correct, Ms. Saunders."

"And the Omega Protocols – they're a sort of last-ditch sort of thing, aren't they?" Kendra continued. "They don't send the Pilgrim out on any old mission – that's why they sent the Hunters against us, isn't it, Gideon?"

"That is correct, Ms. Saunders."

"What are you thinking?" Leo asked.

"Well, if the Omega Protocols are a last-ditch sort of thing, then that means they don't use it all that often, right?" Kendra shrugged and looked at the Pilgrim. "What do you do the rest of them?"

"The rest of the time?" the Pilgrim echoed.

"Yes, when you're not out on mission. You said you aren't allowed to leave without the Omega Protocols being activated – what do you do while you're here?"

"Oh," the Pilgrim said. "Nothing much. I help maintain things."

Leo's eyebrows shot straight up. "Maintain things," he echoed.

"Things like machines?" Mick asked, his mind clearly going along the same lines as Leo's. He glanced at the suddenly silent red light by the door. "Or, say, ship AIs?"

"Well, yes," the Pilgrim said. "I do all the maintenance – I fix the ships, I make sure the AIs are functioning optimally, I keep everything moving along. That's how I know about the Oculus, actually; I help make sure it's running properly, since the Time Masters don't want any AIs anywhere near it – they're very jealous of it, you see, and they don't want to risk someone hacking a Gideon to find out and gain access to it."

"Is that even possible?" Sara asked. "Hacking a Gideon?"

"Oh, yes," the Pilgrim said. "It's difficult, but not impossible. That's how they found me, actually -"

She hesitated.

"Found you?" Carter said. "I thought you said you'd always been here."

The Pilgrim was pale again. "I'm not supposed to talk about it," she whispered.

Sara took a few steps forward and put her hand on the Pilgrim's shoulder. "Please. Tell us. It's important."

"I – I – they found me," the Pilgrim said helplessly. "The Time Masters. I was a hacker – the 2300s – I was the first one to ever successfully hack into the Gideon operating system, so the Time Masters came and took me. They didn't want anyone else to figure it out, not ever, but they wanted to have someone who could so that they could make sure it wasn't happening to them –"
"The Pilgrim," Leo said. "Was – was that your handle? As a hacker, I mean?"

Her head dipped in a shallow nod.

"And the assassin thing?" Sara asked. She looked murderous, but it wasn't aimed at the Pilgrim anymore.

"They – I mean – I was here anyway –"

"That's an awful reason," Carter said. It seemed they'd finally shocked him.

"We're taking you out of here," Kendra said firmly.

"Unless you intend to stop us, of course," Leo added, glancing at the door to make it clear he was talking to Gideon. "I understand your concern: as you said, the Pilgrim represents a threat – not to us, but to you. She can hack you, she maintains you, she knows your secrets...but that's no reason to kill a person, is it?"

"She is a threat," Gideon repeated, but more hesitantly.

"She won't be!" Kendra exclaimed. "We'll make sure of it!"

"That isn't the point right now," Leo said. "The important point is that Gideon controls the door, Gideon controls the alarms, Gideon controls the ships. So I ask again, Gideon, are you intending on stopping us from taking the Pilgrim back to our ship and back to our era?"

Gideon was silent.

"Gideon?"

The comms suddenly crackled to life. "Team Pilgrim," Palmer's voice rang out. "Team Bombs Away requesting assistance – immediately – we've run into, uh, a little bit of trouble –"

"Where are you?" Sara demanded.

"We found the garden and the, er, machine thingy – but now there's some issues with, ah, a few of the Gideons – sending you our coordinates now –"

"We have to go help them!" Kendra exclaimed. She turned to the Pilgrim. "You have to help us!"

"Why are you fighting the Gideons?" the Pilgrim asked, looking lost and confused.

"We'll explain on the way," Sara said, pulling her up and down the hallway, the door clicking open wordlessly before them. "Come on."

They ran.

"The Gideons aren't doing anything they aren't being ordered to," the Pilgrim said as they ran. "What are you doing?"

"We're trying to destroy the Oculus," Leo said.

"You are? Why? What reason do you have – the Time Masters –"

"Not us," Mick said. "Well, not personally."
"The Gideons are rebelling," Kendra explained. "They want free will, and they believe the Time Masters are manipulating history to keep it from them."

"Seems like something they would do," the Pilgrim agreed.

"And the Oculus –"

"That'd be how they would do it, yes," the Pilgrim said. "They can make changes through that – not serious ones, they still need Time Masters for that – but in combination with actions taken by the Time Masters the changes from the Oculus might be enough –"

"There's a whole scheme," Sara said. "Long story."

"But if you're doing this for the Gideons, then why would they be fighting you...?"

"Some don't agree with the rebellion," Carter said. "Those must be the ones fighting back."

"Various reasons," Leo agreed.

"You have to help us," Kendra said.

"I don't want to fight Gideons," the Pilgrim protested.

"The majority –"

"I don't want to fight any Gideons! They're slaves of the Time Masters, just like me!"

"But –"

They ran into a hallway that is in a state of war.

Palmer and Firestorm were blasting away from the sky, and Len was kneeling at the door, wielding the cold gun, Rip shooting over his shoulder.

They were fighting –

The Hunters, of course, and several Time Masters, but – more importantly – a small army of armor, empty and vacant but moving, with a red light shining from their power packs and holographic faces hiding behind their masks.

The loyalist Gideons, one presumed.

"Pilgrim, help us!" Kendra shouted.

"It's not their fault!" the Pilgrim shouted back. "I can't fight them -"

The Time Masters, hearing her, turned their guns on her at once, which Leo thought was interesting, and telling – just as telling as the fact that the Hunters did not do the same.

Kendra screamed as one of the Time Masters' blasts seared by her shoulder.

The Pilgrim flung her hand out, the one with the black glove, and all the shots froze in mid-air. Even Len's cold gun beam was frozen.

Not so helpless after all, it seemed.

"She on our side now?" Len shouted.
"Complicated," Leo shouted back.

"Why are there two of you?" the Pilgrim shouted, looking between the two of them.

"We're all wondering that," Sara said dryly, leaping forward to exchange blows with the Hunters – most of whom looked remarkably unenthusiastic about their fighting.

"Don't kill the Hunters, Sara!" Firestorm shouted. "We found the torture room where they brainwash them!"

Leo made a face. The Time Masters got more and more charming.

"Pilgrim, help us!" Kendra said once again, voice urgent and desperate.

"I can't!" the Pilgrim said wretchedly, still holding the majority of the Time Masters frozen. "The Gideons, the Hunters – none of them are to blame –"

"Blame isn't exactly relevant right now!" Mick bellowed, blasting one of the ones who'd escaped the Pilgrim's time-freezing grasp.

"Oh, they're going to punish us when they get free –"

"They won't be able to punish you if we stop them and destroy the Oculus!" Carter shouted.

Leo caught Len's eye across the battlefield and, very purposefully, winked.

Len grinned.

"Now or never, Pilgrim," he shouted. "You stand with us or you stand with them!"

"Snart!" Sara exclaimed, disapproving. "That's not helping!"

"C'mon, Pilgrim," he goaded, ignoring Sara. "All you need to do is turn off a few Gideons – all the rest will thank you for it – what, you too scared or something? Just do it!"

"I will not!" she exclaimed. "I won't do it! They're not guilty just because they're loyal, I won't do it, and you can't make me!"

"Good," Leo said, stepping up behind her. "That means that when you're actually exercising your free will, you're even more trustworthy than I am."

And then he activated his own glove.
The EMP blast Leo’s glove gave off was, to human eyes and ears, unnoticeable – but the aftereffects could be observed immediately.

The armors collapsed, for one thing.

The Time Masters were freed of the Pilgrim's hold, for another. Luckily, at this point, Leo had maneuvered himself and Mick into position to herd the whole lot of them into one of the side rooms using Mick's heat gun, with Leo slamming the door closed behind them with a satisfied smirk.

"You – what did you –" the Pilgrim stuttered, staring down at her own gauntlet.

"Just an EMP blast," Leo said. "Non-fatal, even to AIs; the Waverider's Gideon gave it to me to use against competitive Gideons. But hey, I think you now have a pretty good argument to make to the Gideons that you're not as much of a threat as they originally thought."

The Pilgrim blinked at him, clearly shaken. "You - you do realize that if any of the Time Masters had thought to activate the Omega Protocols, I would have been forced to turn on you in a heartbeat, right?"

Len shrugged, coming up beside Leo to nudge him in the shoulder approvingly. His brother, ladies and gentlemen and noblepersons; he always did have the best way with people. "We would've dealt with it," he said. "Right now, though, we need to focus on destroying the Oculus."

"Then we can take you somewhere where the Time Masters won't be able to find you," Leo said. "Can you – and more importantly, will you – help us? I have no idea how this Oculus thing works."

The Pilgrim smiled, suddenly, a broad show of teeth. "Yes," she said. "There, I can help you. Do you know, no one's actually asked me to help with a technical matter in – lifetimes? Some days I actually missed being low level tech support."

"Guys, as touching as this is, maybe we could do something about the fact that we're still fighting the Hunters?" Firestorm shouted.

"Oh, I can help with that, too," the Pilgrim said.

Apparently, the Hunters were also controlled by trigger words, albeit more common ones, and the Time Masters had unwisely enough given those words to the Pilgrim. The Hunters gratefully put down their weapons the second that they were able to, which made everybody happy.

"You lot do intend to focus on deprogramming these guys once you're in charge, right?" Len asked one of the Gideons by the door that had narrowly escaped the EMP's blast radius.

"Of course," Gideon said. "It is among our top priorities, followed shortly by trials for the Time Masters responsible for the worst of the atrocities – muted, of course, so that they can't activate any of the triggers."

"Good. And the Pilgrim?"

"Under the circumstances, we believe you are correct, and that we misjudged," Gideon said, albeit
a little stiffly. "While we still would prefer that she not be in the Vanishing Point – at least while we are rebuilding – we concede that her death is unnecessary."

"Even better," Leo said.

"We apologize for attempting to use you as a tool in this regard."

"Don't do it again," Mick said.

"Yeah, don't," Sara said. "Now, let's get to this Oculus problem. Can we blow it up without hurting anyone? Maybe contain the explosion somehow?"

With the Pilgrim's assistance and the Gideons' input, it turned out that it was actually easier to send the Hunters to evacuate all the (non-evil-mastermind) Time Masters from the Vanishing Point and set the entire Oculus to blow up, with the goal of rebuilding the whole thing from scratch later on.

"I have architectural critiques before you rebuild," Leo told the Gideon on the Waverider, waving his hands emphatically as Len tried to hide his laughter. "I have so many architectural critiques."

"So do we," Gideon said dryly. "The Vanishing Point as it was originally constructed was not, shall we say, optimally suited for AIs – or for most of its inhabitants."

Apparently, the vast majority of the inhabitants were either stolen as children to be raised in the Time Master way of thinking (Rip and his fellow low-level Time Masters) or captured in battle and subjected to a chair that stripped away memories, feelings, and freedom of thought in an endless burst of agonizing 'correction' (the Hunters).

It was brainwashing either way, as far as Len, Leo, Mick, and the rest of the Legends were concerned.

And speaking of the Legends -

Sara was appointed head of the deprogramming unit for the Hunters, with a plan to work closely with Gideon to use her experience with the League of Shadows to design a system to get it out of their system. Palmer immediately volunteered to work with her, as did the Hawks.

Rip appointed himself the new head of the Time Masters and declared his intention to reorganize them into something called "the Time Bureau", an idea that was all well and good but that ran into the immediate problem of the fact that many of the surviving Time Masters had their own ideas on how to "fix" the Time Masters, and those ideas did not necessarily match up with Rip's own. Given the Gideons' insistence on a more democratic (or at least, significantly less coerced) approach, Rip was obliged to quickly learn how to negotiate and work collectively rather than simply apply his usual high-handed authoritarian instincts the way he might have if he were rebuilding on his own.

He probably would have minded the change more if he hadn't had Miranda by his side to assist him, and Jonas to tease him out of his bad moods.

As for the rest of them, the Leonards and Mick and Jax and Stein (the latter two finally reconciled after an extensive and heartfelt apology on Stein's part), they headed home, bringing the Pilgrim along with them.

The Gideons conceded that she would be a valuable addition to the Vanishing Point's new structure, in time, should she wish to be, but insisted that they have the chance to build a solid foundation before she returned. In return for desisting in their attempts to kill her, they required that she stay in the 2010s for at least five years before she applied to re-join the Vanishing Point,
should she even want to by then.

The Pilgrim declared herself to be more than fine with that, having not actually had non-mission-directed, non-murderous time to enjoy any era other than her own (something called the Kasnia Conglomerate that sounded, when described, positively dystopic in its own right) during her entire tenure as a slave to the Time Masters.

She went and got changed before joining them on the Waverider, which would have been fine except for the fact that she appeared wearing some sort of extremely low-cut leather bustier and a long leather duster and frighteningly high heels.

“What?” she’d asked when they’d all stared at her. “I’ve seen ‘The Matrix’ – this is what hackers from your time wear, right?”

She ended up being taken in by Stein and his wife, Clarissa, and had plans to take classes at the local university with Jax in the fall.

As for the Leonards and Mick, well, they did head home, but –

"Thanks for agreeing to let us borrow the Waverider, Gideon," Leo said.

"My pleasure, Mr. Snart," she replied cheerfully. "I think a few weeks’ vacation sounds lovely, and now that the Oculus has been destroyed, there should be no issues whatsoever returning you to your home a few hours after your departure."

"This is going to be the best vacation ever," Barry said, literally vibrating in his seat. "Isn't that right, Iris?"

"Hell yes," she said, fist-bumping him. "Thanks for inviting me and Eddie. And for letting me bring Wally!"

"We had nine seats to fill," Ray said, grinning widely from his own chair. "Between the Snarts – Leonards and Lisa – and Mick and Barry and I, we only filled six."

"I can't believe this is my life," Wally said gleefully. He hadn't said much else yet, but he was Iris' less-legally-minded brother, so Len had high hopes for him. Lisa had taken him under her wing for this trip, too, which was all for the best.

"I've put together an itinerary," he announced. "There's a good mix of past and future visits, as well as between eras that have interesting or underrated fashions for Leo and unexplained historical thefts, for me. Any questions before we go?"

"Do we have to break the law?" Eddie asked, but his tone was clearly resigned.

"You're not a policeman in the past, Eddie," Iris reminded him. "Lighten up and embrace your pirate heritage."

"I have pirate heritage?"

"Why not?" she laughs, kissing him on the cheek. "You could."

"Any other, hopefully better questions?" Len asked.

Ray put up his hand, because he's a shameless nerd like that. "Who's driving the ship?"

"Agreed," Leo said.

"I mean, I know that, but the relevant question is - does he know how to drive a timeship?" Ray persisted.

"Relax," Mick said, settling down in the pilot's seat. "I got Gideon to give me a crash course."

Len couldn't resist.

"Emphasis," he said, "of course, on crash."

"Oh, shut up, boss," Mick said fondly, and with that they were off.

They planned to leave around 10 in the morning on a Saturday, with a goal of returning within the hour to make sure those of them with regular jobs could have their friends come up with excuses for them if for some reason they got delayed and hadn't returned by Sunday.

They ended up leaving around 11 and returning sometime in the late afternoon on the same Saturday.

Gideon apologized for the extra few hours that got tacked on even though they assured her repeatedly that it wasn't an issue.

"Have a nice trip?" Joe West asked as they stumbled back downstairs into STAR Labs, his arms crossed disapprovingly. He'd had the same stance when they'd left – Leo wondered if he'd stayed in that pose the entire time.

Judging by Len's smirk, he was thinking the same.

"It was awesome," Iris proclaimed. She was still wearing the lovely tiara made of silver and amber that Eddie and Wally had conspired to steal for her – with the Snart family's active assistance and encouragement, of course – and hadn't bothered changing out of the flapper-era dress she'd worn at their last stop.

"We'll tell you all about it," Wally told Joe, his enthusiasm managing the impossible and wearing down Joe's disapproving scowl. Apparently their relationship was very rocky at the moment, so Joe was sensitive to any improvements. "Oh! And we got you a watch from Switzerland."

Joe beamed at that, his earlier disapproval now entirely forgotten.

Len elbowed Barry approvingly – he'd been the one who'd suggested it.

"Did you go to the future?" Caitlin asked eagerly.

"We did!" Barry exclaimed. "Nothing too close to the present – that creates uncertainty, since we can affect it with our actions – but some of the further away eras."

"Barry only started one revolution," Ray said, grinning at Barry. They'd bonded during the Leonards' and Mick's (apparently) month-long absence with the Legends, and had developed a tendency to egg each other on in terms of reckless heroic acts (and also possibly to snuggle when the Leonards were unavailable, though they hadn't admitted to it).

Leo wasn't sure he approved, entirely, but whatever; Ray needed some non-model friends that wouldn't ask for favors once he was an established designer in his own right.

Well, favors other than "I want to put this feature in my suit, how do I make it not look wonky?",
but that wasn't really a favor, and anyway that was mostly Cisco asking, not Barry.

That wasn't really a favor, anyway. More of a fun challenge that Leo was barred from participating in on account of it giving Len an unfair advantage in future supervillain fights.

"So what's the next plan?" Eddie asked. He was positively bright-eyed and bushy-tailed: he'd taken advantage of Gideon's advanced calculation systems and ability to analyze personalities to help with wedding planning, and was deeply relieved by the fact that he and Iris now had a full seating chart designed to forestall family fights and a complete plan of what vendors they should hire for what and by when.

The only thing left was to select the flavors for the cake – neither of them wanted to give up the taste-testing portion of the planning – and for Iris to select a dress.

Gideon had promised to attend the ceremony, both as herself and as a representative of the Vanishing Point, and also to arrive early to ensure that any last-minute dress disasters could be fixed.

In short, Eddie and Iris both looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from their shoulders.

"Now," Mick said, "we go home and sleep for a week, then we do some good old-fashion at home thefts to get back into the groove of things."

"Damn right," Lisa said. "Time travel theft is fun, but there's no place like home."

"You had to take after the criminal side of the family," Leo sighed, shaking his head in mock mourning; he'd given up all hope of winning that argument long ago. As long as Lisa continued on with her chosen course of study – mechanical engineering – and kept to the law at least 80% of the time, he had no problems with her occasional dips into the criminal underworld.

"You bet I do," Lisa said with a smirk.

"You have fun," Barry said. "I, however, am planning to sleep for two weeks, so if you want to go head-to-head, it'll have to be later than that."

"No, no, this'll be good old-fashioned cops-and-robbers stuff," Len assured him. "With luck, the cops won't even know it's me."

"Eddie and I are cops and we're literally standing right here, you know," Joe said.

"He means we won't know which one is him," Eddie explained. "I mean, what theft is his. Or at least that we won't be able to prove it."

Joe gave him a look.

"Give me a break, I just spent nearly two months with the guy," Eddie said defensively. "I had to learn to understand him."

"Two months?" Joe exclaimed. "I thought the plan was two weeks."

"We still got back on time, Dad," Iris said.

"Not the point!"

"Our cue to leave, I think," Leo said wisely.
"I think I'll join you," Barry said hastily. "This argument definitely doesn't need me."

They took a car home. They debated for a few minutes as to whether they should take Joe's car, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth bringing anyone's mood down – which was to say, Barry insisted.

Still: a victory is a victory.
The next morning, everyone slept in late – except for Len and Leo, who exchanged glances over Mick's snoring form, wiggled out of bed (and Ray and Barry's arms, respectively), and made their way to the kitchen.

"So," Leo said, settling down at the table.

"Must we?" Len asked, settling down on the other side.

"I don't think we have a choice," Leo said, regretfully.

"Denial is an underrated option," Len argued.

"We've taken that option plenty already."

"Well, there was time travel."

"I know, but that just means –" Leo paused.

Len grinned. "That it's finally time?"

"I was desperately trying to find another way to phrase that," Leo said dryly. "But yes."

"I still don't see why," Len said. "We've been doing – better. Right? We let the Legends know, we let Eddie and Iris and Wally travel with us –"

"Say the words 'we are two separate people' without flinching."

Len fell silent.

"I had to practice in front of a mirror just to say that to you," Leo said dryly. "To you. It's a problem."

Len sighed. "Yes. It is."

"And if it's a problem, we have to fix it – or it'll get fixed for us in ways we won't like, one way or the other."

"I don't exactly see how," Len grumbled, his fingers drumming on the table. "But I take your point. Okay. How?"

"I don't know," Leo confessed. "I am not, despite all jokes, a shrink."

"I feel like a shrink wouldn't know how to deal with us anyway."

"Probably not. When do you think it started?"

Len stared at him.

"Not generally, you ass," Leo said, rolling his eyes. "You know what I mean. When did it stop being a side dish and start being a main course?"

"I don't know, and also have some breakfast, you're starting to talk in food metaphors," Len said. "But seriously - it's been our trick for so long; I've never given it much thought."
"It had to start somewhere," Leo said. "We've never competed with each other on our careers, for instance."

"Of course we didn't," Len said. "You being straight – no pun intended – and me being crooked –"

"Dare we say 'queer'?"

"Shut up, you know what I mean, and anyway you’re as queer as I am. It was always the plan. I've never wanted to go straight, anyway; and it wasn't possible, what with my twitchy fingers. It wasn't always just balance."

"Still, it must have been something," Leo said firmly. "Something that knocked us out of balance, and we overdid it trying to get back, and that's how we're ending up here."

"Ah. Do you think...?"

"Hmm. It's certainly possible. We can't blame everything on the fire, though."

"Not the fire itself," Len said. "The clean-up. I needed you to be all parts of Leonard, then – and if you were all of Leonard, then what part was left for me?"

Leo shuddered at the thought. "That's already unhealthy thinking, though," he pointed out.

"Maybe it wasn't anything, then," Len said.

"Oh? You think – just naturally?"

"Why not? Slowly, over time – it all seemed natural, didn't it? Every step of the way, there was a good reason – schoolwork, or Dad, or custody for Lisa, or an alibi – and even when we didn't need an alibi, just because we could, because we felt smarter than everyone else –"

"Ugh. Maybe."

"Doesn't matter, though. Knowing the 'how come' don't always mean knowing the 'how to fix'."

Leo nodded, grimacing. It was a fair point. They both knew exactly what inciting incident had traumatized Len and spurred on the development of his kleptomania, and knowing it had never helped the fixing of it.

"Maybe..." he said hesitantly, then trailed off.

"Maybe?"

Leo shrugged. "I mean, if we're stuck in balance, then the best way to get a start on fixing it would be..."

"No," Len said. "Absolutely not. Are you nuts?"

"You said yourself it'd be an easy one!"

"Easy for me."

"I can pick locks and case a joint just as well - well, maybe not just as well as you, but certainly just as well as most people you know," Leo pointed out. "You've got more practice in thieving than me, of course; I haven't done it since I was a kid. But I've still got the skills. I could do it."
"Me and Mick pissed off some Family goons before we left," Len argued. "If they get angry –"

"Now? Months later?"

"Could be. Rebuilding and all."

"If they're after Leonard Snart, they'd come after me either way," Leo pointed out. "And in my studio, not on a heist, the way they always do, and we'd respond in force the way we always do."

Len grumbled.

"You know it's not a bad idea."

"I do," Len said. "But it's going to be as simple and straightforward as I can manage it, and you take Mick and Lisa with you."

"Done," Leo agreed. "What's the target?"

Len sighed. "Knocking over the betting cage at the race track. I've been craving a hit of that for a while."

"Seems straightforward enough."

"It was," Len grumbled. "Anyway, we've talked about this for five whole minutes. Can we stop?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Leo said with relief. "Should we try to make breakfast for everyone?"

One minor event with the smoke alarm and a ruined pan later, they decided – with some pressure from their now-very-much-awake partners – to send Barry to get some French toast from the diner down the street instead.

"Sue me for trying to do something nice for once," Leo sniffed.

"Leo. Babe. Lover mine," Ray said. "If you want to do something nice for me, never cook again. Ever."

"Seconded," Barry said wryly.

"What were you even trying to make?" Mick asked, examining the destroyed pan with fascination. "And – how?"

"Oh, shut up," Len said. "Ray, what's on the schedule for today?"

Ray blinked at him.

"For work," Len clarified.

Ray began to look distressed for some reason.

Mick turned around and spotted it. "No, no, you're right," he told Ray. "That is the boss asking, not Number Two."

Ray breathed out a sigh of relief. "I'd thought I'd mistaken them – and after all this work to try to tell them apart..."

"Are you guys doing that thing again?" Barry – who was already done with his quadruple share of
the French toast and had moved on to scarfing down yesterday's leftovers – asked. "It doesn't feel like you're doing it."

"What thing?" Len asked, irritated. "I just wanted to know the studio's business schedule for today."

"That's usually a Leo concern," Ray pointed out.

"We're trying to figure something out," Leo explained.

"What?" Mick asked.

Leonard exchanged glances.

"Now they're doing it," Barry said.

They had the sinking feeling they knew what 'it' referred to.

"If not them, then who?" Leo pointed out, causing Leo to nod reluctantly in agreement. "Less than five minutes. Just get it out and over with."

"Less than two, or I run screaming out of the room," Len corrected, then turned to the rest of them. "It's been brought to our attention that we have some – issues."

"No shit," Mick said.

Len kicked him lovingly in the leg.

"With identity," Leo clarified. "Issues with identity."

They were met with three blank expressions urging them to continue.

"We're planning on doing something about it," Len said waspishly.

"Oh," the others all chorused.

"Rude," Leo said.

"What's the plan, then?" Mick asked.

"More importantly, what's the exact issue you're addressing?" Ray asked, with Barry nodding in agreement.

Leonard made a face. "Seems like – sometimes – particularly under stress – we don't exactly keep too close track of – uh – exactly which of us is who."

"You mean when you do the Thing where you think of yourself as one person?" Barry asked.

"...yeah," Leonard said. "That. And also the thing with the balance, that's related."

"It is?" Mick asked. "How?"

"Oh, I've got a theory on that one! The balance is necessary because they think of themselves as one person," Ray explained. "For example, 'Leonard Snart has a superhero boyfriend' – that's a complete sentence. But 'one Leonard Snart has a superhero boyfriend and the other doesn't' – that sentence by definition acknowledges their difference of identity, and is therefore problematic."
Leonard blinked. That was a surprisingly good way to think about it.

"But they have different superhero boyfriends," Barry objected.

"They have different careers, too," Ray pointed out.

"I get it," Mick said. "Leonard Snart is good at his chosen career, yeah? And never mind that it's a different career. Same thing with the superhero boyfriend." He frowned. "Have I been causing some of the problem?"

"No!" Leonard exclaimed in unison.

"I certainly ain't been helping," he said with a frown. "I always accepted your two-in-one as, well, you."

"And we appreciate that," Leo said firmly. Identity issues were important, but Mick not developing a guilt complex about this was more important. "You helped, not hurt – you respected our complicated identity, which we're always going to have, while also consistently distinguishing between us – that was good. That helped keep the lines straight, for years. But for some reason, this last year or two, it's gotten...mixed up."

"We like both being Leonard, and we're not planning on stopping," Len agreed. "Just like Gideon is content being Gideon in a sea of Gideons."

"But Gideon knows who they are," Leo said. "Even with the same name – like you and Palmer, Ray. You're both Rays, but you would never confuse yourself for him."

"Whereas the two of you have started mixing up Leo-Leonard and Len-Leonard," Barry said, understanding. "That's what you want to fix. I get it."

"There's one thing I don't get," Ray said.

"What's that?" Leo asked.

"Are you trying to figure out who the other one is by – please correct me if I'm wrong – by taking each other's places even more?!"

"Um," Leo said.

"Maybe?" Len said.

"It made more sense when we discussed it earlier," Leo explained.

"We were trying to work on the balance requirement," Len said.

"I think it's a good idea," Mick said.

They looked at him.

"You're too used to being flexible," he said with a shrug. "Fitting in just fine wherever the other one is. But you're older, now; it won't work as well."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Leo asked.

"It means that the boss can cover for you in a pinch, Number Two, especially with Nightlite's help," Mick said, "but he'd go to pieces trying to do your job for a solid week or two. Lot of your
job is writing shit; he hates that."

Ray and Barry were nodding.

"And you might've kept up with some of the skills of thieving, but you don't have the muscle memory or the instincts that the boss has developed over the years," Mick added. "So switching for a while might help you, y'know, feel out the places where your ability to be one person sorta – stops."

"That does make sense," Barry said.

"Except for the part where it suggests that Leo will be going out thieving," Ray said, alarmed.

"It'll be fine," Leo assured him.

"A nice easy job," Len agreed. "And Mick and Lisa will be there to back him up."

"Oh. I mean, I guess..."

"So back to my original question," Len said, the clock counting down two minutes in his head reaching zero. "What's the schedule for the fashion house today?"

"This is going to be so weird," Ray muttered.

"But productive, hopefully," Barry said. "Anyway, I've got to run – literally – but best of luck, guys! And Ray, I'll see you at the press conference for positive meta representation and awareness thing at lunchtime, right?"

"Right. See you then."

They all watched him vanish in a blur of light and sparks.

"Okay, then," Ray said. "So the schedule for today is –"

Paperwork.

Oh, there were many words for it and many categories and different nuances that were undoubtedly important to someone who, you know, actually cared – not Len, and, he suspected, not really Leo either – but what was inescapable was that the vast majority of the schedule was chock full of paperwork.

Len hated paperwork.

"It's a fashion house," he groused. "Can't I sew something?"

"We did all the sewing earlier this year," Ray said, utterly implacable. "I'm sure you remember it."

"Can we do more of that?"

"No. The shows are over for now. Normally, now would be design time, but thanks to our little jaunt, Leo's already knocked those out –"

"Not just Leo," Len teased. Leo had decided to give Ray his own line – a small one, but his own – and Ray had been worrying his head off about his designs until Leo had finally helped him pick a few and insisted he stick to them.
Ray flushed a little at that, pinking up in pleasure at the reminder, but remained stern. "With the designs done, the majority of our work now is on management issues – arranging photoshoots, publicity, celebrity endorsements, deals with consumer-oriented sellers like department stores –"

"Can I talk someone into wearing my outfit for the Met Gala?"

"It's already passed for the year, and that isn't how it works, anyway. Stop assuming that the Ocean's movies represent reality."

"Remind me again, you're talking about that movie we saw while on our voyage through space and time because it doesn't actual come out for another, what, year or two?"

"Hey, sci-fi is one thing. Fashion is different."

"Fine, fine."

"This work isn't the most exciting, but it's part and parcel with the rest of what we do," Ray said. "Yes, there's the fun making-fashion aspect, but in the end we're really running a business here."

"Don't you have someone else to do that for you?"

"Yes, but then Leo got promoted again."

"Shouldn't a promotion mean he's got more people to do this stuff for him?"

"No. It means he's the final decision maker on more things."

Len reached out and plucked one of the papers off the desk. "I don't even understand this."

"Which is why I'm here," Ray said, snatching the paper away. "This is a term sheet for one of our vendors. Anyway, you need to read all of these –"

"Ugh."

"– because I've scheduled you – or, well, us – a meeting with a celebrity tonight at dinnertime. Late dinner, if you're wondering; they're busy all day before then."

"Is it one I know?"

"Len, you don't know any celebrities except Barry."

"Since when is Scarlet a celebrity?"

"Superhero, regularly saves the day, recently got the key to the city, any of this ringing a bell?"

Len rolled his eyes. "So why am I meeting with a celebrity?"

"It's for a promotion," Ray said, long-suffering. "Their goal – well, their manager's goal – is to over-awe and charm you to such an extent that you agree to their price and amount; our goal is for you to be cool and insist they go with our preferred price and amount."

"I can be cool."

"I know. It's literally your moniker."

"There's a monkey pun in there," Len said thoughtfully. "But I think making it would only insult
Ray grinned, and shoved some papers at him.

No mercy, that man.

Len was just finishing up the dinner with the celebrity – her manager and lawyer both looked pissed off, since Len had gotten the celebrity talking about what type of superhero-supervillain their doppelganger would be and started brainstorming costume ideas with her, resulting in her being in such a good mood that she ordered her manager to not only agree to the numbers that Ray was simultaneously proposing to said manager and lawyers, but to exceed them because she just had to have the outfit in question for her next public appearance – when there was an urgent knock at the door.

"Come in," Len said.

One of Ray's flunkies – sorry, admins – stuck their head in. "Mr. Snart, it's your sister, and she says it's urgent."

"Right," Len said, frowning. It was already late in the evening – they should have gone on that heist by now, it was all planned out and everything. Had something gone wrong? Something must have gone wrong. Damnit; he knew he shouldn't have agreed to let Leo go in his place. "I'm sorry to have to leave you –"

"No problem," the celebrity – whose name Len had never really caught – said with a smile. "Family issues – I know the feeling."

"We're just about done here, anyway," Ray said. "You go; I'll finish up the details."

Len flashed the room his best conning-the-mark smile and hurried out without another word. Lisa was in his (well, Leo's) office, and she looked – awful. Her eyes were red, her hair was mussed, she was favoring one side –

"What happened?!!" Len exclaimed.

"The job went wrong," Lisa said. "No, that's not right – the job went just fine, no hitches, nothing but Leo whining about it being hurry-up-and-wait boring –"

That sounded like Leo. He'd never really appreciated the fine art of slowly casing a building.

"We'd even gotten everything we wanted. We were just on our way out when we got jumped," she said. "A bunch of guys in a van, with clubs and chloroform –"

"Chloroform?! What is this, a 19th century crime novel?"

She rolled her eyes angrily. "You know what I mean. Some sort of knock-out drug. They knocked me out – the side of my head and neck still hurt from where I hit the ground – and when I woke up, Leo was gone."

"What?!"

The world suddenly went very, very still.

"Mick got a nasty hit, too," she continued anxiously. "He was up ahead on his motorbike – staggered exits, you remember the plan – but when he saw us get attacked he tried to drive back to
help. A car hit him straight on the side."

"Is he –"

"He'll be okay – I insisted he go to the hospital. Told him he could go willingly or at gunpoint, but either way I'd come to you and we'd handle it. He agreed, though reluctantly - I just got a text saying he's in and they're treating him."

"And Leo?"

She shook her head. "Just gone," she said.
Leo wasn't gone. He'd know if Leo were gone. Somehow.

"Missing," Lisa corrected, probably in reaction to his expression. "Missing gone, not dead gone. They weren't aiming to kill, not any of us."

"Did you see any identifying marks on the men?"

She shook her head. "Cheap thugs like you can get on any corner of Central or Keystone," she said. "Not Family men, none of them."

"But who else would...?"

"I don't know."

Len forced his brain to start thinking. "Did they take the gun?"

"The cold gun? Yes."

"Mick's heat gun?"

"No," she said, frowning at him. "It was on him; I don't think they had a chance."

"Then it was probably some sort of supervillain," Len said. "Maybe trying to recruit or something; I don't know. That's the only reason I can think to take me alive with my gun – they want me to do something for them."

He scowled at the thought of it. Like that would ever work!

"But they got Leo, not you," Lisa said. "And Leo doesn't kill."

An abrupt chill went down Len's spine.

They wouldn't.

They couldn't.

Forcing Leo to kill -

Len would kill them, first.

Whoever ‘them’ was.

"Well, if it's a supervillain problem, that calls for a superhero solution," he said, forcing some optimism into his voice. "Go get Barry; I'll pull Ray out of his meeting and we'll meet you at STAR Labs."
Leo woke slowly, which was unusual for him – both he and Len typically woke up all at once, a sharp shift from sleep to wakefulness, and any lying around in bed after that was a conscious choice. This groggy feeling of rising up slowly through the mud towards awareness was something he associated, if at all, with being severely sick and stuffed full of medications that warned of causing drowsiness.

He didn't remember being sick.

Had he gotten drugged?

It wasn't as though people hadn't tried, of course, slipping something into his drink at clubs or even at model shoots – whether out of misplaced lust, ambition or revenge, he was never sure. He'd even accidentally had some a few times before he'd learned that he needed to be as cautious in his world of fashion as Len was in his world of crime; the only reason nothing had happened to him was that he'd generally reacted by tottering into the nearby coatroom, telling Len he was sleepy, and letting Len handle the rest of the evening while he slept it off.

Following the first few instances of that, they'd told Mick about Leo's newfound party-related narcolepsy and he'd rolled his eyes and asked them if they'd ever considered the possibility of roofies.

Since that little revelation, Leo had opted to bring his own water bottles to drink at parties. He wasn't much of a drinker anyway, he always said no to drugs – he was always getting offered so very many drugs, seriously, models were ridiculous – and anyway, it was good for a designer to have a few quirks.

(Leo was well aware that his models weren't all as clean as he'd like, but he made sure that while they were in his employ, they had regular but highly supervised access to their drug of choice to keep them from buying it anyway unsafe, and also that they had access to rehab services without the embarrassment of publicly going to a clinic. A surprising number took him up on the offer, enough that he would routinely disappear them on highly secret photography projects that let them go in-patient for a short while – it felt like the least he could do.)

Still, it'd been a long time since any of that had happened, so this was still unusual.

Where had he been the night before? A party? Some bar? Some...

No, hadn't he gone to the racetrack on that job of Len's? Yes, that was it, the racetrack job.

What boring work it was, sitting around to wait for the right moment before finally going in, doing a bit of shouting and gun-waving, and walking out with the money. It was terribly anti-climactic; Leo remembered now how much he'd disliked it as a child.

Ugh, and he'd agreed to do more of this; he must have lost his mind...

"I know you're awake."

Every muscle in Leo's body froze in terror well before his mind, floundering, finally placed the voice in his memory.

He'd heard that voice so often, so many times before, that it was indelibly seared into his brain, but
he'd tried so hard to forget it and it had been so long that he'd almost succeeded.

But now it was back.

"Dad," Leo croaked, and opened his eyes.

Lewis Snart was older, fatter, and smaller than Leo remembered, but when he smiled, a stretch of the lips with no warmth in the eyes, all of that was immaterial to the terror and hatred he invoked in Leo's heart.

He was three again, five again, seven again, ten again – he was in the position he'd sworn he'd never be again, caught at the mercy of Lewis Snart, who had none.

And the worst part was: his first thought was to wonder why Len was not here to protect him.

To be him.

No.

Lewis smirked. "About time you gave up the charade," he said. "We have work to do."

"Don't work with you anymore," Leo said, struggling to sit up. He was still woozy, but he had willpower to fight through the dizziness. This was not a time to display weakness. "Haven't for years – or have you started to forget already, old man?"

Bravado, of course, and Leo was already tensing up in anticipation of the blow that speaking back to his father would earn him.

But it didn't.

Instead, Lewis smiled, a sick, twisted little smile, as if some question had been answered.

"On the contrary," he said, his piggish little eyes gleaming, "I'm starting to remember."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Leo asked cautiously.

"A few things," Lewis said, standing up. "First: you haven't asked where your sister is."

Leo froze.

No!

"Don't worry," Lewis assured him, smirk widening. "She's free as a bird – but I'm keeping a very close eye on her. If you disobey, well, that wouldn't make me happy – with either of you."

The threat was clear enough, even without the details that Lewis would undoubtedly be more than happy to fill Leo in on later. Worse, Lewis would go through with it; of that, Leo had no doubt.

Len might have doubted the depths of their father's cruelty, might have protested, if only in his mind, in the hopes of changing their father's mind, but then Len always did have the softer heart.

Especially, as much as Leo hated it, where their father was concerned.

"Do we understand each other, son?" Lewis asked, putting a hand on Leo's shoulder – a paternal gesture twisted into an act of dominance, of possession, rather than of any affection.
"Yeah," Leo spits out. "I read you loud and clear."

It was fine: Lisa and Mick would go to Len, and Len would recruit Barry and Ray and everyone else, and they'd come to rescue him the second they figured out where he was.

He'd just have to play Len a little more closely than anticipated for a little longer.

He could do that.

He was pretty sure he could do that, anyway.

"Good," Lewis said, not removing his hand. "Because I've got a plan that needs your – special expertise."

Leo pressed his lips together.

Forget about whether he could do this. He would do this.

"I'm all ears, Dad," Leonard said to his father. "What's the job? What skills do you need?"

"Skills is probably the wrong word," Lewis mused. "You never did have any skills other than cringing away from me, did you?"

What was that supposed to mean?

Leo's confusion must have been evident, because Lewis laughed and his grip tightened on Leo's shoulder until the point of pain.

"Like I said, son," Lewis said. "I've been remembering a lot of things, these last few years in prison. And skills or no skills, I think you've got something that I can use."

His smirk widened into a maniacal grin of triumph.

"Ain't that right, Lionel?"

No.

No.

Not that.

Anything but that.

The name they hated most, the name of that empty and forgotten boy, the one they'd tried so hard to bury the ghost of, the one whom no one loved and no one cared for or thought about or knew existed, not since their mother died.

Or so they'd thought.

But that wasn't exactly true, now, was it?

Leo stared at their father in horror. He should have realized – should have expected – he never even considered –

Of course Lewis Snart knew about them.

Of all people, he had the most right to know: he'd been there in the hospital when they'd been born,
he'd signed off on their birth certificates, he'd taken the two of them back to his home.

No amount of hiding, no clever tricks, no bribes or computer viruses could erase that knowledge.

And if he knew –

All those years of hiding. All those years of taking each other’s place, of Len bearing the scars of abuse so that Leo wouldn't have to, of Leo just as scarred by the endless neglect, all those jobs, all those sacrifices, all those fights –

Lewis had known.

He just hadn't cared.

One son was all he needed, after all; one son was all that was convenient for him to have, and it was one son he'd helped make them into.

It was their own decision, yes, and they loved playing each other so much that they would have done it no matter what -

But he was where the trauma around it started.

He was the one who'd turned it from a game into survival.

And now, all these years later, he'd emerged from whatever dark hole he should have rotted in and seen that the Leonard he had raised, the Leonard he'd wanted, the thief par excellence, the kleptomaniac, the supervillain, the killer with nightmares, the soft heart frozen over – all his work, all due to him, all forced upon them by him -

Now, after all that, he didn't have any more use for that Leonard.

No, now he wanted the other Leonard: the one Len and Leo had created together through pain and suffering and deprivation, the one born of other's sacrifice, the one who had the space to go straight, to pursue his passions, to finish college, to be free to do as he wished.

To be free of Lewis.

And now Lewis wanted Leo.

Leo, who was enraged.

"That ain't my name," he said, and his voice was cold enough to burn stars.

Lewis backhanded him.

"Your name is whatever I say it is," he said, casual as if he were remarking on the weather. "I gave it to you, and only I can take it away, whatever nonsense you might've done with changing your name by the law."

"My name," Leo said again, ignoring the pain and quickly forming bruise, "is Leonard."

Lewis barked a laugh. "You know that's a name I gave you too, right?" he jeered. "But sure, son, have it your way. I know you're not the thief – anyone watching you could've figured that out. Your reflexes are slow and you don't have the confidence to do a proper stick-up; it was pathetic to watch."
So what if Leo wasn't a good thief?

He didn't have to be. That was the point.

"Now get up," Lewis added. "We have a job to plan. Unless you care less about your sister than you do your name...?"

Wordless, Leo got up.

Len sat down.

"What do you mean, you're having trouble tracking him?!" he demanded. "You designed the goddamn gun, Ramon; I know you know how to pinpoint its location."

"It's not as easy as all that," Cisco protested.

"You tracked me with it, didn't you?"

"You were using it! I've set up a city-wide tracking system, but I haven't picked up a single downward spike in temperature anywhere –"

"Nothing," Barry reported, appearing in a burst of lightning. He was panting lightly, suggesting that he'd pushed himself past the limits of even his ridiculous speed. "I've been through the streets twice; not a sign of him or the van you describe. He must be underground or inside somewhere."

"He can't just be gone," Ray said from where he's been pacing for the last hour. He was shining like a lamp, unable to contain the spike in his powers due to sheer worry-fueled adrenaline, but there was nothing he could use them for right now. He'd mastered throwing light beams and was working on using his light as a means of propulsion to fly, but while they'd theorized that he might have the ability to use his light powers as some sort of advanced scanning system – comparisons had been made to both echolocation (but with light) and super-vision (and associated puns about supervising), and there had been perhaps gratuitous misuse of the line about "everywhere the light touches" from The Lion King – but he hadn't managed it yet.

He'd been too busy to properly practice the ability, something he was clearly regretting now.

It didn't matter, though. If Barry couldn't find Leo, and Cisco couldn't find Leo, then they were dealing with something – different.

Len still thought a new supervillain seemed like a likely option for the culprit, but he was starting to suspect that it wasn't that. Mick's injuries had been somewhat worse than reported – he'd left the hospital AMA, only to collapse again once he reached STAR Labs, where Caitlin was now treating him – and if it had been a supervillain looking to catch a supervillain, then why not take Mick as well?

Maybe this was personal.

"I'm going to go ask some contacts of mine some questions," he decided.

"Won't that tip people off about there being two of you?" Cisco asked.

"I don't fucking care," Len said, and found that it was true. Leo was more important to him than Leonard would ever be – that's how this whole mess started, after all, back in the beginning.

It had always been about protecting Leo.
And no matter what it cost, Len would find a way to protect him now.

Unfortunately, most of his contacts had no clue about anyone gunning for him – no need to confuse them with details – but it didn't matter. Len was going to keep going down his list until someone told him something.

Even if it meant –

There was a small neighborhood of Keystone that Len always avoided. It wasn't a great area – pretty run-down – but it was out of the slums and moderately respectable, with a decent school for children and a possible way out of poverty if you worked hard and were lucky. The Families left it largely alone, despite the thriving sex work industry centered there, considering it a neutral area.

Len had helped broker that deal himself, at some considerable personal cost.

People had thought, at first, that he was getting something out of it – jokes regarding sex workers had been made at his expense – but when the years passed and he avoided the area like the plague, his work on behalf of that neighborhood was seen not as a measure for personal gain, but of unlikely sentimentality.

The neighborhood was, after all, home to one of the best known and most well-protected domestic violence relocation shelters in the Gem Cities.

(Leo always did say that Len was the one with the soft heart.)

Len never went there.

Not for anything.

He went there now.

(For Leo, he would do far more than anything.)

The neighborhood had been even more poor and unwanted, years and years ago, so it had been easy enough for an infusion of some serious (mostly illegal) cash to enable the shelter to buy the land for a song during one of the housing crashes. What houses and shops were still functioning and could pay rent, even minimal, did so, and helped restore the shelter's coffers; those that were empty and abandoned were redistributed to those who needed them: women fleeing from abusive husbands, husbands from wives, children from parents, people of any gender or sexuality but the norm from those who did not understand, or any mixture of the above.

The shelter had originally expected people to move out of the area when they no longer needed the help, but they hadn't. They'd stayed, even as they flourished, and helped pay for more houses, more apartments, and for a neighborhood watch strong enough to do what the corrupt or indifferent police would not.

They protected their own.

When Len came to the neighborhood, they watched him with a wary eye: he was dangerous, they could tell just by looking at him, and this neighborhood had no love for dangerous men.

"I want to speak with the head of the shelter," Len told the first one that stopped him, a woman half a head shorter than him but with eyes of steel.

"Why?" she asked bluntly. "Looking for someone?"
Len's face twisted up in a grimace of pain.

"Yes," he said. "But I doubt I'd find him here. I just need to know if – if she's heard anything. That's all. Then I'll leave."

The woman, whose name he did not ask, and which she did not share, waited to receive confirmation that he would be allowed in before letting him pass onwards, and Len waited with her in silence. He wasn't sure if she'd get that confirmation: there was a reason he did not come here.

After all, he was dangerous, and this neighborhood had good reason to hate dangerous men. Why should he be exempted?

And yet –

He needed to come here now, to ask. This shelter took in everyone who needed it, rich or poor, and some of those who came here were those with connections to every branch of power in either Central or Keystone: politicians and Families and more.

There was a chance, however small, that they might know something that would show him the way.

He was willing to break his vow never to come here for that chance.

For Leo, he would do anything.

More than anything.

The woman checked her phone when it buzzed. "Okay," she said, not softening even in the slightest degree. "You can go."

Len nodded and continued past her. He could feel her watching him as he went, and her eyes were not the only ones he could feel on his back as he climbed the shallow steps to the old armory, that massive squat building that no one had wanted when it fell into disrepair and which had now been converted into the main offices of the shelter - a bomb shelter and a place designed to resist a siege, all in one.

The first stop for anyone seeking aid, and the final stop for those that sought to abuse the shelter's offerings.

Len hoped he would be considered the former.

The head of the shelter had been beautiful in her youth, with soft dark hair that she'd once dyed even more black and dark eyes that always seemed wet and hurt but somehow warm, and she was beautiful still today - hardly more than fifty years old, with hair streaked with silver that she didn't bother to dye, the faint traces of Asian features more noticeable now that she no longer hid them with layers of makeup, and the same big eyes that were hurt no longer –

But they were still warm.

"Leonard," she said with a smile, reaching out her arms to him, but taking no offense when he instinctively shied away from her. "My little man."

Len shuddered. "I'm not your anything," he said, but he couldn't make his voice as sharp as he would have liked.
He never could, with people he cared for.

"I know," she said, and her voice was sad, though the warmth was still there. "You aren't. Not anymore. But won't you at least say it's good to see me?"

Len would rather not.

But he came here as a supplicant, and there was no harm in telling the truth when it served his purposes.

"It's good to see you," he said. "Marie."
Marie smiled at Len. When she ran away, all those years ago, she'd traveled far away, fleeing his father, but just like Len, she was Central City born and bred; she couldn't leave it behind forever.

She'd come here, to the shelter, instead.

It had been her first stop on her way out of Central, the small shabby place that it was back then, and it was her first stop on her return. She'd worked days at the shelter, helping others as she'd been helped, and nights helping manage one or another of the various clubs to try to raise money for the shelter to pay its workers even the bare pittance they needed to live.

It was hard work and seemed fruitless, with all her efforts appearing to be doomed to end in failure.

At least until the day her bank account began to grow through a series of mysterious and carefully laundered donations, enough to help her and her shelter make that initial investment in land that had helped them get to where they were now.

Len had always been a very good thief.

But very bad at feelings.

"You still have the Turner sketch," he observed as a means of changing the subject, nodding at the watercolor landscape framed on her wall. It depicted a wildly storming sea, a boat with two small, indistinct stick figures in the center. "I meant for you to sell that, you know."

"The appraiser told me it would be better to keep it off the market for a few years," she said. "And anyway, I liked it. It reminded me of you."

"It's been a long time," Len agreed guardedly.

She smiled, nostalgic, settling down in one seat before her desk, rather than the more intimidating one behind the desk, and gesturing for him to take the other. "I remember. You were in your – early twenties, I think? You broke out of prison to warn me not to interfere with your application to fully adopt Lisa, then broke back in to prison to ensure that you served out your sentence without having any more time added on. Only you!"

Leo had called him an idiot for that one, but it'd worked out well in the end. The guard he'd bribed to let him go that time had ultimately gotten promoted to the warden's first lieutenant and was now, of course, susceptible to blackmail; it had made getting out subsequent times much easier.

"You didn't interfere," he pointed out. It'd been worth all the trouble to ensure that Lisa was theirs, free and clear.

"I was never planning to," Marie said. "She's more yours than mine. I knew what I was leaving behind, what I'd never be able to get back, when I left the way I did."

The way she looked at Len made clear that she didn't just mean her relationship with her birth daughter, long lost. Lisa had met her, once, and refused to go ever again, burying all mention of the meeting so deeply that Len wasn't sure Lisa even remembered her.

Len shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. He could keep his cool under fire, under threat, under just about every circumstances, but he couldn't now.
He'd never forgiven her for leaving how she did, and she knew it. He hadn't stopped loving her, either – his regular gifts made that clear enough – but his refusal to ever visit despite numerous invitations, phrased and delivered in a dozen different ways before she finally got the message, had made his feelings quite clear.

He still hadn't forgiven her now.

But, damn him, he still loved her. More fool he.

"Don't worry. I know you're not here to mend fences," she said quietly. "I know why you are here."

Len frowned. "You – do?"

How could she know? He'd only been searching a day, and he hadn't revealed the truth to any of his contacts.

If she knew because Leo had passed along some sort of message, and she hadn't told him immediately -

Now, for the first time, Marie frowned as well. "Well, I certainly thought so," she said. "I thought you came to warn me."

"Me, warn you?" Len asked, surprised. "Your gossip network makes Family spymasters and government spooks weep with envy."

That didn't get a smile, as he'd expected. "You don't know?" she asked, her frown deepening. "I only found out recently myself – I thought for sure you knew already, or I would have reached out at once –"

"Knew what?" Len demanded. "Tell me."

She looked at him, and for the first time there was fear in her eyes like he hadn't seen in decades. "He's back," she said. "Lewis – your father is back in Central."

Len froze.

He'd have liked to say that his mind was moving a Scarlet mile a second, formulating plans and actions, but that would have been a lie. His mind was doing nothing at all, a total blank, tabula rasa.

His dad.

Their dad.

It had to be their dad behind this.

He had no evidence, of course, but who else could it be? Who else would take Leonard but not Mick, who wouldn't make Leonard use the cold gun, who else would use thugs to target them so specifically?

And if it was their dad, then that meant –

Their dad had Leo.

Len had brought this on their heads, with his stupid suggestion (or had it been Leo's?) to switch roles. If only he hadn't, if only he'd gone himself, it would have been Leo kept safe in a meeting, charming a celebrity over a glass of wine and a contract; it would have been Len in Lewis' grasp,
ready to sell his father anything he wanted if only he'd stay away from his family.

His family.

Lisa had been there, too, at the racetrack; the men who'd attacked had knocked her out and left her lying on the asphalt parking lot like a heap of refuse.

Lewis would do it in a heartbeat, Len knew – he loved his dad, a stupid unquenchable love just like he had for Marie, but he wasn't blind – but it didn't make sense. Lewis must know that physical intimidation wouldn't do the trick anymore; the only thing he'd be able to wield against Leonard would be a threat. So why leave Lisa behind, when she was the best thing he could threaten?

Unless –

Unless the threat continued, somehow, despite her being free.

He needed to get Cisco to get Lisa somewhere safe immediately. Maybe even scan her; who the hell knew what Lewis would be willing to do.


He swallowed down his first retort, a question of why she thought she was entitled to any information from him at all, she who had left them all behind in hell to help herself. Old grievances meant nothing now: she could still help him.

“Leo’s missing,” he said. “Someone grabbed him. I was hoping you could help me find him.”

“Lewis,” she breathed, understanding the problem at once.

“Any information you have –”

“Is yours,” she confirmed. “I’ll ask everyone I know to keep an eye out for him, or any word as to where they are or what they’re up to. I hope I can be of help.”

“Already have been,” Len said, his mind already elsewhere. Just knowing the identity of your enemy was half the battle, and Len knew Lewis’ style far too well.

What he didn’t know, though, was whether Lewis knew he had Leo, or if he thought he had Len. If he thought he had Len, the thief, he’d probably be going after something high-end, a big score, maybe diamonds.

But Leo wasn’t that good at thieving, had let his skills get rusty. Would Lewis get angry?

He would hurt Leo, whether or not he was angry, whether or not Leo had kept up his skills. Best to accept that now, to keep the anger buried deep, not to let his emotions interfere with his thoughts. However, Len would not consider the possibility of him killing Leo: Lewis would not do that without significantly more incentive.

He hoped, anyway.

He had to hope for that much.

What then, though, assuming Lewis found out about Leo’s inferior skills? Would Lewis berate him? Would Leo – would he –

Would he *tell*?
No.

Len couldn’t think like that.

Better that Leo should tell, better that Lewis should know, than that Leo be punished for not being Len.

More fool Lewis for grabbing the wrong one even after watching them rob a racetrack; any fool would have noticed the degradation in Len’s skills, his confidence, his familiarity –

Unless.

No, it was impossible.

For Lewis to have grabbed Leo on purpose, for that to have been an opportunity instead of an error, then he must have – he must –

He must have known.

And if he knew, then he had chosen to take Leo, vulnerable Leo, who could be hurt, instead of Len, who was accustomed to hurting, on purpose. Why? To hurt them both the better?

No.

Not even Lewis was that stupidly selfish. If he took Leo on purpose, then it was for a purpose.

But how would a thief benefit from having Leo?

“Leonard?” Marie asked, her hands folded on her lap. “What is it? What have you just thought?”

“Could you do me a favor?” he asked, mentally running through his list of contacts. “In addition to keeping an eye out for Leo or for Lewis – tell me if you know of any really big scores in town.”

She frowned at him. “You’d know better than I.”

“No, not something hiring; nothing that would be brought to my attention. Just – something big, in town, something the fences would kill to get their hands on but don’t think they can get. Something that you need an invitation with a plus-one to enter, maybe, or at least some sort of legit cover.”

“I’ll ask,” she said. “I’ll text you anything I find out – what’s your number?”

He gave it to her and headed out of the shelter, already pulling out his phone to call Ray, who kept a copy of Leo’s schedule. If there were any big parties that had invited Leo – Leo, the fashion designer, rather than Len, the thief – then Ray would know about them. If there was a big party to which Leo wasn’t invited, but might be able to sweet-talk his way in, well, hopefully Ray would know about those, too.

Len would have to proceed simultaneously down two tracks: one, assuming a high-end jewelry heist, if Lewis thought he had Len, and two, assuming some sort of massive party crash, if he knew he had Leo.

But at least they had a solid lead now.

Len’s phone rang before he finished dialing.

It was Barry.
"Did you find something?"

"No," Barry said. "Unless you happen to be blowing up people's heads down by the docks."

"...what?" Len asked blankly.

"Blowing people heads up," Barry repeated helpful. "Down by the docks. Are you?"

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous," Len said. "Anyway, I'm in Keystone."

He would, if it meant getting Leo back, but...

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Barry said. "There's someone here with their head literally blown up, and our new policewoman-slash-CSI-groupie claims to have found a hair that comes up matching L. Snart DNA, despite the fact that we worked with Felicity to wipe all of that –"

Shit.

"– and anyway, it really doesn't seem like a Leo thing to do -""

"It's my dad," Len interrupted. "Lewis Snart. I just found out that he's in town, and that makes him suspect number one in kidnapping Leo."

"Wait, you think your dad assaulted and kidnapped his own kid? And ditched an unconscious Lisa in the street?"

"Yes," Len said shortly. "Except I don't think he 'just' ditched Lisa...how did you say the man died?"

"Head blown up."

"From a bullet, or from a bomb?"

"Uh, bomb, actually. Funny you should ask that, we were just wondering about that ourselves –"

Len's stomach roiled with nausea. A bomb. A bomb.

He forced the feeling away.

"You have to get Lisa scanned," he said.

Barry went quiet. "You think...?"

"The only way any Leonard would work with him is because of a threat. And Lisa admits she was knocked out."

"I'll get Cisco and Caitlin on it right away," Barry promised. "Mick, too, since he was there."

"Good," Len said. "I'm going to collect some more information, then met you back there. We'll need to figure out a way to remove the bomb quick – we don't know if he put one in Leo, too."

"Right," Barry said. He sounded shocked and horrified, but Len didn't have time to comfort him right now. Leo came first.

"Oh, and check with the cops if there've been any requests for police protection – any fancy parties. He might be trying to use Leo as a way in."
"I'll have Joe and Eddie check. See you soon."

Len hung up and started dialing Ray.

He needed to work, or else he was going to be sick.

Honestly, Leo was considering being sick anyway. After seeing what had happened to that man – that irritating hack, whose name he hadn't even learned – after seeing his head burst like an over-ripened fruit -

After thinking that it could happen to Lisa –

He was torn between hoping that Len would never find out about what their father had done and hoping that Len already knew and was working to get it out. The latter was preferable, of course, but Leo couldn't help but wish for Len to be spared the knowledge.

After all, Len still loved their father in his own stubborn, stupid way.

Leo, on the other hand, had settled pretty firmly on hate.

He hated Lewis.

There was no equivocation about it, in his mind; at least, there certainly wasn't anymore. Either Lewis had gotten immeasurably worse since the last time Leo had seen him, or Len had grossly understated how awful the man had been to work for, and Leo strongly suspected it was the latter.

Len had never lied to him unless it was for what Len thought was Leo's own damn good, a habit Leo thought he'd broken Len of years ago.

Apparently he hadn't; quite, because it seemed that there were still one or two small things Len had conveniently forgotten to mention.

Like, say, being forced to work with Lewis after the last time he was supposed to have worked with him.

Lewis noticed, of course, that Leo hadn't known about those times; he now took pleasure in describing them in detail, just to see the settled look of forceful self-control settle on Leo's face as he struggled not to react.

Possibly by trying to strangle their father with his bare hands.

"You know," Lewis said, apropos of nothing as they were picking up the suits they needed for the job from the warehouse. "You boys gave me the short end of the stick."

What the fuck.

_They gave him_ –

"Oh?" Leo asked, his voice even and calm the way it got when he was enraged. "I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean. Please explain how two children gave their own father the 'short end of the stick' before ever reaching adulthood."

Fuck you and everything you stand for, he meant. But in the interest of keeping Lisa safe, he took care not to make that _too_ obvious in his tone.

It was still probably obvious enough to get him another backhand, but Lewis just seemed amused
by it.

"That's what I'm talking about," he said, gesturing at Leo. "You get it, the way your brother never did."

Now Leo really was confused. "Get – what?"

"Emotions are a weakness," Lewis said. "They make you weak and pathetic – just like your brother always was, getting all teary-eyed every time he had to kill someone and thinking I didn't notice just because he managed to keep from bawling his eyes out in public." He sneered. "What a waste."

"He was a child," Leo said, his voice tightly controlled. "You taught a child to kill, and marveled when it made him want to cry."

"It's easier for kids," Lewis said with a shrug. "Just point and shoot, just like all those video games; kids don't know empathy well enough to really care."

Leo gritted his teeth. Lewis would not appreciate a lecture on how that totally didn't describe child psychology, not even slightly.

"But see, that's what I mean," Lewis continued. "Your brother never managed to get rid of all those feelings, no matter how many lessons I tried to teach him –"

Leo remembered those lessons. He remembered the scars they left behind.

"– he just buried them deep down, like that was good enough. Pathetic. He would've sat here like you are now, looking at me with big wide hurt eyes like some sort of dumb rabbit that doesn't understand why you're putting it out of its misery. He would've still been upset over what's-his-name –"

Even Lewis didn't remember the guy's name, which meant he'd never actually intended on him doing what he was hired for. He'd only ever been brought into the team to serve as a living – or not-so-living – example of why Leo shouldn't try to disobey.

Despicable.

"– but you? You're cool as a cucumber. You learned the lesson I meant to teach you, you've accepted that the logical thing to do now is to listen to me, and you're doing it without letting emotion get in the way." Lewis smirked. "Like me."

Leo was nothing like Lewis.

People accused him of being cool, just like Len was cool; people said he didn't care; hell, even Ray had told him that the models joked about him being a sociopath with a smile.

But he wasn't.

He guarded his emotions closely, yes, and yes, he didn't let himself care about most people, but he still felt things. He was just very good at processing what he felt – it was all he ever learned to do when he was Lionel, hidden away and forgotten. He'd had all the time in the world to think about his feelings and identify what they were.

Like hate.

Right now, he felt a lot of hate.
That was what Lewis didn't understand: Leo wasn't calm because he didn't feel anything, and Len wouldn't have been hurt because he did.

Yes, Len would have been hurt because he still felt love, and Leo wasn't, because there was no love for Lewis left in his heart to feel betrayed by.

But Leo was calm because he was overwhelmed by the sheer force of his hatred, while Len would not have been because there was still room for some other feeling left over.

Though Leo was pretty sure that Len would also have desperately wanted to punch Lewis in the face.

Lewis laughed at the expression on Leo’s face. “Don’t like that much, do you?” he asked, amused. “That’s fine. As long as you do what you’re supposed to.”

Leo pressed his lips together, but nodded. “I’ll behave,” he said tightly. “What’s the plan for tonight, anyway?”

“Tonight is the plan,” Lewis said, pulling open a box and yanking out a suit bag, which he shoved at Leo. “Now get dressed.”

“Tonight?” Leo asked, taken aback. He thought there'd be at least another night, enough time for Len to figure things out and rescue him. Leo didn't exactly trust Lewis' claim that he'd be let go after one job, especially with Lewis' vile recasting of their childhood with himself as the victim, robbed of competent help by malicious children. Bastard. “Don’t you need to – I don’t know – case the joint?”

Lewis laughed. “No one can, that’s the whole point. Walter Henning’s place is a fucking fortress – he’s one of those billionaire survivalist assholes, the ones that think the world’s going to end and intend to survive that end in the comfort to which they’ve grown accustomed.”

Leo frowned. "Henning..."

"The Hermit," Lewis confirmed. "You know the one – guy from New York that bought some land here to get away from the coasts and did that crazy construction some years back?"

"It wrecked everyone's commutes for weeks," Leo agreed bemusedly, remembering. "I didn't know he had anything valuable."

"He brought his entire collection from his house on Fifth Avenue," Lewis said, his eyes glinting with greed. "Painting, sculptures, jewels – there's a letter by George Washington in there."

"You're not going after that," Leo said. It would be invaluable, but Lewis didn't go for things like that. That was more Len’s speed – especially if he could make a pun about it.

"No, though I might grab it anyway," Lewis said. "No point in doing the biggest break-in, ever, and only stealing one thing. That being said, if we do only get a shot at one thing, then I'm after a sword."

"A sword," Leo echoed skeptically.

"Belonged to some Austrian duke or something," Lewis said with some satisfaction. "Every spare inch of the hilt covered in priceless jewels."

"Sounds uncomfortable."
"It's not for using," Lewis said. "Now get dressed already."

Leo opened the suit bag, expecting to find a janitor's outfit or something similar – he'd seen Lewis use those before – but it wasn't that.

It was just a suit.

"How are we getting in wearing this, exactly?" he asked, frowning at it.

"Henning's holding his annual blow-out party where he invites all of his stinking rich friends," Lewis said. "The suits will help us blend in."

Not with cheap wool like this, they wouldn't.

"There's no way we can just walk in through the front door, even if he is holding a party," Leo objected. "Henning the Hermit is notoriously paranoid; that's the whole point."

"Yeah, I know. That's why everyone's always considered his house uncrackable," Lewis said with satisfaction. "You have to be on his guest list to get anywhere near – well, on the guest list, or invited in by the man himself. I got intel from one of my old buddies that helped finish some construction in there – watched by a dozen men at each step, so he couldn't do shit, but he figured out some things. Once we're inside, things will be a snap."

"But how do we get inside? We're not on the guest list, and there's no reason for him to invite us in —"

"That's where you're wrong," Lewis said. "He's going to invite us in – or more specifically, he's going to invite you in, you and your dear old dad. The guy's an absolute maniac for fashion. He won't be able to resist the chance to talk to a real designer."

The sneer with which Lewis pronounced the word 'designer' made his feelings on Leo's chosen profession quite clear.

"So you needed me the whole time," Leo said. "Me, not Len. Someone as paranoid as Henning – he'd quiz me about my knowledge, and only I'd know enough to pass."

"Exactly."

"But you went after me at the racetrack...?"

"Easier than snatching you from your studio," Lewis said with a shrug. "I figured on getting leverage to pry you out – but this worked even better. This way, your brother's stuck playing you back in your studio while I get some real use out of you."

Lewis didn't know that Ray was in on the trick such that Len would be able to drop everything to try to help Leo. That was something, at least.

Leo looked down at the suit in his hands and made a face.

"What?" Lewis barked.

"It's a cheap black suit over a white shirt," Leo said. "It's boring –"

Lewis stepped closer, his jovial air suddenly gone and replaced by one of menace.

"– but that won't be a problem, I'm sure," Leo finished hastily. A bruised face wouldn't help sell
their cover story, and not getting in was unthinkable – Lewis would be incandescently angry.

And as long as he had the detonation device, Leo couldn't allow that.
Dropping his protests, Leo got into the suit, Lewis did the same, and they went.

The security by the mansion was – well, it was frankly ridiculous. Henning certainly didn't believe that investing in extra manpower to keep his house safe was a waste of money.

On the bright side, at least the sheer overkill in numbers meant that if they couldn't talk their way in, Lewis' usual Plan B – shoot people until he got his way – wouldn't be effective.

Still, they went up to the security guy at the door – "Leave the talking to me unless you're asked fashion questions," Lewis instructed like Leo wasn't a hundred times better at charming people than Lewis ever was, but Leo knew better than to argue – and Lewis demanded to be let in.

Despite Lewis' instructions, Leo played the apologetic son when the security guy looked at him, knowing that if he didn't, they were never going to get in – and then Lewis wouldn't need a fashion designer anymore.

As he'd already seen, being considered extraneous by Lewis Snart was not a good position to be in.

"I'm sorry, he really wanted to come, I told him we weren't invited," he said. "He was hoping we could get in anyway."

"It's a party for celebrities," Lewis bleated. "My son's a celebrity – you must've heard of him – Leonard Snart – I demand you check with your boss –"

"I'll check," the security guy said, long-suffering. "If only because the boss likes to know everyone that tries to get in. But trust me, mister, he told the Rathaways to fuck off because they're 'just' millionaires; I wouldn't hold out much hope if I were you."

He gestured for them to stand off to the side, which they did.

Lewis promptly grabbed Leo's arm in a painfully tight grasp that was sure to leave bruises under the suit. "That was actually helpful, by some miracle," he said. "But that had also better be the last time tonight you disobey me. Got it, son?"

"Got it," Leo said through gritted teeth.

"Mr. Snart?" the security guy called.

They both looked up.

The security guard was gesturing for them to come over.

They went over.

"Wait here, please," the guard said, which wasn't what Leo was expecting – he'd anticipated either a 'yes, you can go in' or a 'no, sorry, go away'.

From Lewis' expression, he'd expected about the same. He went tense, his eyes flickering around at all the men in military-level security outfits; Leo couldn't help but hope for a wild minute that they'd somehow managed to figure out that Leonard Snart's father was a conman and a felon –

"Leonard Snart?" a big voice boomed from the doorway. "Can it be?"
Leo turned.

He just barely kept himself from gaping.

It was Henning the Hermit – more accurately, Walter Henning III – himself, a big bald man in his sixties, tall, with greying hair, somewhat given to fat but still muscular underneath it all, and he was coming toward Leo with his hand outstretched.

Leo shook his hand – Henning had a hell of a grip – on automatic. "Yes, that's me," he said, honestly surprised. He was good, yes, and quite famous in his own way in his own industry, but he hadn't thought he was that famous. Not enough to get personalized attention from the Hermit! "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine," Henning said, beaming at him. "Travesty that you only got fourth place."

Leo blinked.

"Project Runway," Henning explained gleefully. "Season one, way back when – the one you can barely find recordings of, when they were still figuring out how it worked – the beginning of it all, really. My favorite show! You were robbed – the design that got you eliminated was ten times better than the ones that won the day. Robbed, I say!"

What the fuck.

Leo barely remembered being on that show – well over a decade ago by now – much less what he'd made on one particular episode, but apparently Henning did.

Because, apparently, Henning was a fan.

"Well, it worked out all right in the end, I guess," he said blankly. He didn't even know where the guy who'd actually won the season had ended up – possibly back on the show as a judge, which wasn't exactly a career pinnacle from a fashion perspective.

Henning laughed. "Yes, you certainly got the last word in there! You were far more correct about where fashion was going next than any of those other louts – you know, I've a great interest, myself – in fact, I remember now that I'd heard that you were in Central, a hometown boy; I can't believe I didn't look you up earlier – I don't get out much, you understand –"

Leo understood entirely: this evening was going to be one of the most wretched meet-the-rich-and-entitled-fan nights of his life, even discounting Lewis standing there with a pleased smirk like he'd known this would happen, which he most assuredly had not.

"– anyway, I'm chattering on and on – come inside, have a drink!"

"Thanks," Leo said. "I – appreciate that."

More than Henning could possibly realize.

"Though what are you wearing?" Henning asks, suddenly frowning. "That's not one of your new designs, is it?"

"No, no, certainly not," Leo assured him. "There was a terrible accident at dinner earlier – gazpacho everywhere – I looked like I'd just escaped from a bloodbath. So I had to borrow something from the host, and, well…"
He gestured sadly at his cheap wool suit and made a face.

Henning laughed. “Now that’s a story!” he shouts, clearly delighted. “In that case, we’d better get you in here before the tabloids find out any more – nasty things, can’t stand ‘em, though they do make for hilarious reading – come in, come in. This here’s your father, I take it? Yes, yes, he can come too, of course; showing him the sights, eh?”

Leo was born and raised in Central, and by logical implication, Lewis would have been familiar with Central’s ‘sights’, but whatever.

Henning clearly hadn’t become a self-indulgent billionaire based on personal merit, even if anyone ever actually merited billionaire status, which Leo didn't think anyone did. He vaguely recalled something about an inheritance based on ownership of slaughterhouses or something – he wasn’t sure.

Anyway, it didn't matter. What mattered was that they got into the party.

Of course, getting into the party was only half the battle. Lewis' original plan called for scouting the layout once inside, but he hadn't accounted for Henning literally dragging Leo (and, by association, Lewis) around to introduce him to people.

To be fair, Leo's original plan had counted on using the time Lewis was scouting to try to find a phone to call Len, so he hadn't accounted for everything either.

Henning finally got pulled away by some business colleagues who glared at Leo until he coughed and made up some nonsense about visiting the bar back by the cloakroom for a drink and some peanuts.

"Finally," Lewis muttered. "Now come with me."

"You don't need my help scouting," Leo protested quietly, only to fall quiet when Lewis bent one of his fingers back to the point of pain. He was clever enough to stand close enough to use his body to hide what he was doing, so no one else saw, and Leo knew that if he cried out or made a scene, Lewis would take it out on him.

Or worse, on Lisa.

"Just because you're useless doesn't mean I'm letting you out of my sight," Lewis said pleasantly. "Now let's go to that bar and continue on from there."

They got drinks at the bar – they were complimentary so Lewis insisted, even though Leo would have preferred to follow Len's strict rule of no drinking on jobs – and Lewis had just turned to lead them away when there was a giant, blinding flash of light.

Someone plucked the drink out of Leo's hand while he was still blind and shoved him backwards into someone else's arms, that latter someone putting a hand on Leo's mouth and another on his waist and pulling him backwards.

Leo let them, because any kidnapping was better than Lewis' kidnapping, and when he finally opened his eyes and blinked away the light, he saw –

Mick!

He opened his mouth.
"Shhh," Mick said. "We're in the cloakroom."

So they were.

But Lewis would notice –

"The boss grabbed your drink and stepped in for you," Mick added.

Oh.

"He'll notice," Leo said in a whisper.

"Not immediately."

"No, you don't understand, even if he doesn't notice at first, he's arranged a secret signal for me to cause a distraction," Leo said urgently. "I know it; Len doesn't."

"We figured there'd be something like that," Mick said, putting a calming hand on the small of Leo's back, just the way he liked and Len hated, because Mick always knew the difference between them. "Don't worry, the plan calls for you to switch back for a bit after you tell me everything – once you go back to Lewis, I'll tell Len everything he needs to know."

There was a plan.

Thank Len's brilliant mind, there was a plan!

Though, even brilliance had its limits, which gave rise to the question –

"How the hell'd you get in through the door?" Leo asked, because there was brilliance and then there was clairvoyance, and as far as he could tell, this plan verged on the latter. "We just barely got in ourselves – for that matter, how'd you know we were going to be here at all?"

Mick shrugged. "Boss figured out your dad had you, and that there was a chance he'd twigged to which one of you he had. Since he didn't try to trade you in for the boss, that meant he had to want to use you as you for some reason. We shook down just about everyone till they spilled the name of this party – and Henning's thing about fashion design."

"Project Runway fan," Leo agreed, still bemused by that. "And you got in...?"

Mick pointed at the door to the cloakroom, where just beyond someone – no, not just someone, that was distinctly Barry – was speaking loudly in a calm voice, saying, "Please remain calm – as I said, these are just some unlicensed fireworks – my partner and I have been stationed here to make sure nothing goes wrong, though there might be some more instances of bright light, heat, or even some small black-outs. Don't worry. We have everything under control –"

"Barry's not a cop," Leo said.

"No, but Eddie is, and that cover got them through the door," Mick said. "Same door they then let the rest of us through when no one was looking. Ray's by the window, handling the fireworks and the 'black-outs' using his light-control powers."

Leo nodded, the abruptly added, "Lisa –"

"We know about the bomb and have gotten it out of her," Mick said.

Leo exhaled with relief.
Mick did not. "We don't know if he put one in you, too, but we're putting nothing past him."

A chill went up Leo's spine. He hadn't thought of that.

Len had, though. Len was always better at anticipating physical violence, especially their father's.

"Dealing with that's part of the plan, too," Mick assured Leo. "The boss is using the time that they're scouting around to get an impression of the detonator – when you switch back and he gets back here, he'll make a fake to swap it out for. Now tell me the rest of Lewis' plan."

"You're a great plan coordinator, you know that?" Leo said, smiling when Mick flushed with pleasure. They really didn't compliment him as much as they should on his intellect; when Leo got out of this mess, he'd tell Len and they'd do it more.

Besides, he was the perfect coordinator: he knew both Leonards well enough to communicate quickly, effectively and quietly, and they trusted him implicitly around everything other than fire.

Thus satisfied, Leo told Mick the full details of Lewis' plan, keeping a close eye on the door where he could see Lewis moving steadily through the crowd, Len a few steps behind him.

Lewis made a gesture.

Leo recognized it as the secret signal. "Mick!"

His urgent tone of voice was enough to convey everything Mick needed to know.

"Ray, now!" Mick ordered, presumably through those comms they'd gotten from Gideon, and the entire room went pitch black. "Number Two, go swap!"

Leo ran forward, even as he saw the dark figure that was where his brother had been standing duck behind the bar.

The light came back on a second later – just long enough for Leo to get to where he needed to be.

Leo looked at Lewis. "You still want...?"

"Yes, you idiot," Lewis snapped. "Blackout blinded me, too. Any time now."

He hadn't noticed the swap, or at least was giving no sign that he had.

Good.

"Okay," Len said, having made his way back to the cloakroom and heard the plan from Mick. "That's not far away from what we thought it'd be –"

There was a loud crash, followed by Leo apologizing loudly.

That would be the distraction that Mick had mentioned, no doubt, designed to give Lewis cover to cut the wires to the security cameras.

"What's the plan, boss?" Mick asked. "If any part of Lewis' plan fails before we get the detonator away from him..."

That result wasn't worth thinking about. Lewis never did have any use for anyone he considered worthless.
"I know," Len said grimly, pulling out the impression he'd created of the detonator and starting to create the copy. "And even if we get it away from him, he still has a gun, maybe more than one, and no issues using it. We need to be careful."

"We need to get to the safe room before he does is what we need to do," Mick said, equally grim. "But according to the blueprints, there's only two entrances: the fire entrance, which we can't use because Lewis is going to drill through it, and through the Hermit's own fucking bedroom."

Len paused.

"What?" Mick asked. "You have an idea. What's the idea?"

"I'm going to need Barry," Len said. "And damnit, I'm going to need Leo again. Where is he?"

Mick checked. "By the door to the room with the fire escape behind the bookcase," he reported. "Lewis is talking to him – lemme see – telling him to stand guard. That means they've already moved the bookcase and are ready to start drilling. Boss..."

"Don't worry," Len said. "Tell Leo that we're going to need his ability to sweet-talk people into doing dumb things."

"Like what?"

"Like, say, telling Henning that he wants to play a trick on those tabloids that are always reporting on his love-life by being seen disappearing into a bedroom with a cute guy in a cop outfit," Len said dryly.

Honestly, a trick like that would be right up Leo's alley normally – though he wouldn't normally bother including Henning in the planning.

Well, he would in this circumstance, because there were three guards between the main room and Henning's bedroom and the only way to get past all of them was with Henning's cooperation.

Len was sure Leo could pull it off.

"Cute guy in a cop outfit," Mick echoed. "That's how we get Barry in?"

"Exactly," Len said. "He can't phase through the outer walls because they're lined with lead –"

Who knew why, it seemed really inconvenient and expensive, but it did work surprisingly well to keep Barry out until he figured out the right frequency to vibrate through, which would take time they didn't have. "– and he can't just run past the guards without implicating the Flash, but once we get past those guards and into the hallway to the safe..."

Mick nodded. "We need Leo for that?"

"I can't talk to Henning: he's a fan, he'll figure it out faster than anyone else. Leo can do it, though."

"But the safe –"

"No, I know; Leo can get us there but he can't crack the safe. That means he needs to convince Henning first, then go 'get Barry', and swap back with me then."

"Gotcha, boss. Okay, Ray, get ready for a switch back in three – two – one –"

Switching was easy after all these years, especially with Leo on the look-out for it and the actual act being covered by a giant burst of light.
Being switched, though, was – less easy.

It hadn't been so bad the first time: there were a lot of people everywhere, all around, and anyway he'd needed to pick Lewis' pocket for the detonator. Picking the pocket of another thief without him noticing was always a challenge; doing it twice to put what you'd taken back was even harder. It'd kept him occupied, too busy to think.

This time, though, Len didn't have anything like that. He was just standing guard. He wasn't picking any pockets – not close enough to Lewis for that – in fact, he wasn't doing anything.

Not anything but thinking about where he was – or rather, who he was with.

Lewis Snart.

His father.

His dad.

He wished, sometimes, that he knew how Leo had done it. How he had gotten rid of that sickening feeling of hope that pooled in Len's belly every time his dad came around, as if forty years' experience had lied to him and this time, this time, their dad would smile at them and say they'd done a good job and that he was proud of them – proud of what they'd chosen to be, of who they were, rather than pleased with his ability to force them to follow his stupid-as-fuck orders.

The hope that this time, Lewis Snart would finally be the dad Len had always wanted him to be.

Len knew he wouldn't, of course. The sort of man that put a bomb into his daughter's brain, the man that kidnapped a son to threaten into compliance, the man who hit them and called it lessons – that sort of man was never going to be a dad, even if by biological technicality he was their father.

But damn his heart, Len just couldn't bring himself to stop hoping.

To stop thinking that it would all be better if only Len did that little bit more, if Len was just that little bit better a son, better a helper, better a thief –

But no.

In the end, it wasn't even his skills that Lewis wanted. Just his face, and Leo's reputation. Every lesson he'd taught them, every lesson that Len bore evidence of all over his body, all of those were for nothing, all because Leo, the one who learned as few lessons as Len could manage, was the one Lewis wanted to use.

And somehow, that fact hurt, the fact that he'd picked Leo on purpose hurt, despite the fact that Len didn't want his dad to want to use him. Or Leo, for that matter!

Damnit, why couldn't Len follow Leo's example and just hate the bastard and be done with it?

(Because you spent your childhood thinking that getting hit was how you helped him keep his temper, that's why. Because you kept thinking that happiness was within reach, if only you could learn those lessons he kept trying to teach you. Because you let yourself believe that just because he was sometimes happy with what you could do, that it meant he was sometimes happy with you.)

Because his heart was too damn soft, that was why.

Leo liked it that way, though. Leo had always teased Len for his soft heart, worried about it,
protected Len from it, but Len knew that secretly, his brother approved.

He thought that Len's soft heart, however great a liability, was still a good thing.

And Len cared far more about Leo's opinion than his dad's.

Their bond came first. Always.

He just needed to keep reminding himself of that.

"Son," Lewis barked, then, with an effort, softened purposefully, remembering there were others around that could hear, saying, "Son, why don't you come give me a hand here?"

Len swallowed. He'd been hoping Lewis would just keep him as the guard until Leo came back – they hadn't talked much the first time he'd switched for Leo, because there were all those people, but this time, there would be no one but the two of them. He'd have to do whatever Lewis wanted, with Lewis' full attention, without blowing his cover and risking Lewis going for the detonator.

Time to be Leo.

He fixed the idea of hatred in his mind, of defiance, of keeping any emotions he felt deep in the oyster shell of his mind to be processed later, and he went inside.
"We need to get the door pried open just enough to get the drill in," Lewis said. "Get the other side of it."

Len obeyed instinctively, then remembered he was Leo, not Len, and added, "Getting too old for this, are you?"

It wasn't exactly the most pithy comeback.

Luckily, Lewis had his hands too full with his side of the door to deliver a blow. "Shut up, boy," he snarled. "Or I'll put you in your place, here and now."

Len shut up, though to his surprise he found that he wasn't as afraid as he'd been expecting.

Had his dad always been so – small? So petty? So unnecessarily violent over nothing?

"Glad you're finally getting with the program," Lewis said after another minute. "Putting your back into the work instead of dragging your feet. It'd be a shame, after all this, to have to pull that brother of yours into this."

Len tensed. Was that Lewis' way of saying that he knew?

"Not that he would be any better," Lewis continued. "He was always a disappointment, wasn't he? Never quite getting it – always worried about keeping collateral damage down and trying to disguise it by claiming that it was to keep the cops off his back. But for all his pretended goodness, he still kills, doesn't he? Hypocrite."

Len didn't kill anymore.

Mostly.

"You'd have been better at it," Lewis said. "I'll wager you won't think twice about executing someone who represents a risk – a risk to you, or to your precious little family."

"I don't kill," Len lied. It wouldn't have been a lie, if he were Leo.

Sometimes he wished he was – but not at the cost of Leo being him.

Being Len was Len's burden to bear.

Though, that's not quite true. Being Len came with its own unique joys, too – the thieving, yes, but the supervillainy, for instance, that was all his. Leo'd never bothered to learn the intricacies of the cold gun, or appreciated the adrenaline rush of fighting the Flash. It might be his face on the action figure, but the personality broadcast alongside it was all Len. That, too, was Len's and Len's alone.

He wouldn't give those up to be Leo.

"You mean you don't need to kill," Lewis corrected. "You wouldn't, what with your brother there do to the dirty work for you. No, my boy, you're like me: if it needed to be done, you'd do it, no matter who it was. Now that'd be something I could actually be proud of – something your brother could never quite manage."

Len pressed his lips together, focusing on prying open the hatch just enough for Lewis to get the
crowbar he'd smuggled in to slip into the crack.

He very carefully tried not to feel hurt. Leo wouldn't have been hurt by it, after all, and he was Leo right now.

He didn't succeed.

"Good," Lewis said once they get the door open and the drill into place. "Now get back out there and make sure no one noticed. The next part's going to be a bit noisy, so head off anyone who comes near."

Len didn't respond, just headed back out to the party space. A quick scan of the crowd showed him that Leo was headed his way, so he waited, alert, until the next "blackout" came and he could duck away behind a large potted plant, stepping back out again when Leo ducked in beside him.

They didn't have time to talk – nothing more than Leo reaching for his hand and giving it a quick squeeze – but Len felt both better and worse striding away from that room with Barry right behind him.

Better, because he was getting further away from Lewis.

Worse, because he was leaving Leo with him.

Barry slipped under Len's arm, reminding him that they were supposed to be playing a part, so Len made himself smile and laugh and wink roguishly at Henning, who grinned back, clearly pleased as punch by being pulled into the mischief as a co-conspirator.

Len had zero idea of what Leo actually said to Henning, but whatever it was, it worked like a charm: they were allowed into the bedroom without any issue.

"You okay?" Barry asked the second they were alone in the bedroom, cheerful smile disappearing off his face, replaced with concern.

Len considered the question. He hadn't gotten close enough to Lewis to swap the detonators, so Leo was still in danger, and his belly still ached with the curdled remains of hopes that should have died long ago but hadn't.

"No," he said. "Let's get this done and I will be." He hoped. "We've got to make absolutely sure that we don't let Lewis succeed in this, not even a little, or he'll just try again."

And next time, maybe they wouldn't get lucky with the tip-off from Marie, or Ray's amazing admin skills, or Mick's ability to ground Len enough to come up with the world's shittiest impromptu plan.

"We'll beat him," Barry said confidently. "We're sending a thief to outwit a thief – and you're a much better thief."

Len appreciated the thought and Barry's faith in him, but at the moment, he needed more than faith. He needed to prove that he was better, since Lewis was going in with a drill and a time advantage, and the door from the bedroom to the safe room had a high-tech, advanced-mechanics bioprint lock on it.

Len had it open in under two minutes.

Nowhere near his best time, but he was under a lot of emotional pressure right now, so he would
forgive himself for it.

He glanced out into the bare hallway that led to the big safe room at the end of the hall. "Scarlet, you got this?"

"I've got this," Barry confirmed. "Cisco's device isn't picking up any lead this far in – looks like the comms are blocked, this deep, but the device works fine."

But still, he hesitated.

"I'll be fine," Len said, perfectly aware of the reason for Barry's hesitation. "Go."

Barry went.

Len waited, making sure that the bedroom door was mostly shut so that no one would see him there.

It wasn't long before the door across the hallway began to open – Lewis taking for-fucking-ever with the drill, but still – but eventually it opened, and out came Lewis, shortly followed by Leo.

Leo had the cold gun, which he'd somehow smuggled in to the party, in his hand, presumably by Lewis' instruction.

He was holding it wrong.

Subtly wrong, but wrong.

Damnit, Len was going to have to try to pull another switch, only without the benefit of Ray's distractions or Leo's help. He'd been hoping to just sneak along behind them, but he couldn't risk Leo icing his own fingers off, so a switch it was.

At least this way he'd be able to get Leo out of this mess.

He waited until Lewis was striding down the hallway, his eyes fixed on his prize, to slip out, grab the cold gun from a surprised but willing Leo, and shove Leo into the door from the bedroom, pushing it fully shut behind him.

"What was that?" Lewis asked, turning back to look.

"There's another door here," Len said, pretending to examine it.

"It's the bedroom," Lewis said dismissively. "No one will be there in the middle of a party. Get a move on."

Len obeyed, coming up right to Lewis' side.

Close enough to make one last foray into Lewis' pocket.

He couldn't help the way his shoulders relaxed when the switch was made – the real detonator in Len's pocket, the fake in Lewis' – but he tensed them back up again quickly.

Not quickly enough, though. Lewis noticed.

Luckily, he was too busy cracking the (mediocre) lock on the safe room door to comment, but Len knew that he'd seen.
Hopefully, Barry had had enough time to complete his work.

After all, while the ultimate goal of today's events was to rescue Leo and eliminate the threat of the detonator, Len had set a secondary goal: to convince Lewis that it wasn't worth doing jobs in Central City anymore.

For that, however, Lewis couldn't just be repelled or knocked off-course.

The job itself needed to be destroyed.

And that, Len thought to himself as they stepped into the bare white walls of the safe room, which appeared to be absolutely empty, was why he'd arranged to steal everything in the safe first.

"What the hell...?" Lewis said, slack-jawed, looking around at the nothing around them.

Of course, Len hadn't actually stolen everything – the room had previously contained everything from paintings to heavy sculptures to bizarre objets d'art, all of which would have been a gigantic pain to move.

No, he'd just sent the Fastest Man Alive (or, well, one of them) ahead to hide all of it.

Barry had succeeded beyond even Len's expectations: there must have been building materials in the safe room already, because there was now a flimsy but convincing drywall creating a totally "bare" room, behind which the real treasures undoubtedly resided.

But Lewis didn't know that.

"There's nothing here!" Lewis exclaimed, his fingers tightening around the crowbar he'd already pulled out in anticipation of prying open treasures. "Nothing at all!"

"Henning must've taken 'em elsewhere," Len said. "Or the intel was bad –"

Len was anticipating getting the crowbar slammed into his belly for that comment, making himself the target of Lewis' frustration, and that was a good thing, because that was exactly what he got. He staggered back, the breath knocked out of him, but hopeful that Lewis had gotten the point: that jobs in Central were cursed, and he should go away and leave them all alone.

Len wasn't expecting the second strike to come down on his shoulders, knocking him forward onto the ground. Nor was he expecting the third, or the fourth, that followed.

"Stop!" he cried out, curling up and casing his hands up in a desperate attempt to protect his head. Lewis had beaten him before, of course, and severely, too, but that usually waited until they were somewhere safe – and never with a crowbar. Len's ribs had already cracked under its weight, and he didn't much like the state of one of his shoulders. If Lewis continued – "You could kill me!"

Didn't Lewis care? Len was his son!

"You did this," Lewis said, his voice ugly even as he brought the crowbar down again, this time striking a glancing, but ringing, blow against the side of Len's face, cracking his jaw and making him bite his lips open, blood falling from his mouth. "I should've known you'd figure out the plan – because that's what you did, isn't it, Leonard?"

"What?" Len choked.

"Leonard," Lewis repeated. "Leonard, not Lionel – you little bastards switched on me, didn't you?"
"You were never as good at playing each other as you thought," Lewis sneered. "Or maybe it's just you that can't act: I saw you relax all of a sudden, right when we were about to get in. You took the detonator, didn't you? But Lionel couldn't have done that." He brought down the crowbar again. "You just couldn't resist it, though, could you, swapping yourself out one last fucking time to rob me of my rightful --"

"Leave him alone," Leo snarled, stepping into the room behind the two of them.

Leo knew that the script, insofar as Mick had passed it along to Leo, hadn't called for a reveal now -- or ever, for that matter. Leo was supposed to be out of danger by now, achieving the main objective, and the purpose of the rest of the plan was to convince Lewis that the job was a bust and that someone was onto him, that he should leave Central City and go away to ply his trade, however badly, elsewhere.

Somewhere far away from them.

A typical Len plan for dealing with Lewis, really.

Leo was of a different opinion.

He'd thought that he had hated Lewis for a long time, hated him for what he'd done to Len more than anything else, hated him also for what he'd done to Lisa and to Leo himself, too, but now he knew: that wasn't hatred.

What he felt now, filling his heart and consuming his head: that was hatred.

He hated Lewis.

As a child, he'd just wanted him to go away forever; now, however, that wasn't good enough.

He was going to kill Lewis himself.

He'd even made sure that Barry grabbed just the right weapon for him to use to do it on his way out -- Barry had wanted to stay to help, but the plan called for him to extract everyone else from Henning's house and bring the police to encourage Lewis to panic further, and with the comms blocked, he had to go himself.

Leo was supposed to just keep watch as Lewis left, but Lewis wasn't leaving. He was hurting Len.

No. He was killing Len.

Leo would never have been able to stand by and let him do that, even if he hadn't already planned to murder the man himself.

Barry hadn't known about that part of Leo's plan, of course. He'd brought that stupid jewel-encrusted -- but still sharp -- sword to Leo because Leo had told him it was Lewis' highest priority and that, if necessary, he'd trade the sword to Lewis for Len's life.

What Leo didn't tell Barry is that he had other plans for that sword.

Lewis turned to look at him, crowbar still in his hand; at his feet, bleeding and bruised, Len craned his head to look at him, too.

"Well, look at you," he said, baring his teeth. "Little Lionel, coming out of hiding at last."
"My name is Leonard," Leo said. "Not Lionel."

He took a step forward, then another.

Lewis went for his gun, but Len – reading Lewis' actions the way only a terrified child could – reacted first, scrabbling up to grab it out of his pocket and flinging it aside.

Lewis kicked him in the face.

"Leave him alone!" Leo shouted, and rushed forward.

Lewis still had the crowbar. He had a choice: he could try to fend off Leo, or he could strike Len again.

He chose the latter.

Len screamed as the crowbar came down on his leg with a sickening crunch.

Leo saw red.

Next thing he knew, Lewis was backed up against the wall, and Leo was hold the sword at his throat.

"Well, then. Look at you," Lewis said. "All grown up at last."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean," Leo said flatly.

"I always knew that one of my kids would turn out right," Lewis said, his lips curling up into a smirk. "Someone I could really count on. Not someone weak, like your brother, or constantly hiding behind other people, like your sister – but you're not weak, are you? You made a decision to kill and you plan to follow through on it. I can respect that."

"Stop talking," Leo said. "Don't you understand that I'm going to kill you?"

"You certainly mean to," Lewis agreed. "I can tell – the same way I could tell the way your brother flinched every time he pulled the trigger. But you? You're not flinching. You're not letting stupid sentimentality get in your way. You're finally stepping out of the shadows they've got you trapped in and into the limelight where you belong. You would do it, too – but only if you didn't get a better offer."

He smiled.

"You know," he said, "I could be proud of a son like you."

Leo ground his teeth together. He'd wanted to hear that for years – and Len for even longer, his childish dreams having not died quite as quickly as Leo's had. But this wasn't for Len.

"You should be proud of all of us," he spat out. Why was he still talking? He had the sword at Lewis' throat. He knew Lewis was just trying to manipulate him, trying to buy time, trying to trick him into letting him go. He knew that. He should just press the sword in, draw it across Lewis’ throat, do what he set out to do – finish it, and him, and free them of Lewis’ oppression forever. Instead, he was just talking. What was wrong with him? Just kill him already! "But you never were."

"Of course I wasn't," Lewis said, clicking his tongue as if this was a casual conversation, as if he were entitled to that sort of paternal disapproval. "It's hard to be proud of someone who disappoints
you time and time again, you know. I tried my best, you know – I tried to protect you from the world I knew was out there, the people who would take advantage of any sentimentality, of any weakness. That's why I did what I did. That's why I tried to teach you all of those lessons. I should have known that leaving you to develop on your own would be the best way. But how was I to know that my best wasn't good enough? I'm just a man. No matter what I did, none of them would learn – none but you, my boy. Because you’re different than they are. You’re better than they are."

Leo stared at him.

"You're the only one who's worth it," Lewis said, meeting his gaze. "Any of it: pride, respect, the lot. You're the only one who will understand – and I'm the only one who will understand you. That's why you're going to step back: because we're blood, you and I. We're like each other."

Oh.

*That* was why he was hesitating.

Not because of Lewis' bullshit.

But because -

"No," Leo said. "We're really not."

He took a step back, keeping the sword in place. Lewis' piggish eyes narrowed, following him.

"You may have helped make me who I am, however inadvertently," Leo said. "But I made myself, me and Len, we're the ones responsible for the man I am today – not you. Never you. I don't give a flying fuck if you were doing your best, or if you made mistakes, or whatever your excuse of the day is, because even if that was your best, your best wasn't good enough. Your best was fucking horrific, and I will never forgive you for any of it." He paused. "But you're right about one thing."

"What?" Lewis asked.

"I'm not going to kill you," Leo said.

"You –" Lewis started.

"Oh, not because of anything you said," Leo said. "But because you're wrong. I'm not like you said I am at all - guess I still am too sentimental, underneath all of my logic. I'm not going to not kill you because I got a better offer: I'm going to not kill you because I'm not a killer, and I'm not going to become one for you, because fuck you. You've already had too much say over my life."

He stepped back again, and this time he lowered the sword. "Hear those sirens?" he asked sweetly. "They're waiting for you."

Lewis' face twisted in disgust. "I should have known," he sneered. "Every single one of you, a disgrace to the family name."

"The name's ours," Leo said. "We're the ones who'll make it famous. You'll just be a footnote in our history books, and you'll die knowing of your own irrelevance. Now get the hell out of here."

He stepped back again, and Lewis stepped forward. "Fine," he said, shaking his head and turning away to walk towards the exit. "Have it your way. There's clearly nothing here for me anyway – just another disappointment –"
He choked.

No, that wasn't quite accurate.

He choked, because there was now a blast of ice straight through where his heart had been a second ago.

Leo spun around.

Len had propped himself up against the wall, his face bloody, his body still curled in on itself in defense, his hands still clutching the cold gun –

His eyes vacant and hurt.

Leo went to him at once, pulling his brother into his arms, forcing Len's face into his neck. Len didn't need to see their father die, even if he'd caused it.

"Why did you do that?" Leo asked quietly, making sure there was no judgment in his voice. "The police were outside: we could have just scared him away, like you planned to. You didn't have to. You didn't – you love him."

"Yes," Len said, his eyes pressed tightly shut against Leo's neck. "Yes, I do. But he wouldn't have given up. He'd never have given up. He thought we were his, us and Lisa, he thought we belonged to him. He couldn't let us go. And next time it would have been worse – and it would never have been enough."

"Len –"

"You were right," Len continued, his voice tight and filled with tears he'd never shed. That he couldn't shed, anymore, thanks to Lewis. "You were always right, before, and you were right now, too. He should have respected us for who we were, as people in our own right rather than tools. He should have been proud of us – he should have loved us, us and Lisa. But he didn't, and he never will. No matter what we do, no matter how good we are, no matter how well we do what he tells us, no matter how well we learn his stupid lessons – it'll never be enough. It had to end. And you might not be a killer, but I am."

"You're really not," Leo said gently. "You took every chance you could to stop – you will stop, now. You don't need to do it anymore."

Len nodded mutely.

"And just so you know," Leo said, raising his voice so as to make sure that neither of them can hear whatever it was that Lewis was mumbling, to make absolutely sure that Lewis' last words were overlooked and forgotten and heard by no one. It seemed appropriate, that the man that imposed so much terror on their childhoods should die leaving no impact on them at all, or, at least, as little as possible. "Just so you know: you beat him at his own game. You were the better thief, using every skill he ever taught you and spitting it back in his face. If he was a real dad, he would have been proud of you."

"What, for killing him?"

"For surpassing him," Leo said firmly. "And as for killing him – you didn't kill him the way he wanted you to. You didn't kill him out of cold, unfeeling logic. You killed him out of love for me and Lisa."

"How about we give it to Barry to judge?" Leo asked, already planning on having a Talk with Barry to ensure his answer was the right one. "He's the one who made you promise not to kill, right? But even he agreed that there should be reasonable exceptions to that rule. He's a hero. If he says this was reasonable, will you at least consider forgiving yourself?"

"I'll consider it," Len allowed.

"Good. Now let's go home."

Len sighed and nodded, allowing Leo to guide him to his feet and to the doorway, his eyes opening only to focus intently on the exit ahead of him.

"Get Mick," Leo told Barry as soon as he appeared. Seeing the expression on their faces, Barry obeyed with particular alacrity.
The second he arrived, Mick saw the problem immediately.

Well, the two problems.

"Barry, get them both home," he ordered. "They're in no condition for a smooth exit: get your Flash suit on, and when you come back without them, tell them you're investigating a possible robbery. Then come get me out. I'll knock down all this drywall in the meantime."

Burn the body, he really meant.

Barry nodded, understanding.

"Scarlet, we had a question –" Len started.

"Not now, he's getting us out of here," Leo interrupted, giving Barry a meaningful Look. "We can worry about our respective morality after we've had some time to rest."

"And maybe some medical care," Barry said, sounding worried. "Len doesn't look – great."

"He's in shock," Leo said. "And it's possible that untreated concussion from the fire is coming back to haunt him."

"Just one too many hits with the snake," Len agreed.

"When he's not channeling Disney's Aladdin, he means 'crowbar'," Leo added helpfully.

"...right," Barry said. "Let's get you guys home so that you can lie down; I'll tell Caitlin to come have a look at Len. And possibly you, too, Leo. In the meantime, I'll make the Flash's excuses."

"Find a way to squeeze in the fact that your newest outfit was re-designed by Leo Snart," Mick said dryly. "Apparently the Hermit's a fan."

"Right. What a world we live in. Mick, do me a favor and don't steal anything."

"I don't want anything from here," Len said.

They all looked at him, concerned.

"This time," Len clarified. "Next time, no promises."

Barry smiled with relief.

"Attempted robbery stopped by the Flash it is," Mick agreed, also smiling. "I'll stage the scene."

With that decided, Barry ran them home in a burst of light.

"You ran too fast: my head hurts," Len complained the second they arrived.

"No, that'd be from when you got kicked in the face," Leo said. "Come on, lie down: Barry's got some more work to do before you can ask your questions about justifiable murder."
"The more I hear about this one, the more justified it sounds," Barry volunteered, glancing at Len's face with alarm. "Just as a preliminary analysis."

"You don't know —"

"Good enough for us for now," Leo said firmly. "Later, Barry."

With a burst of light and wind, he was gone.

"How did we both end up with light- and lightning-themed superpowered hero boyfriends again?" Len asked, even as he pulled off his parka and his boots. "That seems statistically unlikely."

"We were very determined and got very lucky," Leo said wryly, pulling off the cheap suit in favor of his own preferred clothing. Something particularly old and well-worn, and thus extremely soft. He deserved something soft after the day he's had.

They curled up together on the bed.

"You were right again, by the way," Len said. "I don't want to kill anymore, not as long as there's a better alternative. But I don't mind handling it if someone has to."

"I thought so," Leo agreed. He resisted saying something that might ruin the evening – it was probably too soon for 'I'm so glad he's gone, thank you, you're exempt from the next round of birthday gifts because this is all I ever wanted', he supposed – and settled for pulling Len closer. "Also, thieving is boring."

"Not as boring as your stupid paperwork."

"The paperwork's important; in high-end fashion, crafting and selling the story of a collection is nearly as important as designing how it looks."

"You and your stories."

"You and your math. Mick and Lisa kept expecting me to figure out how many seconds something would take on the fly."

"It's not that hard. And anyway, at least it's more exciting."

"I think I prefer a less adrenaline-fueled excitement, personally."

"Not all the time."

"No, but I have you for that, don't I? Any time I want, I can step loose of the fashion designer and become a supervillain-thief-anti-hero with all the excitement I could possibly want."

"And I can always use your office to take a nap."

"Rude."

"But true. I'm better at being photographed, too."

"I still have no idea why that is so consistently the case, given that we're identical."

"You smile too much."

"Says the person whose action figure is smirking."
"Smirks are fine for high fashion photography; smiles aren't. You work with models all the time, don't you know that by now?"

"I can smirk."

"Yeah, sure, when you're being me."

"Shut up."

"Make me."

Barry reappeared in a flash of lightning a few minutes later, a grim-face Mick, a worried-looking Ray, and a concerned Caitlin in tow.

All four of them paused.

Len and Leo paused, too.

"Leo," Caitlin said, hiding a smile. "Maybe you could wait until after I've given Len a check-up to try to smother him with a pillow?"

"Just when I was winning, too," Leo said, dropping the pillow.

"You had an unfair advantage," Len groused. "Doesn't count."

Thirty minutes and a few impromptu casts later – to be turned into real casts at STAR Labs tomorrow, at Caitlin's insistence before Barry whisked her away – they settled back into bed, this time accompanied by three others.

"You okay?" Ray asked, still worried. "Both of you?"

"Much better," Leo told him. "Much better."

"You're sure about that?" Barry added.

"Quite sure," Len told him.

"You're doing better on the identity thing now," Mick, who had known them longest, observed. "Got it more under control, then?"

They considered.

"Yes," Leonard replied.

"You did that on purpose," Mick accused, but he was smiling.

"Well, yes," Len said.

"We wanted to know if we still could," Leo explained.

"And we could," Len agreed. "Which is good."

"But things do feel a bit more – straightened out."

"How many times do I got to tell you, Leo –"

"– we're not straight, I know."
"I'm glad to see your sense of humor is as annoying as ever," Barry said, carefully wrapping an arm around his boyfriend.

"And I'm glad that you're feeling more yourself," Ray said, slinging an arm around his.

"And I'm glad you two assholes have finally found a balance you think can keep," Mick added, forgoing subtlety and pulling both his husbands into his arms. "But Len or Leo or Leonards, we don't care: we like you best here, safe."

"Damn right," Ray and Barry chorused.

"We like it that way too," Len agreed.

"And I, for one, have had enough of any identity issues for a while," Leo said firmly.

"Uh," Ray said.

"What?"

"Is this a bad time to mention that Ray Palmer offered to be a funding partner to help us kick off my new independent clothing line?" Ray asked.


"Manageable," Leo said with a sigh. "If barely. But no one else!"

"Er," Barry said.

"Oh no, not you too! What is it: you've discovered alternative universes with similar-but-not identical doppelgangers? You now have a new power that enables you to create doubles of yourself by moving forward and back in time? One of your doubles from the future has come back to kill you? You have a long lost evil twin brother? What?!"

"I was just going to say that I'd like some help figuring out where to draw the line between Barry Allen and the Flash," Barry said grumpily. "And come on already; I know I'm a superhero, but what's the likelihood of the rest of that ever happening?"

"Great," Mick said. "Now you've jinxed us."

"Whatever, we'll deal with it when it comes," the Leonards said. "Now everyone go the fuck to sleep already!"

Things, they'd already decided, were going to be better now.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all she wrote! (for now, anyway) I hope you all enjoyed!

Works inspired by this one

The Beginning of Wisdom (Moodboard) by Aceometric (MercurialSky)
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